

“There are causes I will lose my job for, you just let me know when you need me”: A creative nonfiction narrative demonstrating how identities and experiences foster solidarity in and create extra work for Queer educators

by

Seth M. Dills

B.S., Manhattan Christian College, 2016

B.S., Kansas State University, 2018

M.S., Fort Hays State University, 2019

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2023

Abstract

Research suggests that there are Queer educators in nearly every school in America (Woog, 1995). With the knowledge that there are Queer educators working within schoolhouses across the nation, it is necessary to understand their experiences in order to close gaps in the literature and to identify implications of the understanding of their experiences. In order to do this, seven Queer educators across the state of Kansas were interviewed, and that interview data was used to identify the findings of this dissertation.

Considering how the experiences of Queer educators, who teach in K-12 public schools in Kansas, and how those experiences and identities impact their practice and professional interactions were the goals of this study. By employing a narrative inquiry approach to this research, this dissertation creates an avenue for understanding through storytelling, in that the stories that were told by the participants are gathered and (re)told by the researcher in order to highlight the various narrative threads that give meaning to collective, individual, and varying experiences. The use of Queer Standpoint Theory was used to honor the multiple, fluid, and shifting identities associated with Queer Theory while centering on the Queer identity of the educators as it is locked socioculturally and temporally.

Data for this study were collected through the use of responsive interviews (H. J. Rubin & Rubin, 2011) and photo elicitation techniques (Croghan et al., 2008). Data were analyzed and coded for themes in order to explore the various narrative threads that were interwoven between the seven participants. Two themes that are impacted by participants' experiences and identities were identified, solidarity and more work.

The first theme was that Queer educator identities and experiences foster solidarity through a variety of methods, which made up five distinct categories. Queer educators

demonstrate solidarity through empathy and awareness, relationships with students, signs and symbols, standing up for the underdog, and acting as a role model. This represents how and why the Queer educators demonstrate solidarity through their actions.

The second theme was that Queer educator identities and experiences create extra work for Queer educators in five different ways (categories). The extra work is created by standing up for the underdog, acting as a role model, doing extra mental calculations, acting as a spokesperson, and dealing with homophobia and intolerance. This represents the various tasks that are given to Queer educators, or that Queer educators choose to take on themselves, which require them to do extra work that is not expected of their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts.

These findings are described using a creative nonfiction narrative (Gutkind, 2012). The narrative is composed of the words that were used by the participants during interviews that they completed with the researcher. These individual interviews were compiled, coded, and then arranged in a narrative that describes a fictional scenario where participants joined each other in a special interest group as part of a professional development session. This scenario did not actually occur, but the opportunity to put the participants in conversation with one another allowed for the various narrative threads, contradictions, and segments to be highlighted and demonstrate findings.

A variety of models, experiences, approaches, and sociocultural factors are described within this study. This provides an overview of the context in which this study occurred and allows for further contextualization of the participants' lived experiences as they are (re)told and (re)presented. In addition to the findings of this study, limitations, implications, and areas of future research are also described.

Key words: Queer, LGBTQ+, Educators, Teachers, Queer Standpoint Theory, Creative Nonfiction

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Approved by:

Major Professor
F. Todd Goodson

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I am forever grateful for those who chose to stand by me, to provide encouragement, and to be a listening ear. I know it wasn't always easy, but we made it!

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the Queer collective.

- To those who have come before, and to those who will come after. Thank you for living and loving with bravery and authenticity.
- To those who have come this far without knowing what an absolute wonder they are. You are the 8th natural wonder of the world.
- To those who struggle day-to-day to remember that they are important, valued, and loved. You are seen, known, and very much loved.
- To those who have departed this world much too soon. May they rest in power.

This work is dedicated to the Queer educators who work to make a difference every day. You are building a better tomorrow. Keep fighting the good fight, and remember:

“We do not start as dust. We do not end as dust. We make more than dust.

That’s all we ask of you. Make more than dust.”

– David Levithan, *Two Boys Kissing*.

This work is dedicated to you, the reader. Thank you for taking the time to read, listen, and learn.

Preface

Subjectivity and Bracketing

This preface involves the use of bracketing (Gearing, 2004; Janak, 2018; Kramp, 2004; Tufford & Newman, 2012) to address researcher subjectivity and provide insight into how aspects of subjectivity may have arisen during the research process. Throughout this work, I've spoken on subjectivity and aimed to transparently communicate issues thereof as they've arisen. I have used bracketing to be intentional when examining my own story for ways that may or may not have influenced the interactions I had with participants and with the data.

The dissertation genre lends itself to more of an analytic approach. While the goal of this project was analysis and deriving meaning from the stories the participants shared, it was (and is) also something deeply personal to me, as interest in researching topics “comes from a variety of personal and professional motives” (Janak, 2018, p. 82). These stories, which I was honored to listen to, resonated in many ways. This resonance invoked a variety of thoughts and feelings within myself, and a range of connections with my personal stories.

Being close to the topic is not inherently problematic. In fact, I believe that it allowed for a depth of insight, empathy, and understanding to be present that non-Queer researchers would be unable to access. I endeavored to remain very aware and attuned to my personal subjectivities. Therefore, I have chosen to begin with a narrative that allows the reader to better understand me as the researcher, me as a Queer educator, and my subjectivities.

Bracketing is a method of confronting subjectivities and bias in order to “mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 80). Bracketing also allows for an opportunity to increase the rigor of a project. Tufford and Newman also explain that “explicitness about the process of bracketing

should be included in the writing phase of the research process, whereby the researcher outlines the method and contribution of bracketing to the research endeavor” (p. 82). This preface serves to be explicit and to outline the method and contribution of bracketing as it was applied.

Bracketing, as a practice, has no singular approach or uniform model and may appear vague (Gearing, 2004; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Tufford & Newman (2012) describe various arguments regarding which aspects should be included in bracketing, such as beliefs and values, thoughts and hypotheses, biases, emotions, preconceptions, presuppositions, and assumptions. It was my goal to describe as many of these categories as I was able within this preface and throughout the dissertation.

Frameworks for the timing of bracketing are also argued in the literature. I have to recognize the importance of examining my subjectivities from the onset of the study but have also noted that it was also an ongoing endeavor, that occurred throughout analysis and in writing up the findings. While there is a lack of uniformity regarding practices for bracketing, it also provides the researcher “a range of choices and methods and the opportunity to interject their own perspectives and embark on their research journeys” (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 93).

The methodological approach used with this dissertation was narrative inquiry, which “assumes personal involvement” (Kramp, 2004, p. 114) with the phenomena being studied. The personal involvement is not inherently problematic, as long as the researcher takes appropriate measures to bring awareness and clarity to the ways they are personally involved with the research. The use of memoing, journaling, and reflecting as tools for bracketing are supported by the literature (Tufford & Newman, 2012). In addition, another form that may be utilized is a self-interview (Janak, 2018; Kramp, 2004).

The bracketing self-interview is an opportunity to respond to a set of questions, either a predetermined set of generalized questions, like Janak (2018) provides, or through responding to the interview questions to examine how the researcher would answer those questions themselves and what suppositions may lie within those. Ideally, this takes place before the interviews begin (Kramp, 2004); however for this project I only became aware of the bracketing structure following the dissertation proposal and presentation of the first three chapters to my committee, so I began the self-interview process during the interviews with the additional five study participants.

These practices allow for an opportunity to recognize biases, suppositions, etc., which is an important aspect of qualitative research to address and can increase the rigor of the study (Tufford & Newman, 2012). However, as the researcher, I “do not want to overlook the value of [my] own perspectives, which can lead to insights derived from a particular way of seeing” (Kramp, 2004, p. 115). As I have described throughout this process, I had particular insight as an educator who is Queer, and I brought that insight, in-group knowledge and understanding, and perspective to the process, which assisted with interpretation of narratives and brought an additional narrative to the themes identified.

Self-Interview

While I completed a self-interview by answering the interview questions myself, I did not include the entirety of that document here. I have made references to similar experiences that I had with participants and information from this self-interview throughout the analysis and presentation of findings and used that self-interview to maintain an awareness of my subjectivities. I have decided to use the six areas identified by Janak (2018) to provide the readers with insight into my perspectives below.

Additionally, I have chosen to maintain a present tense tone to promote the current processes and context at the time of writing this, though upon defense and publication, some factors or experiences may change as I also continue to (re)negotiate life experiences and (re)interpret my own personal stories. This has also been done so that readers can hear the present, reflective tone that shows my closeness to this topic. As I began to try to compose this reflection in past tense, it created a sense of disconnect and distance, and fostered a sterile, objective feel as opposed to the intimate, contextual reflection on my subjectivities that I intended it to be.

Background

I meet all inclusionary criteria described within this study. I am a public school educator who works in Kansas and is out about my Queerness. I teach middle school special education. I have been reflective over the years about how my personal experiences with Queerness have influenced my practice. I have shared with others many, many times that my Queerness allows for me to trust in the narratives of other minoritized populations and be more empathetic about their experiences. While I am a white person and can never fully understand Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) experiences, I do share in the understanding of the mental calculations required to assess a situation for safety, though the reasons for those mental calculations, the ability to blend in or pass, or how those calculations are made are not the same. The anxiety, fear, and mental work, however, is a common experience. When I think about my desk at work, having to think about if I should (or could) put a picture of my partner up without retaliation is something that heterosexual couples do not have to consider. If my same-sex partner and I attend a band concert, or back-to-school faculty picnic, considering what level of

affection can or should we show toward each other without fear for our safety or wellbeing is a consideration that is very unlikely to cross the minds of a heterosexual couple.

I have also been subject to many of the themes and categories described in this study: bullying, harassment, standing up for the underdog, acting as a role model, having to do mental calculations, having positive relationships with students, being more empathetic, etc. For instance, I had students asking me during my first year teaching if I was gay, and I did not know how to respond. My administrator was supportive of me but recognized that the students I worked with were more difficult, obstinate, and behaviorally challenging. In summary, he said to me, "My advice to you Seth, when your students ask you if you're Queer would be to tell them that is a private question, not because I don't support you, but because we know how (that group of EBD students is) and I wouldn't want them to use that against you and cause problems for you."

In addition, there was a time when I wrote an office referral due to a comment made by a student unrelated to my Queerness. In response to this, the student's caregiver told administration "If the kid would have said anything negative to Mr. Dills, it would have been about his sexual preferences." Why my "sexual preferences" would be the topic of conversation seemed unnecessary and targeted.

My background conducting research is limited to a few graduate courses I have taken. The research conducted as part of the pilot study used to inform this dissertation was part of that coursework. I have also conducted action research within the school district. However, I have conducted this research with input from seasoned researchers on my committee, researchers that I personally know, and graduate classmates who are also working toward or on their dissertation. I am thankful for the assistance that these individuals and groups have lent me.

Perception of Subject

I feel that I have a positive perception regarding the subjects of this study. They are educators, like me, who are being afforded an opportunity to share their stories. I generally feel comfortable talking to them, though the participants I met through conducting this research took more time to get comfortable with. I was more comfortable with the participants that I knew, which would be typical of comparing interactions between familiar and unknown people. However, the conversations around this topic, although deeply personal, are conversations that I am comfortable having with others and enjoy being part of.

Interpretations

Initially, I had thought at the onset of the research that RQ2, regarding the influence of Queerness on practices would be the most discussed topic. I spent a lot of time discussing interview questions as they related to RQ1, regarding how the Queer educators describe their life experiences, in order to get to know the participants, develop characterization, and to ease into the content of our discussions. It provided a simple entry point into the conversation that allowed for comfort on behalf of the participants in case they experienced nervousness around not knowing their stories.

RQ2 did ultimately produce quite a bit of information for the study, though this was connected with the other research questions as well. In the qualitative frameworks, I endeavored to not enter this experience with a hypothesis but was aware that in my lens I did see my Queerness impacting my practice by allowing to be more empathetic and understanding and to demonstrate solidarity with others because of my experiences.

I was surprised during discussions that in the rural schools, the educators had fewer negative experiences to share about. They were able to highlight some, but one participant

commented on a negative experience being the only one that they could remember over the last several years. Another participant commented that they had an overwhelming number of positive experiences compared to the negative experiences. I honestly went into this process expecting to hear more of the negative experiences and was prepared to listen to those. It was a pleasant surprise to hear the positives.

There were many feelings that this experience brought up. The feelings that I experienced included pride for the work that the participants were doing; for the participants that I knew prior to interviewing them, I specifically felt pride knowing how far they have come and how well they are doing. I also experienced sorrow at hearing some of the instances of bullying or intolerance. This can be difficult to listen to and hear, especially having been on the receiving end of these actions. However, feeling sorrow or sadness for these experiences is a testament to the empathy that is described as one of the categories in this study, which is developed because of Queer educator identities and experiences. This level of empathy is something that I personally attribute to my experiences as a Queer person.

In addition to this, I must confess that the participants and I shared many laughs. Sometimes we would share funny stories, or one of us would make a funny comment that resulted in laughter. I remember one participant joking that because he became prom king, he would say that he “won high school.” Another participant shared with me a conspiracy theory that a student is passionate about regarding octopi being an alien species, but because mothers often die while watching their eggs, there is no generational knowledge to allow them to act as alien invaders.

Impact

I was deeply honored to conduct this research and feel a great weight to analyze, consider, and report on what was shared by participants in accurate, affirming, and social-justice oriented ways. I felt thankful to be able to listen to the older guard of Queer educators after their many years in the field, and also for the opportunity to hear from the vanguard as they are moving past their first years in the field. Within this is my perspective as a young researcher listening to the stories of the other young teachers alongside the experiences of teachers with more years of experience than I have. This was an experience that I navigated with the utmost caution and care.

My perspectives on this research came from a white male's perspective, which can be limited to understanding the experiences of one participant, who is Black, along with the experiences of the participants who were assigned female at birth (AFAB). At times when race or AFAB experiences were noted, I endeavored to attune to assumptions or areas where additional clarification was needed and explained this positioning to the study's participants. I also brought along perspectives as a Queer person who was brought up in the Christian church and who no longer identifies with the religion. This was present (and interrogated) when talking with two participants about their current or previous involvement with faith groups. There was a time where I acknowledged the benefits of faith communities, how they can serve peoples' needs, and how people have been hurt by those communities. This involved a form of radical acceptance and allowing the various experiences and values to coexist simultaneously.

This study impacted me, on an individual level, positively, as it afforded me the opportunity to get to know other Queer educators, to engage with research in ways I had not been able to before, and to learn from the stories that were shared. Not only was I able to learn from

the participants, but I was able to learn with them, as they developed their stories during our time together, or revisited a story that they had reinterpreted or changed how they would respond to a question. I feel proud to be part of this experience and feel appreciative of the direction that this research may go in the future.

I can only hope that this research impacts readers in the way that I found it impacted me. I can only hope that this assists with the promotion of social justice ideals and can help to provide policies and practices which help to support Queer educators in their employment and in their personal lives. I hope that it provides a lens for administrators, legislators, and community members to better understand the experiences of Queer educators and to respond with kindness, empathy, and openness to these experiences in ways that promote equity and belonging.

Ethical and Political Issues

This study was approved through the university's IRB process and was overseen by my advisor/ committee chair. My committee also provided insight and guidance throughout the process and helped to mediate any potential ethical or political issues. This study can be highly contextual in some ways, and one of those is the analysis of the current political climate, which is explained through a lens of policy and practices which harm Queer people across the nation. These political issues help to recognize the need for this research and the benefits of conducting research about this topic.

There was one ethical issue that was encountered during the research, where a participant brought their spouse along to an interview. This was because it created a sense of comfort for the participant during our first interview. I had to determine that I would allow the spouse to be present during the interview, which would involve recording their comments as well. Following this, I connected with my advisor to explore the ethical issue and get advice. We determined that

the spouse joining the interview was acceptable, but that the interview data from the spouse would need to be deleted and could not be included within this study. This was the route that I took when transcribing the data so that it would not appear as part of the data corpus.

The Unexpected

I was unsure what I was getting myself into at the onset of this study. I did not know who would agree to participate, I did not know if I would get enough participants, and I did not know what would come from our conversations. However, I was very, very surprised when I put out the call for participants for Queer educators in the Midwest and I had to start turning people away! The post was shared 40 times on social media, and I received many, many messages from individuals interested in participating. Some individuals were in fields that did not fully meet the scope of the study (school psychology, for example), were outside of the geographic context (living in Arkansas, for example), or were no longer practicing educators. I had enough participant interest that I was able to narrow the scope from the Midwest to just focusing on Queer educators in Kansas.

In addition, I was surprised by the number of positive experiences and feelings that participants shared while we were talking. I did not expect for stories to always be negative, but there were times that participants had a harder time recalling negative experiences but could easily call to memory positive experiences. I was surprised to see the common threads between all participants, and the interesting ways in which those came together and diverged.

Conclusion

The research process is ongoing. It was not a cut-and-dry procedure where I finished an interview, I analyzed it, and then I moved on. It was a living organism that I had to care for. I had to nurse it, spend time with it, give it time to rest, and we had to learn together along the

way. My subjectivities were present throughout this time, and I have done my best to do right by the participants and our Queer educator collective. I have held their experiences in high esteem and aimed to share them accurately, carefully, and empathetically throughout this project. In the spirit of maintaining these values, I have engaged in the practice of bracketing to bring my experiences, perspectives, and biases into focus and report on those honestly to readers. It was my goal that the stories and findings contained within this work achieve those goals.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Overview of the Topic

Our entire self can never be summed up in one word or phrase – we are complex, multifaceted beings who must be viewed as such. Within the context of this study, the participants, who are teachers in public education, are not only teachers. They can also hold other identities and roles such as fathers, mothers, soccer players, ministers, travelers, coaches, researchers, Black, Hispanic, Native, neurodivergent, dance moms, bibliophiles, board game collectors, kayakers, Big Brothers or Big Sisters, and many, many others. As Endo et al. (2010) explains, “it is difficult to imagine that who an individual is can be reduced to a single identity” (p. 1027). Because of this inability to reduce or consider individuals as just one identity, the interplay of identities must be explored, negotiated, and lived out through the individual experiences that occur within larger cultural frameworks.

One such identity interplay can be examined at the intersection of teacher identities and Queer identities. A participant in the pilot study that was used to inform this proposal shared that “as long as there are children there will be teachers,” and stakeholders must understand that teachers are not always cisgender or heterosexual. However, teachers have concerns regarding their ability to be “out” (sharing Queerness openly) in their teacher lives (Biegel, 2018; Endo et al., 2010; Jackson, 2007), and several questions may arise regarding:

- How teachers negotiate their multiple identities.
- How the multiple identities may impact each other.
- To what degree teachers are legally and pragmatically protected?
- How the landscape of education has shifted for Queer teachers and students.

- What experiences Queer educators may share with collective identities, in collective consciousness, or shared experiences in general

This is not an exhaustive list, and while not every question can be explored, these questions do highlight the need for further research regarding this intersection and the multiple facets of identity.

In this study, I use the terms LGBTQ+ and Queer interchangeably to reference the wide range of identities under the umbrella of individuals who are not cisgender or heterosexual. If I simply reference the LGBT community from a source, that source specifically referenced the traditional four-letter acronym, and it was not my role to change how the author(s) referenced the Queer community. The use of Queer is meant to be framed as inclusive and encompassing of the different identities that people claim, though I must recognize its harmful roots and how it has been used to maintain prejudice and power by dominant groups. My use of the term Queer is grounded in Queer Theory and its use in the humanities since its formal inception by Teresa de Lauretis over two decades ago. Foundationally, “Queer” aims to deconstruct and recognize the fluid, plural, and shifting ways that identity can occur and be experienced, while also being so fluid and ambiguous that it is inconsistent itself and rejects stability (Chandler & Munday, 2011; Jagose, 1996; Weise, 2022). Therefore, I utilize this term to reject stable identifiers and contain a wide range of being within one word or phrase. I choose to capitalize the term as well, and so when it appears in lowercase, that is also due to how it was referenced in the source material.

In an effort to take back the power from those have used terms like Queer as a method of harm in the past, I choose to reclaim the harmful language as an identity and inclusive term. In addition to this, I also recognize the need to specify certain Queer sub-groups in different contexts. In these contexts, the use of the term sexual minorities could be used interchangeably

with the LGB or LGBQ acronyms, which keep the sexual identities distinct from gender minority identities. I reference the gender-specific contexts using the term trans*, but some other scholars may implement the use of trans, transgender, transgender/ gender nonconforming (TGNC), and other terms. Whatever terms are used, I aim for transparency, inclusion, and focus as often as possible.

Civil Rights

It has only been in recent history that LGBTQ+ individuals have earned equitable civil liberties that they did not recently have. Some of these liberties include:

- The Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that same-sex marriages cannot be banned in the United States and must be fully recognized under the law in June 2015.
- My local community adding sexual orientation and gender identity as protected classes in the city ordinances in November 2016, after this was passed initially in 2011 but was immediately rescinded.
- The Supreme Court ruling in *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia*, where employers fired Queer employees simply for being homosexual or transgender, which determined that Queer people are protected in their employment from discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1966, which was decided in June 2020.
- The Department of Health and Human Services announcing in May 2021 that Title IX's prohibitions on discrimination based on sex includes sexual orientation and gender identity.

In the present national context, Florida's HB 1557 (otherwise known as the "Don't Say Gay" bill) (Spring 2022) demonstrates a continued battle for equal rights, access to information, representation, protections, and inclusion for Queer educators alongside the recent Supreme

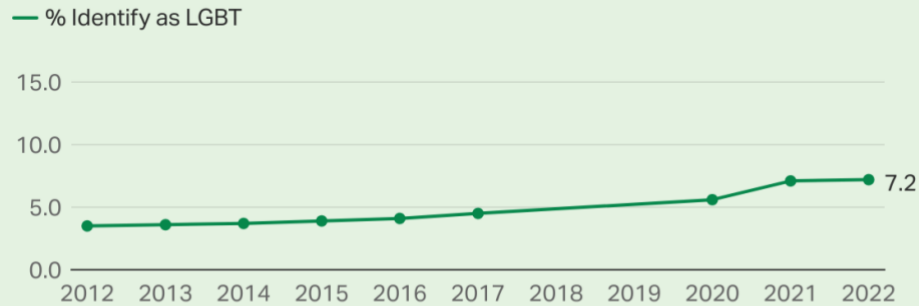
Court opinion piece, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (June, 2022) on *Roe v. Wade* regarding reconsideration of same-sex marriage as a constitutional right, and legislation attempting to codify same-sex marriage (H.R.8404) (July, 2022). Additionally, in April 2023 the Kansas legislature passed SB180, which is a bill that narrowly defines sex as male and female only, without recognition of variations ways that sex characteristics present outside of this binary and would exclude or "other" transgender individuals from and within various athletics, prisons, domestic violence centers, crisis centers, locker rooms, restrooms, and other areas. This bill was vetoed by the governor, but the veto was overridden, all during April 2023.

Prevalence

Jones (2022) reported on Gallup's 2021 data regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender self-identification rates and noted that in 2021, 7.1% of US adults were self-identifying as LGBT. The 2022 version of this report indicated that 7.2% of US adults are self-identifying as LGBT (Jones, 2023). This trend, as reported in 2023, is demonstrated in Figure 1. Additionally, the data is staggering when aggregated by generation, where a steady self-identification increase happens from Traditionalists/ the silent generation (0.8% in 2022 and 1.7% in 2023) to Generation Z (20.8% in 2022 and 19.7% in 2023). Prevalence reported in 2023 is demonstrated in Figure 2, and [Appendix A -](#) includes visual references for both the 2022 and 2023 reports. In reporting, Generation Alpha and younger members of Generation Z were not surveyed due to being under the age of 18 at the time of the survey. A criticism of these findings I must note is that the prevalence of Queer people can be difficult to gauge, as there is a distinction between estimating from a behavior standpoint (like Alfred Kinsey's approach) or from a self-identification approach (like Gallup).

Americans' Self-Identification as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Something Other Than Heterosexual, 2012-2022

Which of the following do you consider yourself to be? You can select as many as apply. Straight or heterosexual; Lesbian; Gay; Bisexual; Transgender



Respondents who volunteer another identity (e.g., queer, same-gender-loving; pansexual) are recorded as "Other LGBT" by interviewers. These responses are included in the LGBT estimate. Data were not collected in 2018 and 2019. 2012-2013 wording: Do you, personally, identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender?

GALLUP

Figure 1: Americans' Self-Identification as LGBT (2023 Report)

Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity, by Generation, 2022

Which of the following do you consider yourself to be? You can select as many as apply. Straight or heterosexual; Lesbian; Gay; Bisexual; Transgender

	Generation Z	Millennials	Generation X	Baby boomers	(
	%	%	%	%	
Total LGBT	19.7	11.2	3.3	2.7	
Lesbian	2.2	1.5	0.5	0.7	
Gay	3.4	1.9	0.8	1.0	
Bisexual	13.1	6.9	1.6	0.7	
Transgender	1.9	1.0	0.3	0.2	
Other LGBT	1.5	0.2	0.1	0.2	

Sum of categories may exceed the total because respondents can choose multiple identities. Birth years for each generation: Generation Z (1997-2004), Millennials (1981-1996), Generation X (1965-1980), baby boomers (1946-1964), Silent Generation (1945 and earlier). Based on aggregated data from 2022 Gallup telephone polls.

GALLUP

Figure 2: Americans' Self-Identification as LGBT by Generation (2023 Report)

The questions “what will happen if we employ a Queer educator,” “what if my child has a Queer teacher,” “how will a Queer teacher fit in with the school staff,” and many others must shift from “if” to “when” - “when we employ a Queer educator,” “when my child has a Queer teacher,” “when a Queer teacher joins our school staff,” etc. Woog (1995) noted that, based on interviewing almost three hundred gay or lesbian teachers, “there are gay and lesbian teachers in every school building in America – probably in numbers greater than our representation in the general population” (p. 15). At the time of his research, there were not near as many Queer teachers who are out in their jobs as there are now. The prevalence has always been there, albeit hidden, and the question of “if” an out Queer teacher is involved in education changes to “when” an out Queer teacher is involved in education. Another pilot study participant shared that “the Queer community is not a monolith.” The Queer community does not constitute stereotypes such as scantily clad partygoers, drag queens, butch lesbians, and effeminate men, among many others - The Queer community contains a wide range of professionals, identities, practices, presentations, behaviors, and interests. This means that Queer people can be, and are, teachers.

Personal Connection

As a middle school teacher working in the Midwest (in Kansas, more specifically) who identifies as Queer, I have an intimate relationship with the topic at hand. Therefore, my subjectivity must be clearly described and highlighted as it shows itself throughout the research process. My identities, experiences, and perspectives are “a garment that cannot be removed” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). Because of this, I intentionally explore my subjectivities throughout this proposal in Chapter One (researcher stance) and Chapter Three (sincerity, credibility, ethical, and trustworthiness), and will also aim for transparency regarding my subjectivities throughout

the literature review, data collection, data analysis, findings, and discussion portions of this dissertation.

Problem Statement

This problem statement in no way aims to even allude to the intersection of Queer and educator identities as anything related to being a problem; however, it is necessary to explore the problems faced by this population that impact how they navigate their social and professional worlds. It is necessary to keep the problems experienced by Queer educators distinct from allowing Queer educators to be seen as problems. The cultural considerations (such as book banning and legislation that erases Queer voices from classrooms) and increased prevalence of Queer people only begins to scratch the surface of experiences of Queer people as they relate to their educator roles, and thus a deeper understanding of those experiences is necessary.

Woog (1995) interviewed almost 300 gay and lesbian teachers, most of whom were not out at the time of the study in the 1990s. After over 30 years, the landscape of American education and the culture of the Midwest has, without surprise, changed. There is an increased level of acceptance, openness, and support for Queer folks in many areas. However, Queerness continues to be met with experiences throughout our upbringing that cisgender/ heterosexual (cishet) individuals do not go through, along with experiences in employment that cishet individuals do not have to navigate either. This study aims to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences and practices of a small segment of the Queer educators in K-12 public schools in the U.S. currently.

Research Overview

Research Purpose and Research Questions

This study aims to explore the experiences of Kansas K-12 public educators who self-identify as Queer prior to, leading up to, and in their roles as Queer educators and to understand how those experience inform practice and professional interactions by answering the following research questions:

- **Research Question 1:** How do Queer educator participants describe their experiences prior to, leading up to, and as Queer educators? (RQ1)
- **Research Question 2:** How do Queer educator experiences and identities impact their practices? (RQ2)
- **Research Question 3:** How do participants describe the ways their Queer identities influence their professional interactions? (RQ3)

Methodology

This study is framed with the narrative inquiry lens and situated within the larger qualitative research domain, which seeks to examine a phenomenon (Queer educators) while prioritizing depth of understanding as opposed to generalizable findings. Humans lead storied lives (Rosenberg, 2020) and the aim is to understand those stories through the use of interviews as the primary source of data collection. This data will be supplemented with artifact review and photo/ video elicitation. The stories the participants tell will form the basic unit of analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017) and allow for the identification of narrative strands to give voice to the overlapping, juxtaposed, and contradicting experiences that the participants share about through the re-presentation of what has been lived and learned through the narrative research process (Ely, 2007).

The sample consisted of five participants (in addition to data collected through the pilot study on this same topic using two participants), who were practicing certified K-12 public school educators in Kansas, who self-identified as LGBTQ+ (Queer), and were “out” about their identities (“out” means that the participant is open about their non-normative identity/ identities to some degree personally and/or professionally – i.e., not “in the closet”). Data was be stored in a computer-based software or in a locked box when physical materials are used, and was coded/ examined in order to make sense of how the participants shared their experiences, identify themes and key narratives in the stories, and then reconstruct their stories into a grand narrative or narratives, which are presented as findings (Rosenberg, 2020). The goal was to make these lived experiences and interpretations more understandable by those who, due to their standpoint, may not be situated to fully understand the experiences unique to Queer educators (i.e., the “other”) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Significance of Study

This study is significant because it considers the context of the prevalence of LGBTQ+ individuals (for both the general population and the schoolhouse populations), the cultural context of legislation happening throughout the United States (such as the movement to ban books that represent non-traditional family types and the “don’t say gay” bill (HB 1557) in Florida), and the socio-historical context of how LGBTQ+ people have been treated (including suicidality, self-harm, and discrimination). The intersection of the prevalence, cultural, and socio-historical contexts places LGBTQ+ educators in unique positions to share their experiences, how their experiences and identities impact their practices, and the effect that their identities have on their professional interactions. This study allows educators, administrators, caregivers, community members, elected officials, and others to have a deeper understanding of

the experiences of LGBTQ+ educators, which can develop a certain level of empathy and understanding. This understanding can lead to identifying specific supports that LGBTQ+ educators may need in their roles in order to be successful without barriers faced due to discrimination or stigma. By understanding the valuable resource in Queer educators and their experiences, we can help to improve those experiences, or build on them in our schools and communities.

Limitations

This study does not aim to make sweeping generalizations about those who maintain intersecting identities of being Queer and being educators. The nature of qualitative inquiry seeks to paint a picture through depth of understanding as opposed to sketch a larger picture through broad generalizations. The experiences of Queer individuals can be as different as the individuals themselves, and how individuals make sense of their experiences to inform practice is heavily affected by their personal contexts, self-awareness, educational contexts, and a host of other factors.

This study is also limited within a very specific national, social, and cultural context, as it occurred within the United States educational system, focusing on educators who work in Kansas, who were willing to share their stories. Because of this, it cannot reflect the experiences of Queer educators in other nations or educational systems (including those teaching in post-secondary settings or those in the privatized educational sector, for example). Even within the limited Kansas context and inability to generalize findings, the current contextual factors can rapidly change over time, which affects how the phenomena is lived out, experienced, and interpreted.

The pilot study was limited in the number of participants (two), and this narrative inquiry dissertation had a limited number of participants (seven, including the two from the pilot study). Those that chose to participate were limited to certain demographics and not representative of the full range of identities and experiences that existed within the intersection of Queer and educator identities. For instance, Blackburn & Parker (2022b) have noted that scholarship surrounding Queer teachers has been limited to white educators. While I seek to diversify my own social and professional networks, there are additional limitations for me as a white person to even begin to fully understand (and subsequently attempt to represent) the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), even if we do share Queer and educator identities. One participant, a Black male, was able to provide representation within this study.

Additionally, as the list of possible identifiers Queer people may use grows, it will be impossible to include voices from each and every identity in this study. Notably, however, has been the absence of trans* voices from these narratives. Suárez (2022) explains that “trans people continue to feel unsafe coming out in the workplace” and that “nearly half of trans people in the U.S. are not “out” to their supervisors or coworkers” (p. 704). This data makes it difficult for trans* voices to meet the inclusionary criteria of this study. Suárez also found that current research demonstrates that there is a need to better understand the experiences of trans* K-12 educators. The existing literature continues to address predominantly white trans* educators, in the same way that the research on Queer educators in general is also limited.

Definition of Terms

Many of these terms can have several different definitions, so they are summarized using the current terminology and sources are cited to clarify less common terms. It is also important to

note that there are a myriad of identities or terms, including slang, which negates an exhaustive list. Many new terms can be understood through an internet search.

Research-Specific Terms for This Study

The following terms are being operationally defined for the purpose of this study. These terms may have a range of meanings or different meanings dependent on context, so the focus is how they will be utilized within this dissertation.

- **Queer:** For the purpose of this study, Queer refers to someone who identifies as a non-cisgender, non-heterosexual individual, including the wide range of identities that fall outside of normative gender and sexual identities, and involves members of the LGBTQ+ community. This is also a term recently reclaimed by some members of the LGBTQ+ community to be used both as an identity and as an umbrella term to encompass the growing acronym or identities within this community.
 - **Out:** For the purpose of this study, out means that someone has shared their identity, that it is not hidden, and that others know about their identity. Being "out" does not have to mean students are aware, but the participants are out in that their families, friends, and even some coworkers would know about their nonnormative identity.
- **Educator:** For the purpose of this study, an educator refers to one who currently is a practicing teacher or administrator within the American K-12 public education system, who is licensed by the state in which they teach.
 - **K-12 Public Educator:** One who works in the American education system, providing public education, which is funded through by taxpayer dollars, and

provided education from kindergarten (for students approximately 5 years old) through 12th grade (for students approximately 18 years old).

- **Elementary School:** This is a school setting that provides education for students from kindergarten through 6th grade (typically).
 - **Middle School/ Junior High:** This is a school setting that provides education for students in 7th and 8th grades (typically).
 - **High School:** This is a school setting that provides education for students in 9th through 12th grades.
- **Licensed:** Educators who have completed an approved teacher preparation program, passed the competency assessments, completed background checks, maintained ongoing professional development, and maintained the license to teach in a particular state.
 - **Practicing:** This means that the educator currently is employed as a teacher or an administrator within the K-12 public education setting, is contracted by the district to fulfil that role, and attends to those duties through the school year. This does not include retired educators, those who did not obtain employment this year, those who left the profession, those who now teach at the college or university level, etc.
 - **Classroom Teachers:** Teachers who work in their own classrooms providing direct instruction to their students (math, science, art, PE, music, etc.). This does not include administrators.
 - **Administrators:** Those who are responsible for the leadership of their schools, must hold a license to be an administrator, and is considered the representative or

“boss” at a particular school. Most often, administrators have experience being classroom teachers.

- **Queer Educator:** One who holds both a Queer identity and meets the criteria described to be understood as an educator.
- **Midwest:** For the purpose of this study, the Midwest is defined as a “region of indefinite boundaries in the north central U.S. including the area around the Great Lakes and the upper Mississippi River valley —often considered to include the area from Michigan, Ohio, and sometimes Kentucky on the east to North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas on the west” (Merriam-Webster, 2022). This definition can be further limited based upon the participants that enroll in this study and where they reside and teach.
- **Experiences:** For the purpose of this study, experiences are defined as the social and professional contexts, exchanges, and occurrences that one has encountered, made meaning from, and recounts. This includes factual or perspectival experiences, and this study further explores the meaning made from, or knowledge gained by, the experiences described by participants. Experiences can happen in a variety of settings and times, and for the purpose of this study, include educational, professional, personal, and social experiences.
- **Identity:** While there are many nuanced understandings of what exactly constitutes identity, for the purpose of this study I utilize identity in terms of personal identity (labels, categories, and descriptors that subjects choose to take on themselves), social identity (group membership, how one might “fit in” depending on context and influences), and imposed identities (identities that may include group membership but are

“given” to the subject). I describe different facets of identity more in depth in Chapter Two.

- **Self-identify:** This means that a person chooses to acknowledge, accept, or claim a certain identity. Imposed identities, or identities that people do not consider to represent themselves are not included in how a person self-identifies.

Sexuality/ Gender Terms

- **Cisgender:** People whose gender identities align with the sex that they were assigned at birth.
- **Cishet:** Someone who is both cisgender and heterosexual.
- **Heterosexual:** Someone who is attracted to people of a different sex than themselves (typically men who are attracted to women and vice versa).
- **LGBTQ+:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/ Questioning. The “+” indicates the multitude of identities that cannot be included in the acronym. I use this term interchangeably with “Queer.”
- **Transgender/ Gender Nonconforming (TGNC):** To be transgender means to identify as a gender that is different from the one assigned at birth (i.e., those born as "male" do not understand themselves as male and understand them as a different gender (female, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, etc.). An important piece of information to keep in mind is that the performance of gender (how one presents) is often defined by cultural expectations of what it means to be a "man," a "woman," both, neither, etc. A nonconforming individual does not conform to traditional expectations of performance or roles of masculinity or femininity. More recently, the use of an asterisk (*) after trans* is used to denote an umbrella term for the entire transgender and gender nonconforming

communities, where the asterisk follows Boolean logic and serves as a “wildcard” to include the ever-growing range of non-normative gender identities (Strunk & Shelton, 2022b).

Critical Framework Terms

- **Minoritized:** Vaccaro et al. (2015) chose to use this term in their own writing to recognize the role power plays in minority status - That those of us in minority groups are in these groups due to those in power assigning us a lower status. I use this term interchangeably with minority/ minority status, and may combine phrases to state minoritized groups, minoritized people, minoritized populations, etc.

Generation Terms

- **Generation Alpha:** This term is not widely used to recognize the generation after Generation Z, but Australian Researcher Mark McCrindle (2021) has defined those born from 2010 to 2024 as Generation Alpha, and this language is growing in popularity.
- **Generation Z:** Pew Research and Gallup both recognize those in this generation as being born starting in 1997, but differ in the ending years for this generation - 2012 for Pew Research (Dimock, 2019) and 2003 for Gallup (Jones, 2022). Some individuals may refer to Generation Z informally as Zoomers (which is both a reference to those that had to experience schooling virtually, or via the videoconferencing program Zoom, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a play on the word for the generation of “boomers”).
- **Millennials:** Pew Research and Gallup both recognize those in this generation as being born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019; Jones, 2022). An informal term that references those who demonstrate characteristics of both Generation Z and Millennials, typically born between 1995 and 2000, is Zillennials.

- **Generation X:** Oxford University Press (2022b) identifies those in this generation as being born between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s. Pew Research and Gallup list the birth year range as 1965 to 1980 (Dimock, 2019; Jones, 2022).
- **Baby Boomers:** Oxford University Press (2022a) identifies those in this generation as being born after World War 2 ended in 1945. Pew Research and Gallup list the birth year range as 1946 to 1964 (Dimock, 2019; Jones, 2022).
- **Traditionalists:** Traditionalists (Jones, 2022) is also known as the Silent Generation (Dimock, 2019) and includes those born before 1946. Dimock provides a birth year constraint of 1928.

Researchers Stance

I choose to conduct this research because I am personally and professionally invested in the research. As such, I am also a stakeholder in the acquisition of knowledge and those factors can influence my subjectivities, approaches, and findings throughout the research project. As the researcher, I bring my own perspectives, experiences, thoughts, opinions, and feelings to the “field.” This is not something that can be ignored, and I in no way intend to claim neutrality, as that would be intellectually dishonest (Bhattacharya, 2017). By transparently situating myself in the research, I, like Peshkin (1988), hope to “create an illuminating, empowering personal statement that attunes me to where self and subject are intertwined” (p. 20). This statement occurs in two places: in the form of bracketing within the preface to this dissertation and within my stance described in this section. However, this statement cannot be considered the only time I refer to my subjectivities, or when I must think about them. I will mention throughout this dissertation the importance of maintaining awareness of my subjectivities prior to them arising and as they arise and aim to report those influences openly throughout as well.

The study involves considering the standpoints of Queer individuals who are K-12 public educators. The purpose of utilizing these standpoints is to begin from their perspectives to developing an understanding of their experiences and how those experiences impact their practice. I also must consider my own standpoint as a Queer K-12 public educator myself, and the perspectives, hopes, questions, ideas, and influences I bring with me. As someone who frequently provides professional development to pre-service and in-service teachers on working with Queer students, I have my personal ideas about how my experiences have influenced my practice and what other teachers should do in order to be more inclusive and supportive of their Queer students. My own standpoint is omnipresent in this process, simultaneously existing with the standpoint of the research participants.

Due to the nature of Queer experiences in the U.S., I must also attune to the empathy, care, and poise needed to conduct this research. Due to the higher rates of suicide, self-harm, and substance use for Queer individuals, I cannot aim to create a sterile, “clean,” and “cut and dry” research environment. It would do a disservice to the research to even consider turning off empathetic understanding and listening; to do so could jeopardize the relationship and rapport I aim to develop with subjects as I listen to their stories and begin to make sense of their common narrative threads. I may miss out on key insights hidden deep within the research process if I step too far back. If I am not intimate with the process, I cannot fully know the data, and if I cannot fully know the data, I cannot fully understand the results.

As such, I aim to be reflective throughout this process, and open with readers about the findings, experiences, and ways that my subjectivities may become present throughout the process. This reflexivity is an ongoing form of engagement and examination whereby I aim to explain how I have influenced this project through critical self-reflection along with

consideration and examination of the decisions I have made along the way (Dowling, 2008). I am a Queer person with my own experiences that impact who I am today, and who I will be in the future. That does not mean that my experiences are the same, or that similar experiences should be interpreted in the same way, as the research participants. I am also an educator in the Midwest, but that does not mean that these experiences should influence the meanings generated from the experiences of the participants. My subjectivities are always present, as is my standpoint, and to report on the findings accurately, honestly, and ethically from this study, I must keep this in mind and be transparent about it for readers. I outline more subjectivity considerations and how I address these in Chapter Three.

Organization of the Study

Chapter One of this study introduces the contextual, historical, and research backgrounds as they relate to Queer educators and their experiences while also highlighting the research purpose, questions, and methodology along with the researcher subjectivities, limitations, and significance of this work. Chapter Two presents the existing literature regarding cultural contexts, systems, and influences, and Queer educators and their experiences. This review also provides an overview for the developing Queer Standpoint Theory framework, with background regarding both Queer Theory and Queer Standpoint Theory and highlights information regarding current perspectives on identity development for Queer individuals and groups. Chapter Three describes the nature of qualitative inquiry and the methodological approach of this study. This includes the methods and analytic approaches used to provide support of the quality and trustworthiness of this study's procedures and outcomes. Chapter Four will present the analysis of the entire data corpus and the findings derived from the data analysis. Chapter Five will include a discussion on the findings, limitations, and future direction of research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter is organized moving from larger conceptual ideas to concrete, specific examples, as opposed to a linear construction. Broader concepts, such as distinguishing the difference between self-identification and behavior as it relates to prevalence, concepts of school, educational philosophy, and cisheterosexism/ homophobia/ systems of oppression begin this chapter. This is followed by a more concrete description of Queer educator experiences and a historical review of legal protections. Then, with a more concrete, “feet on the ground/ in practice” perspective, is a discussion on the practical outcomes that impact practice.

Following the review of existing research regarding the intersection of Queer and educator identities, is a discussion on the theoretical frameworks employed by this study, and the union of Queer Theory (QT) and Standpoint Theory (ST) to form Queer Standpoint Theory (QST). After the theoretical frameworks are discussed, commentary and information regarding identity development is provided. This chapter ends with additional theoretical underpinnings and a conceptualization of the development of Queer educators as a cycle.

Existing Research and Cultural Frameworks (Conceptual Frameworks/ Overview)

It has been previously established that there is a rising prevalence of self-identifying Queer people in the US, particularly in younger generations and they step into a more and more accepting and affirming culture. However, the distinction between self-identification and behavior must also be explored. Where self-identification asks a respondent “do you see yourself as lesbian, gay, bisexual, nonbinary, transgender, etc.?”, and aligns with survey instruments used by research teams such as Jones (2022) at Gallup, Inc., behavior looks at those who may not identify with a non-heterosexual identity who have had interactions that could be labeled as homosexual, which aligns with research conducted by Kinsey in the 1940s and the US

Department of Health and Human Services/ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

(Underwood et al., 2020). Haddock (2016) describes this distinction in the following way:

“There is a distinction between homosexual or same-sex activity and personalized sexuality. As part of the complexity of sexuality, there are instances of individuals who may have same-sex experiences but not identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or homosexual. The sexual act does not constitute a sexual identity for these individuals. Others may identify themselves in terms of those sexualities such as lesbian, gay, or bisexual but not be sexually active, whereas others may consider themselves in terms of sexuality exclusive of gender identity.” (p. 11)

While it is not the role of the researcher to distinguish these items for participants, a focus on self-identification as an inclusionary factor was required in order for subjects to participate.

However, understanding that Queer educators can broadly include individuals from both categories is also important.

It should come as no surprise that there have always been Queer educators working in our public schools. Woog (1995) and Mayo (2020) both argue that Queer staff and students are embedded in our school systems, and Woog further explains that the schools are filled with Queer adults – “some are teachers or paraprofessionals; others coach teams, clean floors, run libraries. Some are in charge of the whole school, or even the district. Some are the targets of rumors; some no one would ever suspect” (p. 22). Blount (2015) asserts that “the ranks of educators always have included persons who have desired others of the same sex or who have transgressed conventional gender norms” (p. 161) and that among those were a wide range of staff, including teachers and administrators. The questions regarding Queer students, staff,

families, etc. can no longer be masked as hypothetical “if” questions, but are realistic “when” questions.

One might say “I don’t mind that they’re gay, but why do they have to flaunt it?” Endo et al. (2010) found that participants in their study “acknowledge that wherever they go and whatever they do, it is impossible for them to completely conceal who they are, and what they are” (p. 1027). Similarly, Johnson (2011) states that “anyone who’s worked in a school will know that gender dynamics and sexuality show up in schools every day simply because students do not (and cannot be made to) leave their identities at the schoolhouse door” (p. 206) (referencing the Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines* in 1969). Johnson goes on to state that if schools intend to serve students and staff alike, that it is harmful to ignore the dynamics at play:

Ignoring or avoiding sexuality and gender dynamics won’t make them go away but ignoring these issues when they become evident in day-to-day experience can lead to physical, emotional, and intellectual damage to the individuals who learn and work together in a school (p. 206).

There is no desire to “flaunt it;” rather there is a desire to exist safely and openly, without having to hide one’s truth.

Some may argue that school is not the place for discussions on or representation of diverse gender and sexual identities. The viewpoint asserted here is driven by certain values that an individual (or group) may feel need to be replicated in the school setting, or that schools should not be teaching values. However, education cannot be value free, and by its very nature is driven by values (Johnson, 2011). If it were possible to produce a value-free education system designed to teach students, then “personal characteristics of the student and of the teacher are irrelevant” (p. 205). Queer people exist in schools and hope to exist safely and freely in these

schools without fear of harm, rejection, retaliation, or other ills that have been aimed at Queer teachers in the past. For this to happen, representation of Queer topics (or simply existing openly) and discussions regarding Queer topics (including Queer subjects) must be allowed, encouraged, and celebrated.

Some historical knowledge can be of assistance in understanding why injustice and erasure has been a normal experience for Queer folks. It was not until the last 150 years that Queer people were labeled as ill or perverted (although this fear-driven rhetoric is still perpetuated today). In the early- to mid- twentieth century, psychologists, psychoanalysts, and sexologists “viewed gender diversity as being of psychiatric concern” (Davies & Hoskin, 2022, p. 182). Further, Foucault (1978) argues that “the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized ” and that “Westphal’s famous article of 1870 on “contrary sexual sensations” can stand as its date of birth” (p. 43). Jagose (1996) affirms Foucault’s line of thinking that “homosexuality is necessarily a modern formation because, while there were previously same-sex sex acts, there was no corresponding category of identification” (p. 10). Because of this background, teachers in Jackson’s (2007) study recognized that “teaching is political” and “expressed their commitment to empowering new generations to confront injustice” (p. 146).

The People (Not the Location or Institution) Make Up “School”

Queer teachers may embrace the commitment to confronting injustice and representing all their students as an asset to their school communities. Those school communities are what make up the modern notion of “school.” Woog (1995) states that

“Ultimately school is not about places or things; school is much more than bricks, books, and backpacks. School is really about people – classmates, teachers, coaches, nurses,

principals, everyone who makes up the communities in which we spend half our waking hours, three-quarters of the year, for over a decade of our lives” (p. 21).

It stands to reason then, that if Queer people make up a significant portion of our population, and we know that there are Queer educators working in our schools in various capacities, then it is worth understanding the experiences of Queer educators, their roles, their practices, and how those are impacted by their Queerness.

However, there is still fear surrounding whether Queer teachers will be harassed, bullied, mocked, fired in the workforce, or a host of other possible harmful experiences. Queer educators still show up for their students, and can be incredibly talented, skilled, and resourceful school community members. These educators, though, enter the teaching profession for the same reasons their heterosexual, cisgender counterparts do – they were inspired by teachers who made a difference in their lives, have a desire to share knowledge with others, the desire to be nurturers, or to follow in the footsteps of those who came before them, to be role models, and more (Endo et al., 2010; Kissen, 1996). Even facing additional hardships, Queer Educators are willing to defy societal boundaries and norms in order to contribute to the educational investment in future generations. As Mayo (2020) argues, “nothing about being queer should prevent you from being an educator” (p. 41), including the risks and prejudice that have historically been and that are currently present for Queer educators.

Educational communities tend to reflect the broader communities in which they are located (Blackburn & Parker, 2022b), and varying levels of acceptance, understanding, or protections can impact how local educational communities may respond to a Queer educator. Further, Endo, et al. (2010) found that “queer teacher solidarity, which is currently missing from the US educational environment, could help queer teachers to accept who they are in the school

context and to be proud of being a queer teacher” (p. 1028). An additional layer to the community considerations is that how people or groups may experience communities both inside and outside of the school setting is impacted by a wider range of factors outside of Queerness, including factors such as race, class, gender, religion, rural/ urban status, grade levels, and others (Blackburn & Parker, 2022b).

The people that make up the school, and the experiences within the schoolhouse themselves, directly relate to the experiences that Queer educators have while attending the schools as students and while working in schools as educators. How they describe these experiences will be important to address this study’s research questions and better understand those experiences, how they tie together, and how they inform educator practice.

Cultural Impacts, Norms, and Systems

Replication of Cultural Norms.

The larger cultural impacts on school communities and Queer educator experiences alike must be considered. The reproduction of heterosexuality, a gender binary, being cisgender, and performing gender in predetermined ways can be understood using a variety of similar, yet distinct, terms, such as heterosexism, heteronormativity, cissexism, cisheterosexism, cisheteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, homophobia, transphobia, and a host of other frameworks (see a variety of entries in K. K. Strunk & Shelton, 2022a, for clarification on distinctions between these terms). Whichever word is used to describe the systems at play, the central idea is the same: that individuals who do not fall into heterosexual, cisgender ways of being are thought of as deviant and are not reinforced, represented, or considered normal, and there are many systems which maintain an exclusive status quo.

This dissertation is situated within a culture which views heterosexuality and being cisgender as the norm, and anything outside of those frameworks as deviant (though progress has been and continues to be made toward removing negative perspectives toward those outside of the norms). This society reinforces compulsory heterosexuality, which can be understood as “a social system which regulates sexual desire and romantic attachment: it mandates heterosexuality and punishes, [penalizes], or renders invisible those who violate its norms” (Fraser, 2018, p. 329). Because of these deeply rooted sociocultural mandates, our schools replicate compulsory heterosexuality and reinforce the gender binary to regulate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. However, there have many who have sought to disrupt these norms to bring value and freedom to not only those who are deemed “deviant,” but also to those who are cisgender and heterosexual, who are also impacted by systems of oppression. Nixon (2006) shares how gay and lesbian teachers can build a more inclusive culture that celebrates what was previously known as “deviant,” “perverted,” or “corrupt:”

As lesbian and gay people, we discomfort the regular hierarchies and challenge the way fragile identities have been built out of unacknowledged prejudice. We act as social critics simply because we have been perceived as different, and stand in solidarity with other marginalised groups by virtue of our own marginalised history. We advocate new paradigms for ‘doing gender’ and ‘doing sexuality’ in which more inclusive roles are conceived, less predatory ways of masculinity explored, and family stereotypes expanded. The ancient cultural tradition of same-sex affection and friendship provides a rich resource for enlarging the scope of human relationships and community (p. 280).

The valuable resource found in Queer educators cannot be overlooked: they are embedded in the school system, are able to affirm value in the oppressed, and challenge social prejudices, social systems, and build a stronger society.

Replication of Norms through Curriculum and Systemic Culture.

Through the curriculum present in American schooling, these ideologies are perpetuated and systems such as compulsory heterosexuality or the reinforcement on the gender binary are maintained. López Medina (2022) asserts “the education system contributes to LGBTQ+ people assuming that the role society expects them to play is secondary, submissive, and hidden. Schools teach them their identity is not meant to be public, but to be kept private and discreet.” López Medina also explains that “no school system will admit to educating in prejudice and privilege. It is a fact they do, though.” The education system/ systems help “instill binary concepts like normal/abnormal, good/bad, superior/inferior, legal/illegal, central/marginal, sane/insane, and many more, which are implicitly and explicitly applied to people’s identity in terms of gender and sexuality” (p. 91). The systems in place do perpetuate hegemonic powers, even though they would not outright state this.

This (re)production created an ideal (to be cisgender and heterosexual). It also supported the creation of another system of oppression known as homonormativity, or to be Queer in specific, easy-to-understand ways, that align with cisheteronormative assimilation, and replication of dominant ways of being, even in homosexual contexts. All of these uphold a “platform of oppression” in our societies and in our schools (Archer, 2022, p. 287). As such, schools in America, or education broadly, are systems of power that through democratic education shape individuals and society, and through that shaping, sets, maintains, and/ or challenges norms and values.

John Dewey, an American educational reformer and philosopher, is quoted as saying that “perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only the particular thing he is studying at the time” (Dewey, 2015, p. 48; Eisner, 2002, p. 87). The things that students learn in schools, and the things that teachers participate in, are not always explicitly taught, communicated, or studied; rather, there are many things that are implicitly communicated and reinforced. One form of curriculum, the implicit curriculum, includes “pervasive and ubiquitous... expectations and rules” (p. 106), such as values, motivations, norms, and more. These items are not taught explicitly but are instead modeled and reinforced in more subtle ways. Additionally, the concept of null curriculum highlights things that are not taught (explicitly or implicitly) in schools – considering the “options students are not afforded, the perspectives they may never know about, much less be able to use, [and] the concepts and skills that are not part of their intellectual repertoire” (p. 107). López Medina (2022) provides examples of this null curriculum in relation to Queer people:

LGBTQ+ people are usually blatantly omitted in school discourses, and their representation is purposefully deleted in most school resources. Another example is the scarce use of inclusive language in formal education, which also erases both women and non-binary persons (p. 91).

The use of hidden and null curriculums is not only present for the Queer students in the modern schoolhouses, but for Queer educators as well.

Bittner (2022) provides a perspective on research that demonstrates how “curriculum policies, teaching, and learning materials tend to normalize heterosexuality and privilege information related to heterosexual futures over the possibilities of queer futures” (p. 116), which helps to maintain cisheteronormativity through these different types of curricula. Nixon (2006)

highlights that heterosexism, the unchallenged assumption that heterosexuality is the norm, is “pervasive through the education system, from the silence about homosexuality in the curriculum of schools and training institutions, to the signs of marriage like wedding rings, spouses’ names, and casual references to shared social activities” (p. 276). The fear of outing oneself or seeing how administration handles bullying situations that target Queer students communicate certain messages to Queer educators. Being products of the education system in which heterosexism (and cissexism) is the norm, Queer educators who grew up in the US education system are no strangers to learning and “playing by the rules.”

Considering preservice teachers, Davis (2022) highlights the difficulties experienced by having to navigate their safety and careers about whether to come out of the closet, stay out of the closet, or re-closet themselves. These additional struggles are due to the “persistent presumption and (re)production of heterosexuality as normal” which through heteronormativity “silences and marginalizes queer sexualities and erases transgender and nonbinary identities altogether” (Staley, 2022, p. 252). These individuals are again subject to an education system (both as products and as actors from within) which, again, “contributes to LGBTQ+ people assuming that the role society expects them to play is secondary, submissive, and hidden” and where they are taught that “their identity is not meant to be public, but to be kept private and discreet” (López Medina, 2022, p. 91).

Interconnected Issues.

Audre Lorde, an American writer and civil rights activist, is quoted as saying that “there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” The “-isms,” “-ists,” “-phobias,” “normativities,” and “compulsories” are all connected and reinforcing of each other. Even the concept of heteropatriarchy, the “social, political, and economic system

in which heterosexual men are the dominant group in a society or culture,” (Kelley & Arce-Trigatti, 2022, p. 257) is engrained in our education system, thus reinforcing heterosexual ways of being and limiting how individuals are allowed to perform as male and female, which is normalized and maintained through policies and practices within the educational institution (Kelley & Arce-Trigatti, 2022; Rudoe, 2010). The hidden, explicit, and null curriculums, which perpetuate harmful and exclusive ideologies and practices, are built on systems which maintain that being cisgender and heterosexual is the norm and is the valuable, or correct, way of being. The Queer identities and reinforcement of binary gender norms are then set in contrast to cisheteronormativity (Staley, 2022). However, Jackson (2007) explains that “through the informal or hidden curriculum, out [gay and lesbian] teachers acted as positive role models for both gay and straight students” and that they were able “to challenge homophobia either explicitly or implicitly” (p. 152). Individuals within the education system are able to push back against cultural norms and systems in order to support their communities. This is a systemic issue that is based on systemic oppression.

Oppression and Dominance.

It is worth noting that these ideas of oppression and dominance are not representative of a traditional autocratic rule, rather, as Young (2014) explains, an alternative understanding is that they designate “the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society” (p. 5). These attitudes are not required to be viewed “only in overtly hostile acts of discrimination, violence, harassment, or microaggressions, but is also located in silence” (Chatterjee, 2022, p. 265). Young further explains that “the systemic character of oppression implies that an oppressed group need not have a correlate oppressing group” (p. 6); while there are groups that seek to

disavow Queer identities, freedoms, and lives (such as Focus on the Family, Westboro Baptist Church, American Family Association, and Family Research Council, to name a few), the issues faced are larger than specific groups ideologies – they are faced as part of larger systems that promote and maintain subtler forms of these ideologies. It is important to remember that the issues faced by so many cannot be considered in isolation from one another. The various forms of oppression (racism, sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, classism, ableism, etc.) must be understood intersectionally – that they are all interconnected and interdependent forms of oppression.

Additional Cultural Messaging.

The heteronormative and compulsory heterosexuality frameworks not only idealize cisgender, heterosexual ways of being, but promote a form of compulsory sexuality, or allosexuality, the idea that all people experience attraction toward others (Mollet & Lackman, 2022), which is exclusive of people within the asexual and aromantic spectrums. Western societies promote “social norms and practices that both marginalize various forms of nonsexuality, such as a lack of sexual desire or behavior, and compel people to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity” (Gupta, 2015, p. 132). This norm affirms that all people must experience attraction, but that attraction experienced in Queer ways is wrong, deviant, and immoral. Further, through amatonormativity, there is an assumption that “a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans... is a universally shared goal, and... should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types” (Brake, 2012, p. 88-89). Queer couples who choose not to marry, individuals who do not experience attraction, and others are also left out of the socialization of what is considered institutionally as normal and acceptable.

An added layer to these cultural considerations is that of birthing and raising children. Rubin (1999) provides a model of the sexual value system and what is acceptable or unacceptable. Rubin describes “good,” “normal,” and “natural” sexuality as being heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive,” and that demonstrations of sexuality that violates these rules is “bad,” “abnormal,” or “unnatural,” which may be “homosexual, unmarried, [or] non-procreative” (p. 152). The “good” forms of being are reproduced through socialization, curriculum, policy, etc. while the “bad” forms are repressed, condemned, silenced, and otherwise oppressed and ignored.

Identifying and Quantifying Oppressive Attitudes and Beliefs.

Heterosexist attitudes and beliefs are not always easy to identify and quantify. They are interactions that occur in the day-to-day encounters and promote stereotypes about Queer individuals and communities (Chatterjee, 2022). This leads to “marginalization wrought structurally and institutionally on queer people by legitimizing heterosexuality as [the normal and only option]” and “the only proper way of life.” Heterosexism allows for and reinforces the punishment of “those who do not figure in the dominant socially approved processes through which heterosexuality is conceived (primarily, marriage and procreation)” (p. 260).

Within the context of schooling, Staley (2022) summarizes an array of research that examines curricula and has found that it is primarily heteronormative and reinforcing of heterosexuality as the only logical way to be, while also summarizing findings that heteronormativity is reinforced in students’ friendships (pointing out the quickness to ask if a different-sex friend is a boyfriend or girlfriend) and the language used by and interactions of students and teachers. The pathologizing of homosexuality as something “to be met by verbal or physical aggression, or marginalized as ‘other’” is engrained in heterosexism (Nixon, 2006, p.

276) and the maintained systems that primarily promote heteronormative perspectives through the education system, by including only pictures of heterosexual couples in learning materials, promoting heterosexual sex and procreation without addressing the sexual health needs of Queer students, or not including examples of same-sex desire or relationships (Chatterjee, 2022; Staley, 2022). This creation of an ideal has allowed for “a platform of oppression [to be] created: not just of exclusion, but of active antagonization” that occurs internally and externally in relation to the larger Queer community (Archer, 2022, p. 287).

Privileges at the Expense of Others.

There is an interplay to be found between sexism, racism, and heterosexism where all are based upon discrimination through the use of structures (institutional, social) that marginalizes Queer people (Chatterjee, 2022). Even the “ideal” of a heterosexual male being privileged must “be established by an interplay of misogyny and homophobia” (Nixon, 2006, p. 277) and results in the social, political, and economic system where heterosexual males are the dominant social and cultural group (formally referred to as heteropatriarchy) (Kelley & Arce-Trigatti, 2022). Further, the term cisheteropatriarchy shifts heteropatriarchal concepts to include gender, and highlights the mutually reinforcing relationships between patriarchy, heterosexism, and transphobia – systems which maintain themselves and maintain each other (Muncaster, 2022).

Muncaster further explains that the cisheteropatriarchal system privileges cisgender, heterosexual men are benefited as the expense of trans* people, Queer people, and women. Foundational to heteropatriarchy, and able to be understood within cisheteropatriarchal frameworks, are five assumptions outlined by Harris (2011) and summarized by Kelley & Arce-Trigatti (2022, p. 256):

1. A person is born either male or female.

2. A person's sex at birth determines their gender and behavior.
3. Sex/ gender causes innate and distinct differences between males and females.
4. The differences are complementary and so relations should only occur with the opposite sex.
5. Males are privileged because masculine characteristics and abilities are seen as better.

Further, these frameworks “not only naturalize heteronormative gender roles and the socio-political dominance of cisgender men but also reinforce the gender binary and marginalize [trans* people]” (Muncaster, 2022, p. 87).

Assimilation as a Response to Cultural Oppression.

What do Queer people do in order to blend in amidst these frameworks within and outside of educational settings? There are several possibilities: some remain in the closet and do not disclose their non-normative identities, some only come out to a select group of people, some aim to replicate heterosexual ways of being within their homosexual relationships, and some remain in the closet, keeping their Queerness to themselves only, to name a few options. Homonormativity is one of the ways Queer people can aim to work within their current contexts. Archer (2022) explains that this “refers to an idealized performance of queerness that is congruent with as many privileged cisheterosexual norms as possible and which offers the least challenge to dominant narratives” (p. 284), that “homonormativity seeks assimilation” (p. 287), and that anything outside of what can be replicated from heteronormativity would face backlash. The homonormative ideals of mirroring as many cishet norms as possible have been found to be centered on “whiteness, masculinity... upper- or middle-class status... cisgender, and binary-adherent gender identity and presentations... able-bodiedness... what is appropriate relationally... a binary and genital-related understanding of attraction... pro-creative sex...

hypersexuality... the seeking of marriage, and the financially inter-dependent relationships” (Archer, 2022, p. 284). Queer people may choose to find ways to “blend in” instead of “sticking out.”

This attempted assimilation becomes even more complex when it’s understood that it is based upon a white, euro-centric perspective and not inclusive of racial and ethnic diversity. Hawkman (2022) explains that this approach to inclusion “insists queer people and constructs assimilate to white heteronormative expectations in order to make queerness more palatable to ‘mainstream’ interests” (p. 766) and that whiteness is made central to the perspectives of what is “normal,” “ideal,” or “palatable” while “ignoring, erasing, and at times co-opting decades (generations) of contributions from queer people of Color” (p. 768). Through assumptions that the Pulse nightclub shooting had the same effect on all Queer people, when the racially-motivated aspect of this act impacted Latinx Queer people more than white Queer people, or that “the white queer experience can be understood as the same as the experiences of queer people of Color”, white homonormativity is enacted and assimilation, or same-ness, is expected (Hawkman, 2022, p. 766-767).

Cultural Impacts, Norms, and Systems Conclusion.

Additionally, a variety of other sub-groups within the Queer community (which are also marginalized within their own community), are subject to heteronormativity, cisheteronormativity, and homonormativity. These groups include bisexual people, asexual people, and aromantic people who are “essentially reduced to their presentations,” and trans* people, whose transitions and presentations are expected to easily assimilate to fit standards of gender and beauty, but that anything outside of what can easily be understood are shunned (Archer, 2022, p. 287). There are many, many factors that are involved in sociocultural contexts

which affect individuals and groups within those contexts. One of those factors that should be considered is the institution of public education as a key sociocultural factor.

The larger cultural context and factors within that context directly impact how Queer individuals navigate their sociocultural contexts at large and will also impact their experiences. Understanding these impacts and influences is key to understanding the more subtle, and even the overt, ways that Queer educates make and negotiate meaning from these experiences. With this information in mind, it is easier to address the research purpose and research questions.

Education as a Key Factor in the Cultural Context

Kelley & Arce-Trigatti (2022) asserts that “education, as an institution, plays an important role in normalizing heteropatriarchy through policies and practices” and describes additional arguments made that education as an institution “has traditionally served a purpose of indoctrinating individuals with the socio-political norms approved and accepted by a privileged majority (p. 257). Bittner (2022) argues that heteronormativity “reinforces certain normative expectations around gender identity and sexuality, and these expectations are often reflected within classroom spaces in ways that are restrictive to students who are in the process of self-formation” (p. 118). Staley (2022) explains that Queer-focused education researchers have highlighted that heteronormativity is “institutionalized in schools through discourse practices, policies, pedagogies, and everyday actions of administrators, teachers, educators, and students” (p. 251). The education system builds and maintains these systems, expectations, and norms.

Kelley & Arce-Trigatti (2022) also provide a summary of studies regarding how the “ideal” cisgender male continues to be benefitted or privileged in schools:

Educational spaces are often gendered, benefitting cisgender heterosexual men in ways that are evident through the physical structures (e.g., availability of bathrooms, residence

halls, and lactation areas), policies (e.g., maternity leave, childcare options, and equal pay), curricula (e.g., a focus on cisgender heterosexual male authors and protagonists), and social norms (e.g., dress codes that are more flexible for male students, dialect and language preferences, and standards related to elite professionalism) (p. 257-258).

Understanding the interplay and prevalence of privileges and systems is critical to understanding the experiences of Queer individuals, and (most relevant to this study), Queer educators.

Regarding Queer experiences in American classrooms, Endo, et al. (2010) explains that “[presumed heterosexuality] has made the classroom environment hostile for queer individuals, students, and teachers alike” (p. 1023). Blackburn & Parker (2022) highlight that those filling the roles of administrators have primarily been cisnormative white men and women, and that they “have historically upheld cisnheternormative ideals embedded throughout educational systems” (p. 162). These factors, and the interplay of frameworks idealizing cisgender, heterosexual ways of being, have an adverse effect on Queer individuals involved in the modern American education system, frameworks which “[make] it difficult for queer people – and particularly racialized and variously minoritized queer people – to lead livable lives and realize their potential” (Chatterjee, 2022, p. 264).

Research on Options or Stances Available to Teachers

The unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, assumptions underlying rules, and collective consequences reinforced for following (or not following) the “rules”, maintains these forms of oppression (Young, 2014). Kitchen (2016) explains that “educators need to question such implicit codes rather than passively allow them to be taken for granted by students constructing their own identities and coming to understand other people” and that “heteronormativity is often unexamined and unchallenged in teacher preparation” (p. 19). Before

teachers even begin their formal teaching career, the structural and systemic concerns can be highlighted so that they can address, push against, and change rules, systems, structures, expectations, and biases affecting their Queer students. Within the classrooms, teachers can do all of this and more. They can “push against any norms... interrogate the norms surrounding their disciplines, school policies, teaching practices, student learning, and all other structures in education” and “critically [question] norms, particularly heteronormativity and cisnormativity” (Pennell, 2022, p. 540).

Additionally, educators are able to include Queer subjects in the classroom curricula, representations, medias, and community to push back against the norms and ideals. Trinh (2022) explains that “making queer subjects socially, culturally, and politically seen, heard, and supported... resists and disrupts cisheteronormative ideologies and assumptions” (p. 756). Trinh does, however, acknowledge that “making queer subjects visible is not always safe or possible” (p. 756). These issues of safety or possibility may cause teachers to feel unprepared, unable, or unsupported to implement inclusive practices, challenge assumptions, and work to change a system that is not supporting all of their students. Staley (2022) explains that “when educators are unprepared and unsupported to disrupt heteronormativity in these ways, students have few opportunities to learn to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions of “straight” as normal and to unlearn traditional scripts that rely on binary gender categories to teach what it means to be a boy or a girl” (p. 251).

Within some educational contexts, one form of rebellion and changing the system is through Queer educators being “out” to their students, coworkers, and communities. The ability to share openly who they are, without fear of criticism, judgement, risks to their safety, or risks to their employment, or even in spite of these things, is one way that Queer teachers are

addressing heteronormativity, cisnormativity, heteropatriarchy, and these many interconnected systems. Nixon (2006) explains that Queer teachers “force schools and other educational institutions to face reality in terms of continuing discrimination on the grounds of gender and sexuality... and to begin the long, hard-fought process of setting up new models for thinking and [behavior]” (p. 280).

Students even benefit from having teachers who create spaces that are safe for Queer students. These benefits are not limited to only Queer students (Freitag, 2013), because having out gay teachers can benefit both gay and straight students as positive role models (Jackson, 2007). A participant in a study by Rofes (2000) even shared that “[having a gay teacher] provided an accessible example of a person who resisted dominant social norms and managed to survive” (p. 411). These role models are available to students, but still are faced with backlash and fear of coming out. However, sometimes, questions like “are you gay, teacher?” may arise (It did my first year as a teacher!). Endo et al. (2010) shared that “Even though the teachers we interviewed have not come out to their students, some of their students have wondered whether their teacher is gay or lesbian” (p. 1026). It is at this point that teachers have to revisit if they wish to remain in the proverbial closet or step out and share the truth about themselves openly.

Kissen (1996) describes that for gay and lesbian teachers in the 90s, “surviving and thriving as an openly gay teacher is more than a dream,” as they live amidst a paradox where “self-revelation is the riskiest act imaginable for someone who is gay, lesbian, or bisexual, yet at the same time, it holds the greatest potential for true liberation” (p. 161). Displaying signs of marriage (wedding rings, spouse’s names, and references to shared social activities) may be a risk in some contexts, but it may also set the stage for freedom in the face of those risks. The legal protections since the 90s have changed and moved in a direction of progress, but fear is still

present in Queer educators – when the rubber hits the road, will they be protected? Will there be an outcry from student caregivers and community members? Will administrators make their time at the school miserable so that they must leave? Will administrators allow others to make their time at work miserable? The decisions regarding Queer visibility are “intertwined sociopolitical processes that can perpetuate and oppose, exclude and include, perpetuate and disrupt cisheteronormative ideologies and assumptions simultaneously” (Trinh, 2022, p. 757).

Educators have a wide range of experiences, but one key area of focus in this study is on RQ2, dealing with how Queer educator experiences and identities impact their practices. When considering how Queer educators decide to enact knowledge gained or meaning made from their experiences and the larger sociocultural context, it is important to start thinking about how those would then impact their practice as educators.

Existing Research and Experiences (Experiential Frameworks/ Overview)

Due to the interconnecting systems, contexts, cultural influences, and a wide range of factors, Queer educators have a variety of experiences driven by concepts such as heterosexism, heteronormativity, cissexism, cisnormativity, cisheterosexism, cisheteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, homonormativity, amatonormativity, allosexuality, homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, classism, ableism, and more. Those experiences are present through legislation and policies, through harmful experiences and fear of harm, during the span of their time as a K-12 student, as a preservice teacher, as an in-service teacher, and even beyond their time in education, and can be positive, negative, or otherwise neutral experiences.

Experiencing (or Lacking) Legal Protections

Queer subjects have historically not been considered a protected class but have gained more explicit protections over the last several years. The notion of homosexuality as an identity has built over the last 150 years (Jagose, 1996), which has been used to pathologize and demonize Queer people since its medical inscription in the mid- to late- 1800s (Davies & Hoskin, 2022; Foucault, 1978). The pathologizing and demonizing of Queerness also has its roots in the modern Evangelical Christian movement, which is arguably based in years of mistranslation and misinterpretation (see Lee, 2013; Miner & Connoley, 2016; Vines, 2015 for readings on the history of homosexuality in the Christian Bible). It can be jarring to learn that the term “homosexuality” itself had not been used prior to the mid- to late- 1800s (Oxford English Dictionary, 2022).

During civil rights movement of the mid-20th century, the protections for Queer people were not addressed in the same ways as they were for other minoritized individuals. As Queer people began to push for equal rights and protections, they began to make progress in the mid-1900s; however, there were groups that did not believe that it was appropriate for Queer people to have the same legal protections or to be present in schools. After discrimination in a Florida county was prohibited against homosexuals in employment, housing, and public accommodation, Anita Bryant spearheaded a successful 1977 campaign “to overturn the law by focusing on the myth of pedophilia” (Fair, 2022, p. 418), under the guise of protecting children from predatory gay individuals (as a means to strike up fear in the public through an unfounded assertion). Thus began the onset of “no promo homo” laws across the nation following Bryant’s “Save the Children Campaign.” These laws were widespread and varied, including a focus on abstinence, procreative, heterosexual sex education only and as a prohibition of discussing LGBTQ+ issues

in a positive light. Further, in California, a politician led an unsuccessful campaign that aimed at banning homosexual teachers from teaching in California schools, while a similar law was successfully passed in Oklahoma (Fair, 2022).

As these laws were being promoted, rejected, and/or passed, the AIDS epidemic quickly grew during the late 1970s (Bennington-Castro, 2020). The onset of the AIDS crisis stirred continued sociocultural attacks into the 1980s on Queer people through moving beyond painting Queer people as predatory recruiters to painting them as a sick group spreading a disease that was a punishment for their lifestyles. It was hard to deny the need for adequate sex education to mitigate the spread of HIV. This spurred a movement where “religious conservatives chose instead to focus on shaping the laws that would govern sex education programs” (Fair, 2022, p. 418), which would focus on abstinence only education and “to stress that the only sex that was appropriate and moral was sex in a committed heterosexual marriage,” (p. 418) and even required that teachers represent LGBTQ+ relationships as immoral. This was even more restrictive in Alabama, where legislation outlined that engaging in homosexual acts was illegal.

Further into the 1990s, the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy went into place signed by President Clinton and was active from October 1993 until it was repealed in September 2011. This policy could have been considered a progressive policy at the time, aiming to repeal World War 2 era restrictions on homosexual people serving in the military, and instead required that military personnel “don’t ask, don’t tell, don’t pursue, and don’t harass” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022) so that homosexual people would be able to serve in the military. While some could argue that progress was made, there remained a major gap in allowing Queer servicemembers to be “out” and fully embrace their Queerness.

Additionally, through the early 21st century, protections remained lacking. Protections for Queer individuals in housing, workforce, education, and marriage, to name a few, were not explicitly or nationally curated. Fair (2022) points out that “while [no promo homo] laws remain on the books, members of school communities cannot be certain that attempts to include LGBTQ+ issues in the curriculum, create safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students, or provide LGBTQ+ students with appropriate health services won’t be met with negative repercussions” (p. 420). The need for a continued fight toward equity and inclusion was evident, though protections have been slowly increasing and developing.

More recently, the passing of marriage equality (June 2016), the Supreme Court ruling that LGBTQ+ people are protected under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1966 (June 2020) and the Department of Health and Human Services announcing that Title IX’s prohibitions on discrimination based on sex includes sexual orientation and gender identity (May 2021) all built legal protections into the laws that govern the United States and support Queer people. Policy, however, does not automatically address sociocultural and systemic marginalization. In addition, policy and legislation “is often unclear, with a lack of distinction between gender identity and gender expression” (Davies & Hoskin, 2022, p. 185).

The protections achieved in recent history are not all-encompassing and do not quickly and directly affect concerns at the cultural and social levels. Negative and exclusionary attitudes still exist that affect Queer educators and students. Hutchinson and White (2022) state that “these protections have the potential to allay fears educators have felt concerning coming out to their students and colleagues and may consequently impact the school climate for LGBTQ K-12 students as more educators serve as role models and create safe spaces for students” (p. 346). The protections continue to move in a direction that can support Queer students and staff, but the

much slower process of sociocultural development continues to lead to negative experiences in schools.

Existing Research on Queer Educator Experiences

The uncertainty faced by Queer teachers is abundant from several perspectives – those of teachers as employees, teachers as deliverers of curriculum, teachers as community members, and more. These concerns are evident in legal protections, fears of rejection (Mayo, 2020), and anti-gay curriculum laws where teachers cannot teach Queer history, inclusive sexual health education, or systemically protect Queer students through anti-bullying policies (Mayo, 2020; Rosky, 2017). Even with legal protections developing, backlash and policy restrictions continue to remain in place and remain evident through explicit, implicit, and null curriculums, thus perpetuating harmful systems and uncertainty.

Due to this, teachers (while more are “coming out of the closet”) may still choose to keep their identities hidden or repressed. There are many positives about teachers “coming out,” related to disrupting norms, promoting a more inclusive school culture, empowering others, and being positive role models/ examples. There are also many risks associated with “coming out” related to safety, employment, discrimination, additional burdens, and professional or physical damage. Even with legal protections laid out as they have been, “the closet can be reinforced by repressive school cultures” (C. G. Gregory, 2022, p. 97).

Those who are in same-sex relationships or who are oriented in that manner may ascribe to homonormativity and attempt to “blend in” as much as possible. This is easier to understand for many than issues related to being trans* (to include transgender, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, and a host of other identities). Thus, gender diversity adds another layer to being in the closet. Suárez (2022) explains that “past research that documents workplace experiences of

trans teachers highlights the overwhelmingly negative encounters of trans educators with coworkers and supervisors” (p. 704) and that the experiences include harassment, apathy, loss of employment, and others. Suárez also highlights research and literature describing additional complications experienced by trans* teachers, including differences in how transmasculine and transfeminine transitions are embraced and how race adds even more layers of discrimination.

Attitudes about Queer educators being out at school are changing among educators, and “there is renewed hope for legal protections of LGBTQ educators” (Hutchinson & White, 2022, p. 346). These attitudes are even changing among non-educators (students, student caregivers, community members, etc.). This has been a slow, ongoing process with many facets to consider. As has been described previously, what makes up “school” is not just the desks, the building, or the textbooks; rather, it is the teachers, administrators, paraeducators, and people at the school building. There are Queer educators and students in the schoolhouse, and they cannot be made to leave a key aspect of who they are as a person outside of school and not be allowed to bring it in with them, in the same way that their cisgender, heterosexual colleagues are privileged to live openly. Smith (2003) argues that we must continue to “mobilize political support” for Queer people, because “we deserve the protection of Enlightenment ideals of justice” and that “we must strive to extend... the benefits of rational thought processes... that should be used to protect all persons who are victims of oppression, coercion, and deprivation” (p. 348). Ultimately, continuing to allow discrimination and exclusion to occur toward/ against Queer individuals and groups is harmful to the entire school community, including educators and students (C. G. Gregory, 2022).

Experiencing Harm and Fear of Harm

In a modern context where legal protection and policy is in place, there are still rampant fears in Queer individuals, including those in education. Even as the Queer community worked against the “no promo homo” laws, there were several states that successfully passed them during the late 80s and early 90s (Freitag, 2013, p. 144; Skloot, 2010, p. xvii) (Fair, 2022). The discrimination faced by Queer educators has historically made them one of the most discriminated against professional groups in the US simply because of baseless, harmful stereotypes using arguments that Queer people are immoral, pedophiles, diseased, or working to enlist children into Queer ways of being (Blackburn & Parker, 2022b; Fair, 2022; Jackson, 2007; Nixon, 2006; Rofes, 2000).

Queer educators are aware that by violating cisheteronormative expectations, that they subject themselves to being misunderstood, becoming subjects of discrimination, facing violence, dealing with upset caregivers, unsupportive administrators, violence, and many other forms of harm (Coker, 2022; Coker & Cain, 2018). With these rampant risks, it should come as no surprise that Queer people experience abundant fear that their cishet counterparts are privileged to not experience. In violating the cisheteronormative expectations, these additional pressures (and more) take a toll on Queer educators (S. Davis, 2022).

The additional pressures placed on Queer educators tend to center around student caregivers, student wellbeing, and witnessing heterosexist and cissexist actions. Mayo (2020) describes two study participants who shared concerns that are adult-centered rather than student-centered: Rachel, who shared that “nothing really kid related [concerns me] but definitely more adult related [concerns exist]” and Robin, who shared that “[my concerns] have to do with the parent side of things and to some degree the administration side of things” (p. 36). Both

participants demonstrate the fear that Queer educators must confront and manage related to working with caregivers and other adults.

Additionally, Queer educators may experience more distress witnessing discrimination toward Queer students at their schools and Queer student suicide (Endo et al., 2010; Kissen, 1996). A third participant in Mayo's (2020) study, Samuel, shared "I do have concerns for students who are figuring things out. Especially when they confront the older guard of faculty and parents" (p. 36), showing a concern that centers on the students' experiences and the adult interactions. Participants in Rofes (2000) study also believed that "issues" about gay individuals working as educators were not concerns for students, or viewed as impacting their abilities, but was a concern for adults.

Endo et al. (2010) argues that "perhaps an even greater fear is that of being accused of child abuse" (p. 1024) due to the false, fear-driven argument that Queer people are pedophiles or that they are trying to recruit children to the gay lifestyle. It has been discovered that, in opposition to the harmful rhetoric, that heterosexual men are statistically more likely to be abusers than Queer individuals (Kissen, 1996). Though there is continued debate on whether being Queer is a product of nature or nurture, and how that could be proven, the recruitment myth continues to be pervasive.

Queer educators remain a product of an educational system that maintains cisheteronormative ideologies and positions the straight, cisgender male as the ideal. A wide range of influences continue to promote this within and beyond formal public education, such as representation in the media, how Queer people are talked about in newscasts, legislation proposed by elected representatives, rally and protest signs, research findings and surveys, and many other items. Public perception can be a major factor that contributes to harm or fear of

harm. For example, Gallup (2022) provides an overview of recent surveys that have been completed regarding Queer acceptance, rights, employment, and public perceptions. Some of those findings include the following (emphasis added):

- In 2019, 5% of respondents believed that gay or lesbian people **should not have equal rights** as non-gays or non-lesbians in terms of job opportunities.
- In 2019, 18% of respondents believed that gay or lesbian people **should not** be hired as elementary school teachers.
- In 2019, 15% of respondents believed that gay or lesbian people **should not** be hired as high school teachers.
- In 2021, 18% of respondents believed that gay or lesbian relations between consenting adults **should not be legal**.
- In 2021, 51% of respondents believed that **it is morally wrong** to change one's gender.
- In 2022, 25% of respondents believed that gay or lesbian relations **are morally wrong**.

Knowing that there are caregivers, community members, school board members, teachers, administrators, legislators, and in general, people, in our communities and country that would agree with these statements makes it clear that the fear experienced by Queer educators is not unfounded.

Teachers may ask themselves question whether they should even be a teacher (Nixon, 2006) or if they could even truly be themselves and an educator (Mayo, 2020). Are the risks worth the reward? One participant in Endo et al's (2010) study felt that if they were to be true to themselves, “many heterosexual teachers, administrators, and parents [would] easily change how they see [them] the moment they discover that [they are] homosexual” (p. 1028). Even though teachers “have a responsibility to their students to create safe spaces for all identities to be

affirmed,” some teachers “are too afraid of the backlash they may face personally” (Blackburn & Parker, 2022, p. 159).

In a developing model for identity formation and development within specific sociocultural/ temporal contexts, which (re)produces cultural norms, values, and practices and influences an individual’s development throughout their lifetime, I offer the first component to represent the topics discussed here: The sociocultural/ temporal contexts (including cisheteronormativity, heteropatriarchy, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, and others). The experiences discussed in this section and the following section, occur within this context, which is represented by Figure 3.

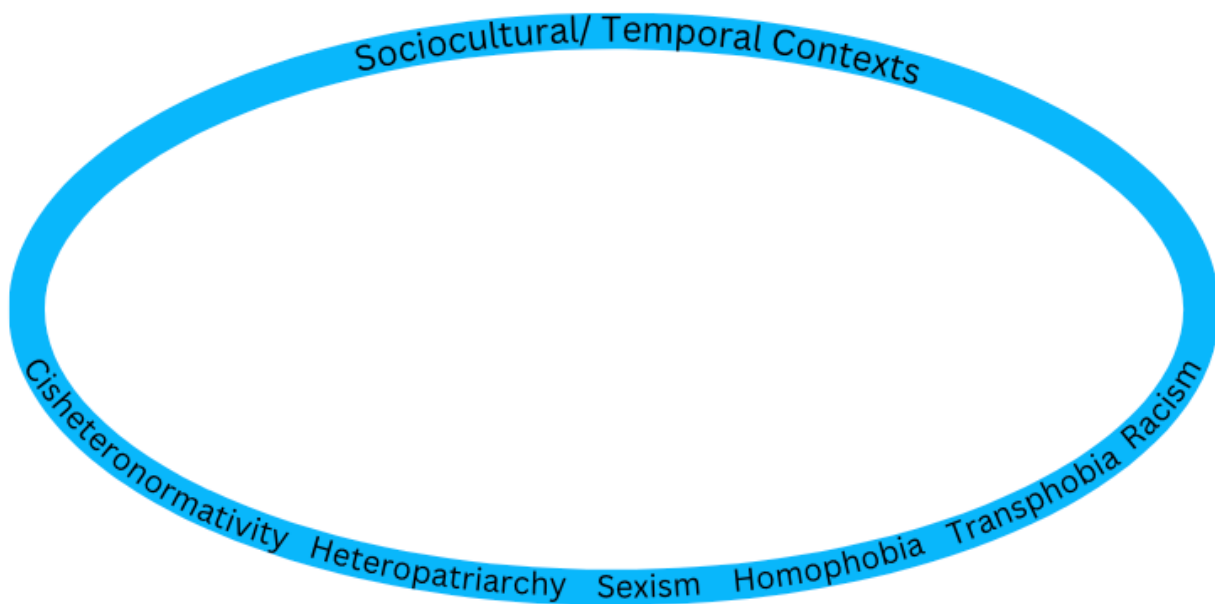


Figure 3: Sociocultural/ Temporal Contexts for Queer Educator Development and (Re)Production

A Range of Positive and Negative Experiences as Students and Educators

My goal with reviewing this is not to say that all experiences for Queer educators are negative. Instead, I aim to shed a light on how progress has shifted toward fostering more positive experiences while avoiding sweeping the sobering perspectives and history under the

proverbial rug. Existing research has shown that there are many benefits to inclusive practices, policy, and approaches that support not only Queer educators and Queer students, but all students and staff (Freitag, 2013; Jackson, 2007; Pennell, 2022a; Rofes, 2000; Trinh, 2022).

Experiences as a student.

Most American educators are themselves products of the American education system, so it is important to start by briefly exploring student experiences that have built many of the Queer educators among the ranks of in-service teachers today. I have previously established many of the shortcomings of the oppressive systems that maintain cisheteronormativity and promote exclusion through heterosexism and cissexism (Blackburn & Parker, 2022b; Chatterjee, 2022; Kelley & Arce-Trigatti, 2022; López Medina, 2022; Muncaster, 2022; Staley, 2022), and that these systems are maintained and promoted through the education systems various curricula, including learning materials along with implicit, explicit, and null curricula (Bittner, 2022; Eisner, 2002; López Medina, 2022; Nixon, 2006). The next topic, then, will focus on the experiences of Queer students within those systems.

While progress has been made over the last several years, Crawley (2022) describes an array of research showing that “much work needs to be done to support LGBTQ+ youth of all ages” (p. 21). How Queer students experience school and their school climates can vary greatly across contexts and locales (Linville, 2022), particularly in rural and southern schools where cisheteronormative ideals are maintained and Queer students “can become the subjects of judgement, harassment, and isolation from peers” (Blackburn & Parker, 2022a, p. 159) within more hostile school environments where students experience “higher rates of biased language, victimization, and anti-LGBTQ+ discriminatory school policies and practices” (Kosciw et al.,

2022, p. XXVII). These schools are also less likely than urban and suburban schools to “have LGBTQ+-related school resources or supports” (p. XXIX).

Taking all contexts into consideration, Kosciw et al. (2022) found in GLSEN’s 2021 National School Climate Survey that “72% of LGBTQ+ students reported no LGBTQ+ topics in any classes” and that while “only 16.3% of LGBTQ+ students were taught positive representations about LGBTQ+ people, history, or events in their schools... 14.4% had been taught negative content about LGBTQ+ topics” (p. XXI). A culture shift is happening, and some aspects of being Queer in the public school setting are becoming more inclusive and easier to navigate, but the shift toward globalization, hyper-connectivity through new technologies, and access to information comes with its own struggles. Kitchen (2016) actually found that in some ways, “life for gay teens today is harder than it was for many in my generation” because “they know who they are earlier, which can make it much harder to wait until graduation for things to get better” (p. 12). Even with social, cultural, and educational progress, challenges, though changing, continue to be present in K-12 schooling.

Mayo (2020) describes the effect K-12 schooling had on one participant, sharing that “the public school system failed me as a queer person on so many levels” (p. 42). Failures of the education system can include negative content about Queer topics (Kosciw et al., 2022), a lack of inclusive and positive curricula (Blackburn & Parker, 2022a), not providing teachers with professional development to better support their students (Blackburn & Parker, 2022a; Linville, 2022), reinforcing allosexuality/ amatonormativity (Mollet & Lackman, 2022), teachers not being mindful of the signs and symbols present in their classrooms and curricula that perpetuate cisheteronormativity, are not inclusive of diverse ways of being, and can produce intense affects

in Queer students, such as anatomical models of bodies and gonads in sex education lessons (Helmsing, 2022), and many others.

There is continued improvement and hope for students currently in or who will be in the American education system. Kosciw et al. (2022) found that “almost all LGBTQ+ students (96.3%) could identify at least one staff member supportive of LGBTQ+ students at their school” (p. XXII) and as I have explained previously, the steady increase of young adults who self-identify as LGBT demonstrated by Jones (2022) indicates that more people are coming to understand their Queerness and are more willing to live authentically, since almost 21% of Generation Z respondents indicated that they are Queer, which is almost twice as many as Millennials, which was over twice as many as Generation X, and so on (see [Appendix A -](#)). This increase in people who accept themselves and their Queerness suggests an increased likelihood that they will accept others.

Within the sociocultural/ temporal contexts, which (re)produces cultural norms, values, and practices and influences an individual’s development throughout their lifetime, is situated the student within the schoolhouse, who is learning a variety of curricula and being affected by the large sociocultural and temporal contexts. This is represented by a student within the schoolhouse along with a student who has just graduated college in Figure 4.

Because these educators are often products of the K-12 school system, they share in certain experiences within that system. Those experiences will ultimately impact their practice and will also impact their personal and professional development. Understanding how participants describe their experiences prior to, leading up to, and as Queer educators (RQ1) will help to understand how these experiences impact their practices as Queer educators (RQ2).

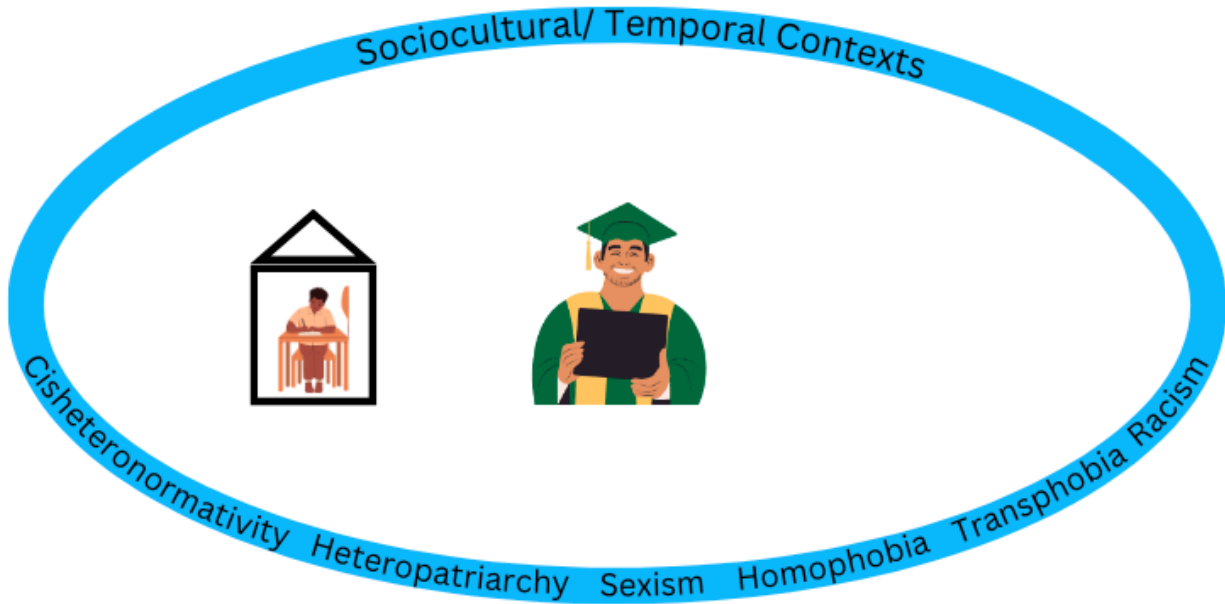


Figure 4: The representation of the student within the sociocultural and temporal contexts influencing an individual's development throughout their lifetime

Experiences as an educator.

Queer educators have their own unique experiences working in the education system. Historically, Queer educators were made to compartmentalize their teacher identity and role away from their Queer identity (Griffin, 1991), and even though progress has been made to mediate the minoritization of Queer people, Queer educators continue to face “a unique challenge within the context of a community that condemns individuals who are not recognized in relation to patriarchal and dominant views of gender identity and sexual orientation” (Camicia, 2016, p. 30). Queer educators must regularly navigate the boundary of public and private life (Rudoe, 2010) and the act of “coming out” or “staying in the closet” (C. G. Gregory, 2022). With the blending of what has previously been considered public and private lives, and the overt or covert discrimination toward Queer individuals, it makes sense that an aspect of Queer educators’ unique experiences also includes the need to “overcompensate in order to ‘make up’ for perceived shortcomings due to queerness” through attempts to show that they are a “good

teacher,” such as building popularity to mitigate negative reactions regarding their Queerness, becoming a “superteacher,” or that they are in general more than their Queerness and their skills are worthwhile regardless of their identities (Rudoe, 2010, p. 30).

All these experiences can impact the teachers’ affect while at the schoolhouse. Similar to the affective domain of learning and the affective filter metaphor, affect in this context refers to input and experiences related to feelings, emotions, and attitudes (Helmsing, 2022). These affective states produced both inside the school and outside of the school impact Queer educator’s decision making, comfort, regulation, and overall wellbeing. There are many affective states that occur throughout the educational contexts that impact Queer educators, such as those “produced in school board meetings when homophobic comments from the public are directed toward queer members of a school,” (Helmsing, 2022, p. 8) or those “produced in classrooms when a student is bullied for their perceived sexuality or gender expression” (p. 10). Other impactful scenarios might include the experience of jealousy when a coworker can post a picture of their heterosexual relationship at their desk or as their device wallpaper, or listening to harmful, casual phrases such as “that’s so gay” or “no homo” uttered by students.

Additionally, there are many, many stories of experiences that would impact how Queer educators feel while at work, in their role as an educator, or in their communities. Even the permeation of heterosexism and the denial that discrimination occurs, when “revulsion against queer people [is] expressed through a commitment to ‘traditional values’ and ‘freedom of speech,’” and when Queerphobic hate speech is tolerated (Chatterjee, 2022, p. 261) will have a negative impact. Threats of physical or verbal harm also impact the affect Queer educators carry with them because “it is not uncommon to know about physical and verbal attacks on students and teachers on the grounds of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation” (López Medina,

2022, p. 91). These experiences are impacted by and impact the school climates where they work.

School climate is not only important for students wellbeing and improving educational outcomes, but for educators as well (Linville, 2022). School climate can be understood as a holistic overview of “the quality and character of school life” based on “patterns of students’, parents’ and school personnel’s experience of school life” that “reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (Linville, 2022; National School Climate Center, 2022, para. 3). Schools can be a difficult place to work due to the affects produced by school climates, and can contribute to concerns regarding employment, being out, (lack of) administrative support, and harassment; however there are ways to improve school climate for Queer educators such as clear antidiscrimination policies, antibullying policies, administrative follow through on harassment targeting Queer students and adults, public administrative support of Queer educators, and professional development for all school staff regarding Queer staff and student rights and different identities (Jackson, 2007; Linville, 2022). Professional interactions with colleagues, administrators, student caregivers, and community members can differ based upon context, but remain influences on school climate and teacher affect. Teachers still have to negotiate the compartmentalization of their Queer and educator identities (Rudoe, 2010) and how they might respond to community or caregiver pushback (Mayo, 2020) through regular mental calculations that create an additional emotional burden.

Though these examples are by no means exhaustive or representative of all possible experiences any Queer educator has navigated or will navigate, one final unique experience of Queer educators worth discussing is the additional workload placed on them. In a sense, Queer

educators are expected to “take up the torch” or “carry the burden” of the Queer struggle for equity, inclusion, and acceptance. One participant in Mayo's (2020) study explained that “I have to be brave in ways others do not as well as make decisions about what to hold back that others do not” (p. 43) and that there is “more work for [Queer educators] to do than non-queer staff” (p. 40). Even those Queer educators who choose not to “come out” have shared that “they see it as their duty to promote equity and social justice in the school setting, as well as the desire to provide a safe space for all students” (Endo et al., 2010, 1029).

“Taking up the torch” for the minority struggle is an experience shared not only between Queer educators who are “out” or “not out,” but with other minoritized populations as well. This is evident in the use of a “token” Queer person, person who is BIPOC, disabled person, etc. as the relevant spokesperson for their demographic to represent their populations (S. Davis, 2022). McIntosh (1990) describes this in terms of one way she is benefited by white privilege, recognizing “I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group” (p. 32). This sentiment, though originally centering on unearned racial benefits, is applicable to many minoritized groups and experiences, including its ability to be shared in terms of one's cisgender privilege as well.

Nixon (2006) argues that “while the responsibility for sexualities equality must not be devolved to those most likely to experience inequality[,] there is some case to be made for LGBT teachers as role models and in terms of pastoral support” (p. 278). There is a valuable resource within and from the minoritized populations, but they cannot be expected to carry the entire burden themselves. If this is the case, then, Nixon explains, “the whole school fails to appreciate that these issues are everyone's responsibility” (p. 280). One participant in Nixon's study shared that people started coming up to her to ask questions or share with her after she expressed her

Queerness openly, and that it “was cool to start off with, then it got a bit annoying because [she] seemed to become the resident gay counsellor of [the] year” (p. 279). There are many potential advantages and potential disadvantages to Queer teachers specifically serving in the capacity of a Queer role model beyond already serving in the capacity of a teacher role model, and there are times that educators may embrace this “extra work,” but there are also times that Queer teachers may have to step back and set boundaries to not fill the role of the “token” Queer person. It stands to note that, whether or not someone believes the role needs to be filled, a specific person filling the position “cannot be imposed or expected” (p. 279).

With these additional stressors and expectations, teachers may choose to continue to remain in the closet or to be out. Wright et al. (2019) describes that there are still major fears or concerns regarding the ability to be out, and that these fears or concerns may vary between geographical contexts and grade bands taught. In contrast to those fears are stories of positive outcomes from being out, including the note that “many of the respondents reported that supporting LGBT students was the very best consequence of their being out” (p. 12). Choosing to be “out” comes with its own set of possible consequences and possible rewards to benefit students and teachers, Queer and non-Queer, alike, though being “out” maintains its own set of additional expectations and, even for Queer educators who are not “out,” necessitates more work and a larger emotional labor that cishet educators experience.

While educators have a wide range of experiences as students, they also have experiences within their roles as educators that help to address RQ1. These experiences will impact their practices and how they decide to navigate their professional and social contexts, but will also impact their professional interactions and how they describe those and see their Queerness influencing those interactions (RQ3).

Existing Research and Outcomes of Intersecting Identities/ Roles

(Practical Frameworks/ Overview)

Decisions... Decisions... Deciding Whether or Not to “Come Out”

I have described many factors that impact Queer educators, including cultural frameworks, legislation and policy background, the current status thereof, their fears, school culture, and several other items that must be considered when discussing Queer educators. The decision on whether or not to “come out of the closet” and share their Queerness openly is one outcome impacted by these factors. The closet is a term that balances concealment and disclosure of one’s sexual or gender identity and has “historically, as a figure of speech... been a site of privacy and secrecy” (C. G. Gregory, 2022, p. 93). On one hand, to be in the closet means that one is concealing their sexual or gender identity. On the other hand, coming out of the closet is a term referencing the act of disclosing one’s gender or sexual identity openly, though it may be to varying degrees. However, “coming out” is an ongoing process that is “not a static or binary status” where Queer individuals have to navigate who they are and are not out to, whether or not to come out, and when to come out (Cain, 2022, p. 422). It is also the avenue for Queer visibility, or the act of, “making queer subjects socially, culturally, and politically seen, heard, and supported” (Trinh, 2022, p. 756).

Kitchen (2016) shares his perspective on “coming out” and how he thought “it was prudent to ensure that [he] was safe personally and professional before taking any action” (p. 19). Determining whether or not to come out “is a complicated, personal choice that is constantly negotiated across time, space, and context” (Cain, 2022, p. 425), and “is an individual decision based on numerous unquantifiable factors,” including those such as “personal characteristics, gender conformity, family status, school culture, and community atmosphere” (C. G. Gregory,

2022; Jackson, 2007, p. 119). Coming out is not always a safe thing to do (C. G. Gregory, 2022; Trinh, 2022), and simply coming out of the closet does not mean that a Queer person is free of external pressure, risks, or bias (C. G. Gregory, 2022). Gregory also shares that “even in the face of legal protections, the closet can be reinforced by repressive school cultures” (p. 97).

Several studies have found that school culture has a major impact on the decision to come out or not (Blackburn & Parker, 2022a; S. Davis, 2022; C. G. Gregory, 2022; Rudoe, 2010). Rudoe's (2010) study highlighted the “personal and psychological costs of being closeted” and how for one participant, “being secret about [their] sexuality was very painful to [them]” (p. 32-33). In contrast to this, Blackburn and Parker (2022b) argue that if Queer educators felt supported in their sexual orientation, then they would feel “genuinely happy at work” (p. 351). Even the culture of a school developed by its geographic context can make a difference regarding how these decisions are made (S. Davis, 2022).

Some Queer educators may benefit from a concept known as “passing.” This means that they are able to “pass” as heterosexual or cisgender in order to maintain the sociocultural benefits of cisheteronormativity, thus rendering their Queerness invisible to others (Archer, 2022; Trinh, 2022). “Passing” as cisgender and heterosexual, or presenting as “normal,” Archer (2022) argues “is not an innate and unconscious performance for many, but something done as a matter of survival” (p. 285). Additional nuances to Queer educators who are able to pass include bisexual individuals in a heterosexual relationship, asexual individuals who may not be in or desire relationships, individuals who “act straight,” and more. Again, Queer educators must constantly negotiate the divide between being “out” or not, how they present themselves to others, and manage the consequences of those decisions.

In order to “pass,” or blend in, Queer individuals may attempt to perform in certain ways that replicate the expectations of the dominant culture in order to maintain a certain appearance. Performativity involves doing what is expected and reinforced socially, even when it may be set in contrast to what is innate (Coker, 2022). This can be replicated through the concept of homonormativity, which “seeks to police physical appearance, policing some LGBTQ+ presentations over others” (Archer, 2022, p. 287) or through “doing” or “performing” gender norms and expectations “to meet the structural pressures imposed by dominant societal ideals” (p. 285). Performativity, homonormativity, and passing, are all defense mechanisms or identity management strategies (Rudoe, 2010) used to protect Queer people from harm at the expense of authentic living.

In the instances where teachers choose to come out to students and colleagues, even though it may be uncomfortable (Kitchen, 2016), there can be a mix of responses. One sort of response may include a shift in others’ perceptions of the Queer educator, where Queerness “became central to how others perceived them” (Endo et al., 2010, p. 1029), and can realistically include the threats of and fears of harm described previously. The responses and implications of coming out can vary greatly depending on school culture, geographic contexts, community, and many other factors, but “coming out is not inherently good or bad” and can arguably be pedagogically sound (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 154).

Kitchen (2016) explained how he arrived at the conclusion that coming out was a pedagogically sound decision:

LGBT students need to see queer educators as confidantes and role models. Straight students and teachers need relate with queer teachers. While I acknowledged a level of risk, I was prepared to assume it as I had a secure job to which I could return (p. 21).

Kitchen was privileged to know that his employment was secured, and ready to face the additional risks. The reasons for his decision regarding pedagogical soundness can be expanded to include a positive impact on students and staff, the ability to counsel and support Queer students, and to act a sounding board for colleagues (Woog, 1995).

Participants in Mayo's (2020) study highlighted the value they found as well in coming out to their students and the benefits for the students and themselves. One participant shared the following advice for incoming Queer educators:

I would say first to embrace who you are... that's like one of the biggest things I regret about my first couple of years... I'm just such a better teacher when I can be my authentic self in front of kids (p. 40).

She later went on to explain that "it's really important to find [a workplace] where you can be your authentic self" (p. 41). Another participant advised Queer individuals interested in teaching as a career that "if you want your students to be open with you, then you need to be open with them" (p. 39), because there is power in that authenticity and openness.

Ultimately, the decision to come out is an individual one that is not taken lightly. It is multifaceted and shifting depending on a variety of contexts and factors. There remain several risks and several barriers that make it harder for Queer educators to present themselves authentically, even to the extent that some of them choose to remain in the closet, hiding who they are, and attempting to pass, perform, or blend in to keep their Queerness hidden. Alternatively, some may choose to come out, but replicate cisheteronormative ideologies and ways of being through homonormativity. However, for many Queer educators who have come out, there are positive outcomes, responses, and minimal, if any, impacts on their careers. Woog (1995) found that "teachers who come out of the classroom closet describe the effects as

exciting, liberating, almost intoxicating” (p. 23) and Kitchen (2016) describes his experience akin to freedom.

Queerness Influencing Educator Practice

Whether or not a Queer educator chooses to disclose their Queerness, they are still Queer and are not free of the experiences, influences, and other factors that they must negotiate and navigate. The experiences and background knowledge we bring to our roles as educators do, in fact, impact and influence our practice. When I first began this project, I anticipated that RQ2 would be the largest gap in the literature and was surprised that there was already a strong foundation for understanding how Queerness influences the practice of Queer educators. However, this study aims to build on previous work to understand how experiences and influences have changed since previous studies were completed and to fill further gaps in research as it stands currently.

While it is not possible to map every interaction, influence, and outcome that could occur, there are trends in how teachers have begun to identify their Queerness impacting their practice. Jackson (2007) reached the following conclusion:

Participants connected their classroom practice to their experiences related to being gay and lesbian, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, and sometimes in conjunction with other factors. They did so most predominantly in the areas of creating safety, relating to students, incorporating social justice, and building understandings (p. 167).

Within these areas were several additional influential factors that Queer teachers related to impacting how they taught.

Jackson (2007) found that participants recognized that there were limits in their ability to understand other minoritized groups, but that they were able to use their experiences with

discrimination, oppression, and bias to build a stronger understanding of others and their experiences. In the terms that one of the participants in the (unpublished) pilot study that informed this dissertation used, “being gay has helped me become more aware of the world.” Having personal experience with discrimination and stigmatization can help one to understand others and their experiences and be more empathetic toward them. However, one cannot assume that because they are part of one stigmatized minority that they fully understand the experiences of others and are unable to be the oppressor or hold negative beliefs toward other minoritized populations (Rofes, 2000). Interestingly enough, though, there is an array of research that also shows how non-Queer individuals who have experienced discrimination due to other marginalized identities are more likely to serve as allies to Queer individuals (Coker & Cain, 2018). These diverse perspectives demonstrate that empathy is a possibility that can fuel allyship, but being marginalized in one way does not absolve one from acting with racist, classist, ableist, sexist, and other attitudes.

In some ways, Queerness can influence practice by providing teachers with an intersectional lens that helps individuals become aware of their own social benefits, such as white privilege (Jackson, 2007) or position them to consider their work through a social justice framework by “moving beyond oneself to serving the interests of others, particularly minorities and the marginalized” and acknowledging that “with privilege comes responsibility” (Jackson, 2007; Kitchen, 2016, p. 24). Because of the “experiences of being ‘othered,’ not fitting in, and being pushed to the margins,” Queer educators have been able to seek ways to make learning available to all (Jackson, 2007, p. 170).

The experiences of being marginalized can create a heightened sensitivity to social isolation, interactions, and issues faced by students that teachers may aim to address based upon

their own experiences. Similar to how participants in Mayo's (2020) study found that authenticity with students improved their student relationships and teaching practice, Kitchen (2016) developed his conception of being a relational teacher as a teacher educator through becoming “a more caring and responsive teacher” (p. 14) by presenting his authentic self within the student/teacher dynamic. Teachers in Jackson's (2007) study shared that the empathy that was fueled by their Queerness impacted their attention to student safety “beyond their own actions to orchestrating student interactions” (p. 131) and how their “experiences with isolation made them more aware of how social dynamics can operate to enhance or shut down learning” (p. 133). Because of their experiences and the empathy they developed, these Queer educators found that they were able to intercede on behalf of their students to provide support and connection.

Additionally, Jackson (2007) highlighted a difference between how openly gay and closeted participants differed in their practices. She found that “openly gay participants felt freer to incorporate gay and lesbian topics into their curriculum while closeted teachers avoided topics in the curriculum that might hint of or lead to discussing gay issues” (p. 155) and that “openly gay participants were deliberate about their classroom appearance because it signaled to students that their classroom was a safe one to ‘be who you choose to be,’... whereas some closeted participants used it to mask themselves” (p. 130). Jackson has demonstrated here that while there may be core practices that are impacted by experiences, there are also practices that are impacted or varied based upon whether an educator is “out” or not.

As some Queer educators attempt to incorporate Queer topics into their classrooms, it is important to remember that Queer themes and topics can still be considered controversial (Mayo, 2022). However, as the 2019 Minnesota Teacher of the Year shared “students are more successful when they can see themselves in both their schools and in their curriculum; and all

students benefit when they can learn from a variety of experiences and perspectives” (Holstine, 2019). By endeavoring to make Queer subjects visible and included, Queer educators can serve as role models in the school (Nixon, 2006; Rudoe, 2010) and provide an avenue for Queer students to see themselves represented in that setting. Queer topics and themes can serve as a means to help students address and unlearn homophobia and other biases (Endo et al., 2010; M. R. Gregory, 2004; Mayo, 2022) and the voices, topics, and themes can be used “to breakdown binaries... [and] battle the homophobia, cisheterosexism, and many other social ills rampant in K-12 schools, [which do] harm to young people every day” (Mayo, 2022, p. 686). Some may approach this from individual and classroom-level approaches, whereas others may use their experiences to work toward fighting for larger-level institutional change (Nixon, 2006).

These existing findings demonstrate the “valuable resource” found in Queer educators due to their experiences with discrimination, bias, and stigma, their understanding of “passing” and invisibility, and their “deep knowledge of ways in which we limit and constrain citizenry in the United States” (Rofes, 2000, p. 411). Some Queer educators argue that when Queer topics are silenced, it “leads to a lack of role-models for students, which can result in the isolation of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students” (Rudoe, 2010, p. 33) because “queer students (and staff!) need to see queer adults being strong and proud” (Mayo, 2020, p. 40)

Their practices, or the ways that they act as a resource, may vary at different points in their careers based upon their contexts, experiences, and other factors. Some may continue to prioritize being out and visible. Others may become more subtle in their practices. One participant in Blackburn's (2014) study indicated that their experiences in high school and college as a very visible activist shifted as they entered their teaching career and they began to focus their efforts on conversations and intersectionality instead of overt activist efforts.

Whatever the way that their experiences have influenced their practices, are currently influencing their practices, or will influence their practices, Queer educators demonstrate that they are a valuable resource in their communities and that they have a wealth of experiences and ways to support their diverse classroom populations. They cannot (and do not) leave their identities, experiences, and background knowledge at the door when they enter the schoolhouse; instead, they bring those metaphorical bags in with them, unpack them, and use what is in them to create engaging lessons, foster safe classroom environments, develop positive and influential relationships with students, and instill social justice-oriented practices, in addition to serving as a classroom teacher.

Influences and Outcomes for Queer Educators and Allies

It is helpful to understand the weight of additional pressures, cultural factors, history, and past experiences that Queer educators manage and explore how these influences can impact their practices. This allows for the exploration of additional outcomes, including calls to action for Queer and non-Queer educators, that occur because Queer and allied educators work within the system to provide support to students, challenge norms, and otherwise educate students in their communities. Jackson (2007) explains that the “past silence imposed on gay people” and homosexuality being referred to as “the love that dare not speak its name” has influenced educators’ desire to ensure that all students voices are heard in classes (p. 134) as one of these such outcomes, among many others.

Recognizing the systems at play and how they impact students and educators, it is necessary to “dismantle the hierarchies inherent with compulsory heterosexuality” (Bittner, 2022, p. 116; Heasley & Crane, 2011) and the other interconnected systems that have historically silenced Queer educators and students. This includes using Queer educators experiences to

challenge cisheteronormativity through an intersectional approach that is driven by their deeper understandings of other oppressed groups that can be developed due to their Queerness (Jackson, 2007). When educators begin to better understand these systems and the nuances that demonstrate how viewing issues through a “black and white” (oversimplification that something is “this or that”) lens does not work, they begin to understand that “rigid boundaries soften and become permeable... black/ white binaries morph into various shades of gray” (Mayo, 2022, p. 686). The outcome of deconstructing these boundaries is a more complete, nuanced understanding of issues.

Dismantling systems and embracing the ambiguity of those systems can be done through the development of a positive school culture. It is well documented that Queer educators can make positive and significant contributions to their classrooms, their schools, and the education system (Blackburn & Parker, 2022b; Mayo, 2020; Nixon, 2006; Rofes, 2000; Woog, 1995), and that school climate has a large impact on educators (Linville, 2022). When Queer educators feel supported within the school’s climate, their affect, interest in making, ability to, and willingness to make these contributions increases (Blackburn & Parker, 2022b; Endo et al., 2010) despite the extra work that can be required or expected of them by themselves or others (Mayo, 2020).

These issues can be addressed through several methods, including through curriculum, professional development, conversations with students and staff, and a host of other avenues. To build a positive school culture, one should consider the use of “calling in” instead of “calling out” (Tejada, 2022) with both adults and students when one speaks from a place of being misinformed, incorrect, biased, prejudiced, or discriminatory. To “call someone out” includes a directive approach, which is often done publicly, to signal that something was done wrong, which “makes space for wrongdoing, misconceptions, and confusion” (p. 70), whereas “calling

in” “involves making space for the person to reflect and be heard” (p. 70) through a “facilitative approach to better understand the root of behaviors, mindsets, or perceptions... which helps remove affective barriers that may inhibit learning as well as supports the development of a common understanding” (p. 69). By “calling in,” one can facilitate a conversation of growth, allow others at the proverbial table to have a solution- and learning-focused conversation, and develop or maintain the relationship with the individual or group who has wronged another.

These factors (school climate, power systems, intersectional approaches, addressing concerns and issues through “calling in,” among others) help Queer educators to play a key role in developing a positive school culture, dismantling systems, challenging norms, and student development. The impact of liberation movements can also be amplified by allies, who are “individuals who engage in social change efforts in coalition with social groups to which they do not themselves belong” (Curtin & Russell, 2023), which helps reduce the workload of the minoritized populations, as “bearing the burden” or “carrying the torch” of liberation should not fall solely on the minoritized population (Nixon, 2006; Rudoe, 2010). Kitchen (2011) describes in a newspaper opinion piece about how being “out” can make a difference for Queer youth by sharing “it is my experience that we can make a difference and that there are many straight people ready to join us in this work” (para. 9). There are many allies who are able and willing to help carry the weight of history, societal expectations, and systemic change.

Kitchen (2016) also noted that his own personal and professional development had “been advanced thanks to the kindness of straight colleagues [i.e., allies] who did not judge [him] based on identity and who encouraged [him] in [his] work” (p. 24). The support from not only teacher colleagues, but from administrators that addresses Queerphobic harassment, is publicly displayed, is demonstrated through policy and behaviors, and includes the implementation of

necessary professional development (Jackson, 2007; Linville, 2022) impacts school culture, Queer educator wellbeing, and Queer educators' abilities to support students and challenge systems.

The support of allies, including colleagues and administrators, helps Queer educators to challenge larger cultural systems within the school culture and context and reduces the additional burden and workload often placed on Queer educators. However, it is important that in attempts to be inclusive of Queer topics, themes, and people, educators are careful to continue to disrupt systems and what constitutes "normal." If they are not careful, they perpetuate "problematic binaries" such as normal/ different, self/ other, us/ them (Staley, 2022) in attempted inclusion and advocacy, and continue to reinforce social categories that normalize and idealize certain ways of being and other those that do not meet what has been socioculturally deemed the "ideal" or "normal."

All of this impacts Queer educators in their communities and allows them to feel more secure in their school communities so that they can be available to their students (Blackburn & Parker, 2022a) and can allow teachers to build strong, healthy student/ teacher relationships. Strong, healthy, person-centered student/ teacher relationships greatly impact student achievement (Blackburn & Parker, 2022a; Hattie, 2009; Lomotey, 2019) and even students' attendance (Hattie, 2009). The Queer educator and allied educators may also influence children's moral and political development by helping them to be more accepting, address biases, question norms, and confront their own homophobia in ways that could even help to address other biases and beliefs surrounding other minoritized populations (Endo et al., 2010; M. R. Gregory, 2004; Mayo, 2022; Rofes, 2000).

When Queer educators and allies collectively take up the torch or share the burden, they become “the ones who make schools safe learning environments for all students” as they “take up curricula and pedagogy in ways that recognize and value queer people” (Blackburn & Parker, 2022a, p. 161). Participants in Jackson's (2007) study were able to “[create] learning atmospheres where students felt safe enough to take risks in learning” (p. 168). All educators are able to build healthy and positive student/ teacher relationships and can challenge norms and oppressive systems which “[reinforce] certain normative expectations around gender identity and sexuality... within classroom spaces” and are “restrictive to students who are in the process of self-formation” (Bittner, 2022, p. 118) when they share the workload and burden. Educators can use these perspectives to “[call] into question hegemonies that [serve] to instantiate inequalities” (Jackson, 2007, p. 168) and work toward equity and social justice for not only their students, but themselves as well (Endo et al., 2010).

At the end of the day, Queer or not, it is the educator's responsibility to provide meaningful learning opportunities for, care for, and support their students. Positive school climates, discussing Queer issues, topics, and themes in academic settings, and making Queerness visible through curriculum and role models benefits students' social, emotional, and character development, their acceptance of others, school attendance, and academic performance (Blackburn & Parker, 2022a; Coker & Cain, 2018; Holstine, 2019). Though there have been great strides made over the last 50 years toward Queer liberation, equity, and understanding, there is still much work needed to fully deconstruct harmful systems, ideologies, and practices that affect not only Queer educators and students, but everyone. Heasley and Crane (2011) describe how (and remind advocates and allies that) culture (and educational) change lags behind the behaviors of the vanguard, but eventually “catches up:”

Culture change in the form of changing behaviors of young people often precedes changes in school curriculum, policies, and classroom practices. Historians relate the panic that ensued in American schools in the 1950s when black and white students began to openly hold hands or date. School administrators in the late 1960s and 1970s reacted severely when high school boys started growing their hair long and wearing earrings and girls began wearing pants. These actions, a few students dating across race and challenging gender norms, confronted the racism and sexism that were part of the larger culture, reinforced by educational institutions. Eventually schools caught up (p. 105).

As a part of the developing model for identity formation and development within specific sociocultural/ temporal contexts, which (re)produces cultural norms, values, and practices and influences an individual's development throughout their lifetime, I now introduce another component of the model: the educator. This component, added to Figure 5, represents the educator who has been a part of the U.S. K-12 system, attended post-secondary training to become a teacher, and is now in charge of their own classroom.

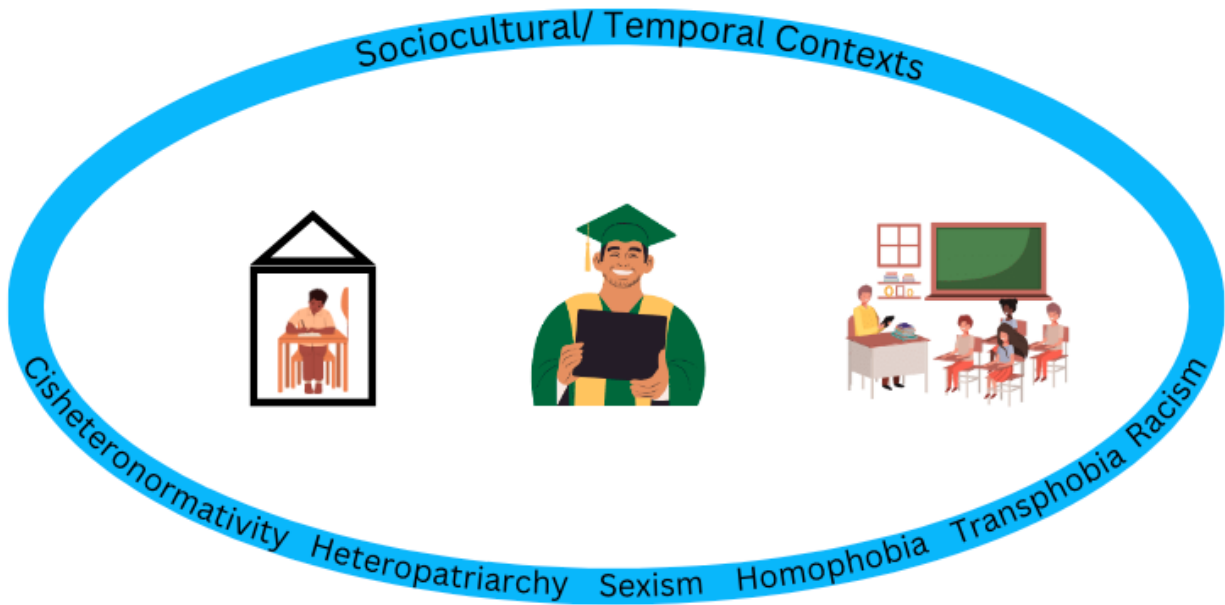


Figure 5: The representation of the educator, as a product of the U.S. K-12 school system, working within the sociocultural and temporal contexts influencing an individual's development throughout their lifetime.

Foundational Concepts and Theoretical Frameworks

A lot has changed since some of the foundational studies were conducted (Woog, Jackson, etc.) and there is an opportunity for a updated, in-depth review of the Queer educator experience. Queer educators have a wide range of experiences and I aim to better understand what those experiences were and how they are described by the Queer educators (RQ1). Those experiences and identities clearly impact educator practice, and I aim to understand how the participants in this study identify their identities impacting their practice as educators (RQ2). There has been a demonstration in the literature that there are certain professional interactions that occur when a colleague finds out that another is Queer, but there is still an opportunity to better understand how those professional interactions are impacted, described, and negotiated by participants (RQ3).

Theoretical Frameworks

Standpoint Theory (ST)

Within this study, I aim to blend two theoretical frameworks, the first of which is standpoint theory (ST). ST emphasizes whose point of view the researcher is taking (H. J. Rubin & Rubin, 2011) which assumes that marginalized participants have a “more complete view” because of their positionality (Nielsen, 1990, p. 484 as cited in King, 1999). This understanding aligns with findings both in the (unpublished) pilot study used to inform this dissertation and from other researchers that demonstrated the ways in which being part of one minoritized group helped participants better understand and empathize with other marginalized communities (such as Coker & Cain, 2018 and Jackson, 2007).

Based in the understanding that “knowledge is socially constructed, political, and theoretical,” ST focuses on understanding that social positionality informs perspectives and affects knowledge production (Bailey, 2022, p. 676), meaning that experiences shape one’s understanding and viewpoint. It allows for one to recognize how their experiences and histories have impacted what they know and what they do with that knowledge. One cannot assume that there is a single standpoint that all members of one marginalized group share (Borland, 2020) because knowledge and understanding of subjects and researchers is socially situated in a specific time and place and “all positionings offered only partial views of the world” (Bailey, 2022, p. 680). While this theory was first developed to examine phenomena through a critical feminist lens to emphasize women’s knowledge (Borland, 2020), the point of view addressed here is that of Queer educators, though I wish to acknowledge the groundwork laid by feminist theorists.

There are many standpoints that occur within the context of this study. One of which is the standpoint of myself as the researcher, particular in the context of “the relation of the researcher to the subject” (Haddock, 2016, p. 60). I have a unique standpoint that offers perspective on the roles and experiences of educators who work in public K-12 education in the Midwest along with a unique standpoint that offers perspective on Queer lived experiences to assist with the interpretation of how meaning has been negotiated and enacted by participants. This standpoint, while valuable, must also be considered in terms of subjectivity, which was explored in Chapter One, and is an ongoing consideration throughout this dissertation.

Queer Theory (QT)

In addition to ST, Queer theory (QT) also frames this study. QT aims to contest heteronormativity and cisnormativity and to analyze people, issues, and anything that challenges these normative structures. QT also encourages us to question and challenge what we know, and how what we know can maintain or dismantle power structures, and ultimately question ourselves and systems (Pennell, 2022b). Coined in 1990 by Teresa de Lauretis, QT is a form of critical discourse that aimed to “deconstruct (or ‘to queer’) sexuality and gender in the wake of gay identity politics” and to “see sexuality as a discursive social construction, fluid, plural, and continually negotiated rather than a natural, fixed, core identity” (Chandler & Munday, 2011).

“Queering” is a difficult concept to describe, identify, and define due to its fluid, ambiguous nature. Because of this, it “can have neither a foundational logic nor a consistent set of characteristics” (Jagose, 1996, p. 96). Its nature is unstable, and because of this, it rejects stability (Weise, 2022). Because social structures are socially constructed, QT acknowledges that they must be questioned and deconstructed. To do this, QT aims to also revolve around questioning dominant systems, norms, limits, boundaries, ignorance, and expectations (Pennell,

2022a) along with “normative knowledges, structures, and ways of being” (Weise, 2022, p. 487). This nuanced, ambiguous, multiple, fluid, and shifting nature of Queer as a theoretical lens “is often cited as its reason for its mobilisation” (Jagose, 1996, p. 96) along with its direct challenge against damaging systems, many of which I described earlier in this chapter.

This perspective that works “to destabilize hegemonic cultural ideals of normality” (Smith, 2003, p. 346) has been evident in the literature reviewed for this study, in the problematic systems which produce an “ideal” or “normal” way of being, and are harmful to those that do not fall within either of these categories. This disruption of dominant systems allows for a medium to undo forms of normalcy, such as heteronormativity, nationalism, colonization, imperialism, and capitalism (Weise, 2022) along with cisheteronormativity, cisnormativity, sexism, and many others. These perspectives can invite “a greater appreciation for a range of diversities” and, as an example, can allow for performing masculinity to accept and encourage affection and tenderness to “reduce the negative effects of homophobia and sexism for all males” (Heasley & Crane, 2011, p. 102).

In order for QT to mobilize and disrupt hegemony, norms, ideals, and systems, one must understand the central ideas of QT in theory and practice. Smith (2003) describes the core tenants of QT as the following:

1. All categories are falsifications, especially if they are binary and descriptive of sexuality.
2. All assertions about reality are social constructed.
3. All human behavior can be read as textual signification.

4. Texts form discourses that are exercises in power/ knowledge and which, properly analyzed, reveal relations of dominance within historically situated systems of regulation.
5. Deconstruction of all categories of normality and deviance can best be accomplished by queer readings of performative texts ranging from literature (fictional, professional, popular) to other cultural expressions (geographic distribution, body piercing, sitcoms, sadomasochistic paraphernalia) (p. 346).

While QT is a theoretical framework, there are many practical applications within educational contexts. Within the scope of education, QT calls for educators to “actively monitor the language they use” and aims to reimagine what is deemed “normal,” and open to shifting individual, social, and cultural frameworks as “sexual identity is neither fixed nor unitary, but multiple and shifting” (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010, p. 6). This “way of thinking... encourages [teachers] to actively participate in questioning the meaning of ‘normal’ and how normalcy plays out in classroom spaces” (Mayo, 2022, p. 686) and can help them to confront “the norms of how we structure and conceptualize teaching and learning” (Pennell, 2022a, p. 540). QT can allow educators to turn perspectives on schools as stable, certain, authoritative sites into “places to question, explore, and seek alternative explanations” (Britzman, 2000, p. 51; Mayo, 2022) where educators may “respond with questions rather than answers” (Weise, 2022, p. 488) and recognize that “ideas are weapons” (Smith, 2003, p. 346).

The fluid and varied aspects of QT in action can be demonstrated in Alfred Kinsey’s research. The Kinsey scale popularized the idea of sexuality falling on a spectrum that was not only exclusively homosexual or heterosexual, and looked at behavior instead of identity from a range of exclusively heterosexual encounters, mostly heterosexual and incidental homosexual

encounters, equally heterosexual and homosexual encounters, etc. While the 1948 research is dated and not inclusive of diverse gender identities (i.e., only referenced men and women, interactions with one or the other, and conflated gender with sex assigned at birth), it did help to popularize the idea of a sexual spectrum and asserted that individuals could exist at any point and that could change and shift overtime (Strunk, 2022). QT allows for the open and fluid definitions of identity and behavior, and the consideration of how they may overlap or be different within various temporal, social, and cultural contexts.

Finally, it is worth clarifying that “Queer” can be used in a variety of unique yet overlapping ways. Theoretically, Queer can emphasize fluid, ambiguous, temporal, and social constructs that may be multiple and shifting, and empower its users to challenge normative systems of dominance through nonconformity, and questioning (Heasley & Crane, 2011; Jagose, 1996; Mayo, 2022; Smith, 2003; Weise, 2022). Practically, Queer can indicate action through the ability of individuals, through fluid, multiple, and shifting identities to “recreate and fully realize themselves” (Smith, 2003, p. 346), to “reconsider situated knowledges, histories, and structures that reproduced normalcy” (Weise, 2022, p. 487), or intentionally approach a subject with the intent to question, challenge, observe, or read a situation or text through a Queer lens. As an identity, which I briefly described in Chapter One, Queer can be used as a subject-identifier (Freitag, 2013, p. 8) to describe someone who holds nonnormative sexual and/or gender identities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans*, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, asexual, and others (Weise, 2022). These multiple, shifting, ambiguous, inconsistent, unstable, and overall unconstrained tenants of Queer make up theoretical, practical, categorical, and identity approaches to understand and develop social meanings within specific times and cultures.

Queer Standpoint Theory (QST)

There is limited research on the union of QT and ST. This may be due to how one hallmark of QT emphasizes the fluidity of identity, and a contrasting hallmark of ST is the central identity in focus. Understanding a fluid identity as it is in a single, temporarily locked moment or moments, can centralize a particular identity or interpretation of self, and thus maintain the contradiction of fluidity of identity and centralizing a particular identity at that time. The ST view of how knowledge, experiences, and understanding are situated in a specific time and place and are grounded in the context (Bailey, 2022) aligns with the QT view that there is a level of fluidity regarding identity and experiences, which can be temporally and socially contextual (Mayo, 2022; Smith, 2003).

Some scholars have found ways to join the frameworks together (Haddock, 2016; J. R. King, 1999), and one author has referred to this union as Queer standpoint theory (QST) (Layne, 2018). Krane (2001), while not using QST itself, explores the intersection of QT and ST with feminist and cultural studies. She explores the different perspectives that individuals may have based on their position in society, and how ST can help to better understand the perspectives of minoritized people due to their positionality in reference to dominant powers. She also discusses that QT “places sexuality as a central focus, acknowledges the common history of devaluation of non-heterosexual individuals, and challenges the current power structure marginalizing nonheterosexual individuals” (p. 401).

Ultimately, this choice of theoretical approaches came down to these questions: should the central focus be the Queer identity, or the educator identity? Does this research examine experiences of educators who happen to be Queer, or Queer people who step into the role of educators? While some may read this as the same lens, in this instance, the use of QST allows for

the Queerness of the participants to be centered and brought into focus, and for an exploration of how that impacts their roles as educators. This allows for the consideration of experiences they have as Queer educators, that non-Queer educators may not experience. As a member of both communities (educator and Queer), I also recognize that, as Haddock (2016) states, “my standpoint with respect to the queer community gives me a connection to the variety of identities as part of the queer cultural collective” (p. 67) and this connection is also made available through my participation as a member in the educator collective.

Additional Perspectives Worth Noting

Another tenant of this study is that educators are not only educators and that they have many identities that come with them to their classrooms. Johnson (2011) asserts that “students cannot leave their identities at the schoolhouse door,” referencing the 1969 US Supreme Court case *Tinker v Des Moines*, in which the argument was that “students do not leave their rights at the schoolhouse door” (p. 206). In the same way that students cannot shed their identities or rights when they enter the schoolhouse, educators cannot shed their identities or rights when they enter the workplace.

The multiple, shifting, individual, and collective experiences are influenced by internal (identities, feelings), external (social structures, experiences), and contextual (temporal, cultural) factors. These factors allow for participants to develop powerful knowledge that is socially situated and that contributes to the collective understanding and collective experience, though not all understandings and experiences are capable of being generalized across all members of a minoritized group due to unique contextual factors and unique standpoints. As a member of both research categories, I am able to gain access, trust, and insight that might not be privileged to an

outsider, and I aim to truthfully report on findings while being transparent about my own subjectivities as they have come up throughout this process.

Identity and Identity Development

When focusing on a particular item or aspect (standpoint), it is necessary to consider the concepts of identity and identity development, as those would impact the theoretical perspectives, research viewpoints, participants' ability to be included in this study, and many other aspects of this study. While I aim to avoid a reductionist attitude regarding a subjects identity where I reduce who an individual is to a single identity (Endo et al., 2010), I cannot avoid applying categorical representations to subjects, situations, actions, experiences. However, since identity and identity development are not the focus of this research themselves, but will influence its focus, process, and findings, I aim to provide a brief overview of the theoretical, conceptual, and practical aspects of identity and identity development, particularly as it relates to Queer identity and identity development.

Identity

Identity is a multifaceted concept which entails “individual, interpersonal, and social processes embedded within social structures” (J. L. Davis et al., 2019, p. 254) and “an individual’s sense of self” (American Psychological Association, 2023). The individuals’ sense of self is defined by “(a) a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person and (b) a range of affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social roles” and their identity “involves a sense of continuity,” which is “derived from one’s body sensations; one’s body image; and the feeling that one’s memories, goals, values, expectations, and beliefs belong to the self” (American Psychological Association, 2023).

J. L. Davis et al. (2019) summarizes Identity Theory (in the field of sociology) as “how individuals organize identity meanings, enact them in social situations, and respond to identity-relevant feedback” (p. 255) and describes the social identity theory (in the field of psychology) as being “concerned with identity processes through inter- and intragroup dynamics” (p. 255). This range of components that make up the concept of identity makes it difficult to curate one overarching theory that will fully encompass all aspects – social, personal, internal, external, cultural, etc. – in order to discuss how identity is formed, influenced, deployed, refined, understood, and negotiated. The deeply personal nature of identity and identity development can also make it difficult to pinpoint perfect conceptualizations. For the sake of this study, I discuss identity in terms of personal identity (labels, categories, and descriptors that subjects choose to take on themselves), social identity (group membership, how one might “fit in” depending on context and influences), and imposed identities (identities that may include group membership but are “given” to the subject).

It has been described previously how the conceptualization of homosexuality as an identity began in the mid- to late- 1800s, where prior to this, homosexual acts occurred isolated from a particular identity, across cultures and contexts, to varying rates of acceptance, moral validity, and even as an expected behavior in some contexts. The formation of the homosexual identity (whether accepted or imposed) was a scientific, artistic, and scholarly focus during the late-1800s (Blount, 2015; Foucault, 1978; Jagose, 1996). There were a range of identities utilized (imposed) during this era, such as “homosexual, deviant, invert...[and] lesbian” (Blount, 2015, p. 162) which painted homosexuality as a pathology, opening up those who fit into these categories to responses of verbal or physical aggression and to create a categorical “other” set in opposition of the “normal” straight person (Nixon, 2006, p. 277).

The construction of homosexuality as an identity led for the inherent construction of heterosexuality as an identity, which came to be considered as the default, morally superior, and natural way to be (Blount, 2015; Foucault, 1978; Jagose, 1996). This created additional social categories and allowed for the (re)production of systems which create(d) or maintain(ed) power and dominance, such as heteronormativity, cisnormativity, heteropatriarchy, and others. This othering of normal/ deviant, straight/ gay, moral/ immoral, well/ sick allowed for the development of compulsory heterosexuality, the requirement that “in a world where only two sexes exist, every person must feel attracted to another of the opposite sex” (López Medina, 2022, p. 89). Rich (1980) argues that to be heterosexual might not even be a “preference” at all but is instead “something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force” (p. 648). The social pressures designed by compulsory heterosexuality and the systems and norms reinforced by cisheteronormativity would act as the conduit for the imposition and management of the othering of those who do not align themselves with the “ideal” social categories, ways of being, and ways of acting/ performing gender and sexuality.

The personal, social, and imposed aspects of identity can be used to describe subjects (either as self-descriptors or imposed categories) and are numerous. To understand the vastness of options, one simply must think of the number of ways they could finish the sentence “I am ____.” Descriptors such as race, gender, sex, ability, occupation, roles, positionality, religion, state of being, and many more categories are available to choose from. Even Queer subjects may have specific identifiers they use to describe their Queerness, and that list of options continues to grow and develop immensely. One may describe themselves as a non-binary butch lesbian, as an aromantic bisexual male, as an asexual gay male, or many, many others. As described in Chapter One of this dissertation, the word “Queer” was chosen and used as an over-arching, inclusive

term to describe “people who hold gender and/or sexual identities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, non-binary, and gender nonconforming” (Weise, 2022, p. 485).

There is again a need to draw a distinction between identity (how one understands or categorizes themselves or is understood or categorized by others) and behavior (how one behaves or what one does). The lines may become blurred in terms of how one may maintain a normative identity while still engaging in nonnormative behaviors. The term, homosexual, for example described “behaviors in which one might engage” in the early 20th century and earlier but over time the term came to describe “an expression of the person one might be” (Blount, 2015, p. 164). Jagose (1996) explains that while there are certain individuals that can “be described more or less unproblematically as homosexual” that there are “a number of ambiguous circumstances [that] cast doubt on the precise delimitations of homosexuality as a descriptive category” (p. 7). This ambiguous space, which is celebrated by Queer theoretical frameworks, highlights the ongoing distinction between identity (I am gay, I am bisexual) and practice (I am in a heterosexual marriage and occasionally engage in casual or anonymous sex with members of the same sex) (Jagose, 1996).

Revising the question that Blount (2015) poses, “are we looking at identities, behaviors, both, or something else?” (p. 164). Understanding that these concepts must be viewed as interconnected categories, but that the scope of this study is not to (de)construct these concepts, this study focuses on the Queer identity that subjects choose to claim to describe themselves in terms of feelings and behavior within a particular context as opposed to those who may have this identity imposed on them, or Queer terms may be used to describe behaviors that are not accompanied by a Queer identity. It is important to still recognize that those who may engage in nonnormative behaviors while still claiming a normative identity are subject to the same systems

(cisheteronormativity, compulsory homosexuality, etc.) and may still experience similar forms of discrimination and bias (at seeing homophobic behavior directed at others, experiencing discrimination or violence themselves, etc.).

Identity Development

While the focus has been on those who self-identify as Queer, there are additional layers of temporality and context that must be taken into consideration from the current standpoint. As previously explored, the ambiguity and fluidity of QT are a couple of its hallmarks; therefore, identities and experiences must be considered within the context they occurred at that respective standpoint with the simultaneous recognition that the identities and experiences may shift over time. Several dimensions of identity have been found to be fluid (relationships, emotions, norms), but others (patterns of sexual, romantic, and affectionate attractions) tend to be stable thorough the lifespan for a majority of people (Dillon et al., 2011). Although one's identity is not always fixed (or set) and can be fluid (multiple and/or changing) (Hoover, 2022), the identities "may act as a marker," even though "their ink is by no means indelible" (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 59), meaning that the temporal and contextual standpoint can still be marked by the identifiers.

An individual's identity develops over their lifespan and includes the personal, social, and imposed aspects of identity. Gender and sex are continuums that are informed by dominant structures, social structures, institutions, social and cultural practices, and environmental experiences (Davies & Hoskin, 2022). Due to the personal and communal aspects of identity, and the natural growth in understanding oneself and one's culture that occurs over time, a subject may shift, develop, grow, or change through processes of identity development, which can be social or psychological.

Identity development describes the process by which one assesses, explores, and commits to one's identity. This was originally considered a key component of adolescence, but has come to be understood as an ongoing process that is occurring throughout the lifespan (Dillon et al., 2011). An individual's gender and sexual identity development is a complex process (Fassinger & Miller, 1997) that is an intrapsychic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and social process (Strunk & Jang, 2022). The development of one's identities does not "take place in a vacuum" (Jackson, 2007, p. 87) and is intersectionally impacted by other identity categories (race, class, etc.) as it is "never experienced in isolation from the whole subject" (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001, p. 124). The identity development process is also affected by a variety of contextual factors such as being in rural settings or different geographies, highly religious contexts, or unsupportive family environments (Strunk & Jang, 2022).

Identity development is also impacted by concepts such as gender socialization, which is "the process of being assigned a sex and the social process through which individuals are gendered on that basis" (Davies & Hoskin, 2022, p. 181). However, there are many individuals who go through attempted gender socialization and come to understand that they "experience gender in ways that do not align with a binary, including those who use they/them pronouns to identify themselves outside of cisgender norms" (Airton, 2018; Davies & Hoskin, 2022, p. 184). In a similar vein, there are many individuals who go through structures that (re)produce compulsory heterosexuality and come to understand that they do not experience attraction in ways that align with the imposed social norms, standards, and ideals.

I aim to describe a few identity development models but want to note first that most prominent Queer identity development models draw heavily from other psychological identity models. With this in mind, one should remember "queer peoples narratives do not tend to neatly

map to these progressions and models” (Strunk & Jang, 2022, p. 473). The staged models described, while useful for some perspective on typical terms of development and occurrences, do not tie neatly into the QT model, in that they do not align with the fluidity and uncertainty embraced by QT (Strunk & Jang, 2022)

Queer identity development (in the field of psychology), outlines certain “stages” which individuals go through as they develop; however, these categories fall in contrast with the multiple, temporal, and shifting views produced through QT. In addition, the models typically are produced through quantitative approaches, which aim to measure and research identity quantitatively to produce generalizations and statistical findings. However, K. K. Strunk and Jang (2022) critique this oversimplification of information due to how quantitative research is “often missing... consideration of contextual factors, supports, and constraints” (p. 475). In addition, these critiques also support the qualitative nature of this study and the Queer standpoint perspective, which acknowledges QT’s “rejection of stable and knowable identity categories and [embracing] of fluidity and uncertainty” (p. 473) and the contextual, social, and temporal perspective of subjects’ standpoints.

K. K. Strunk and Jang (2022) also explain that the models that aim to describe gender identity development parallel those that aim to describe sexual identity development, though they are unique processes influenced by both similar and distinct factors. The experiences with and development of one’s understanding of their gender is not the same as the experiences with and development of one’s understanding of their attractions. While sexism and homophobia are interconnected concepts, sexism and cissexism may play a greater role in one’s gender identity development than it would in one’s sexual identity development, and homophobia may play a greater role in one’s sexual identity development than it would in one’s gender identity

development. Notably, though, is that these models attempt to show Queer identity development as linear and clean, whereas in practice, it is not always so orderly and neat (Fassinger & Miller, 1997).

While identity development is a lifelong journey and people may reach certain “stages” or “milestones” at different points in their lifespans, adolescents will experience identity as something that is “ongoing, in-formation, and unfinished” (C. G. Gregory, 2022, p. 96). This ongoing, in-formation, and unfinished development is true into the different stages of adulthood as individuals’ lives, understandings, and experiences are multiple and shifting throughout time. It’s notable that, even though identity development is a lifelong process, it has been found that many of the core feelings form during earlier years in childhood.

Gender identity typically develops in stages for children, beginning with a consciousness of physical differences between boys and girls around age two, being able to label themselves as boy or girl by their third birthday, and finally, having a stable sense of their gender identity by age four (Rafferty, 2022). Dr. Rafferty goes on to say that “children tend to develop a clearer view of themselves over time... Research suggests that ***children who assert a gender-diverse identity know their gender as clearly and consistently as their developmentally matched peers*** and benefit from the same level of support, love, and social acceptance” (emphasis added). There are children who assert a diverse gender identity that may not align with their sex assigned at birth early on. There are also many who do not come to explore their gender identity until later on in life. Doyle (2022) describes that “while self-awareness (and private exploration) of transgender identity often occurs around onset of puberty, self-identification to others and expression in public tend to occur later in adolescence and young adulthood” (p. 1).

The American Psychological Association (2008) states that “according to current scientific and professional understanding, the core attractions that form the basis for orientation typically emerge between middle childhood (**6-8 years of age**) and early adolescence (**10-13 years of age**). These patterns of emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction may arise without any prior experiences” (emphasis and age ranges added). Many students will discover and accept their sexual and gender identities during the secondary years (Blackburn & Parker, 2022a).

The students in K-12 classrooms are on their own identity development journeys, not only in reference to attractions and gender, but in their values, in who they want to be, in what they want to do, in their friendships, in their social status, and in many other aspects of who they are and who they are becoming. Major areas of identity development typically happens during an individual’s K-12 schooling years, and the value-laden nature of the educational context also helps to shape identity (Johnson, 2011). As education is laden with, influenced by, and (re)producing values, it is also laden with, influenced by, influencing, and re(producing) identities.

I have discussed basic background for understanding identity development as a lifelong experience, and before discussing models of identity development as it relates to Queerness, I must provide an additional layer to the developing model for identity formation and development within specific sociocultural/ temporal contexts, which (re)produces cultural norms, values, and practices and influences an individual’s development throughout their lifetime. I add another component in Figure 6, which accounts for identity formation within sociocultural and temporal contexts throughout childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and adulthood (including identity development within the role of “teacher.”

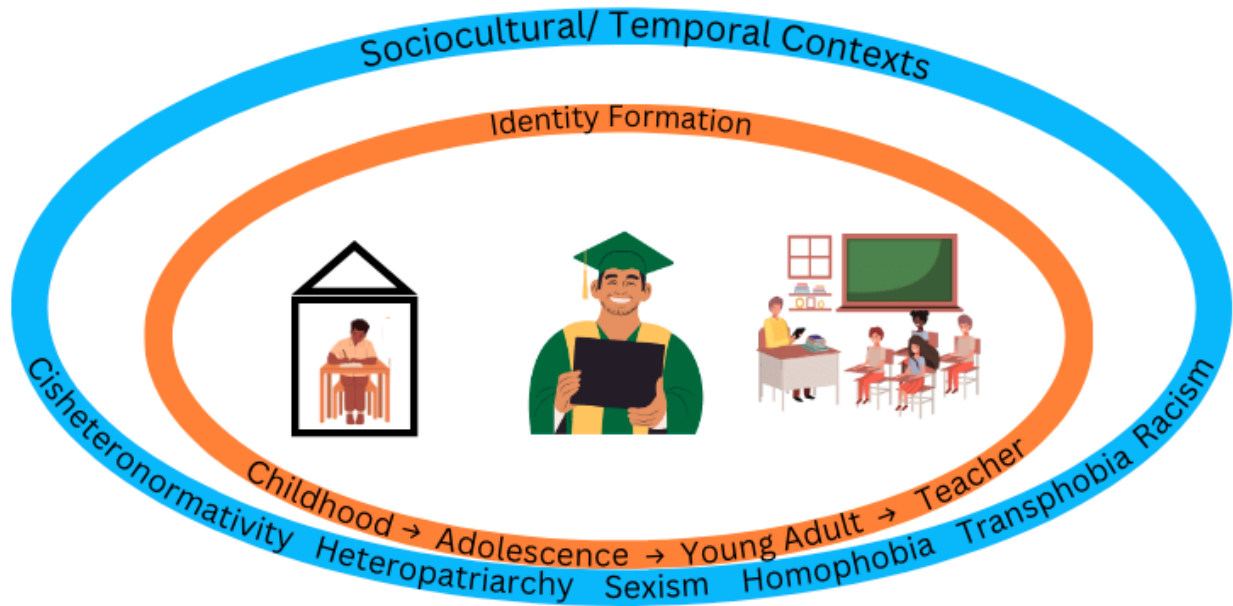


Figure 6: The representation of an educator, as a product of the U.S. K-12 school system, working within the sociocultural and temporal contexts experiencing identity development throughout their lifetime

Models of Identity Development

The sexual identity development model (Figure 7) described by Dillon et al (2011) begins with the concept of compulsory heterosexuality as the starting point for sexual identity development. As the “default” in this culture, it is expected that everyone begins as heterosexual until proven otherwise. Following this, individuals may step into an active exploration of their attractions and desires or step into diffusion, which is “the absence of commitment and of systematic exploration” where one “is unconcerned and content with not having strong commitments or having actively explored” (p. 662). They may move between active exploration and diffusion or on to deepening and commitment, where they “exhibit a movement toward greater commitment to their identified sexual needs, values, sexual orientation and/or preferences for activities, partner characteristics, and modes of sexual expression” (p. 663), which is also a stage that can be reached directly from one’s assumed (compulsory) heterosexuality. There may

be interchange between these different statuses, as individual's sexual identity development may be fluid and shifting over time, where a person may deepen their commitment to heterosexuality, but through life experiences and self-awareness, they may decide that it is necessary to explore alternative attractions or ways of being, which could lead to diffusion or back to deepening and commitment. Beyond active exploration, diffusion, and deepening and commitment, resides the synthesis status, where "people come to an understanding of sexual identity that fulfills their self-definitions and carries over to their attitudes and behaviors toward both LGB-identified and heterosexually identified individuals" (p. 664). Individuals may again move from synthesis to active exploration or diffusion within the fluid nature of their sexual identity development.

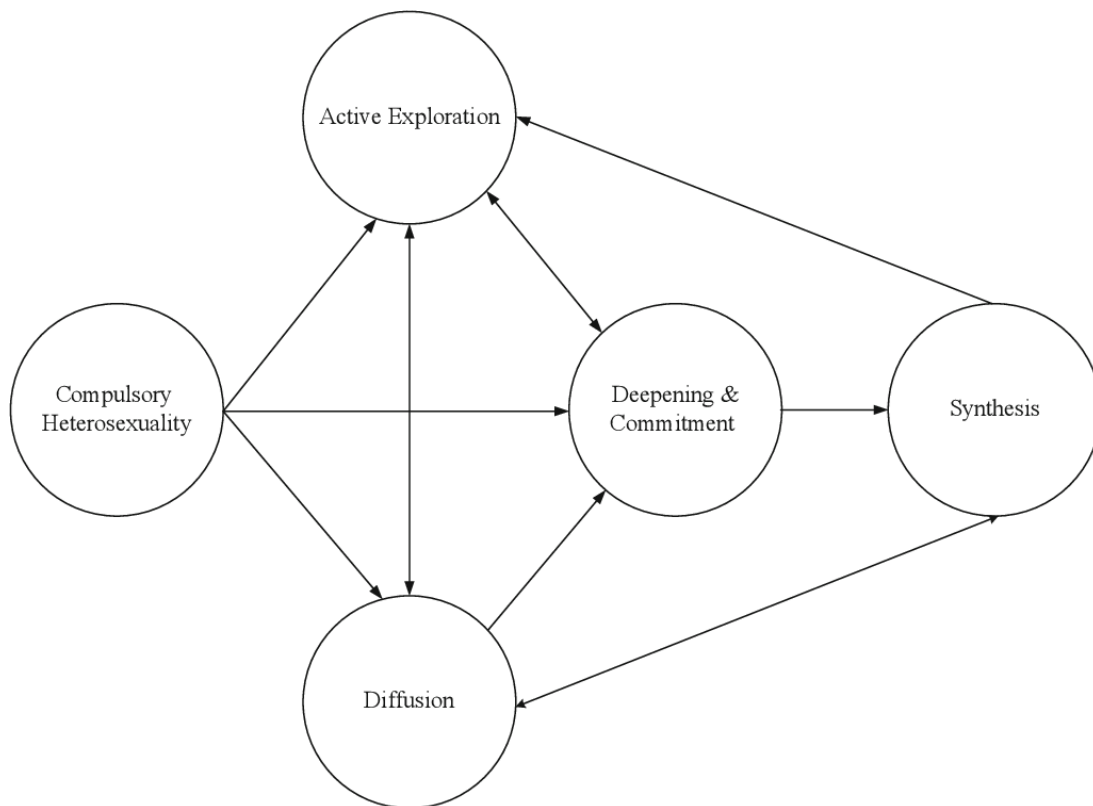


Figure 7: Dillon et al.'s. (2011) Process of Sexual Identity Development (p. 658, Fig. 27.2)

Sexual identity development happens within a particular context. Dillon et al. (2011) also explores factors that determine sexual identity development (Figure 8), with sexual identity

development at the center of the model, being influenced by these additional factors. The model begins with biopsychosocial processes, which are the “interrelated biopsychosocial factors (e.g., biological, microsocial, gender, cultural, religious, and systemic) [which] were posited as influencing an individual’s progression through five heterosexual identity development statuses” (p. 656) as previously described. This model also considers “two parallel, reciprocal developmental determinants” which include “an individual sexual identity development process” and “a social identity process” (p. 657). These two social and individual processes occur within each of the five statuses described previously.

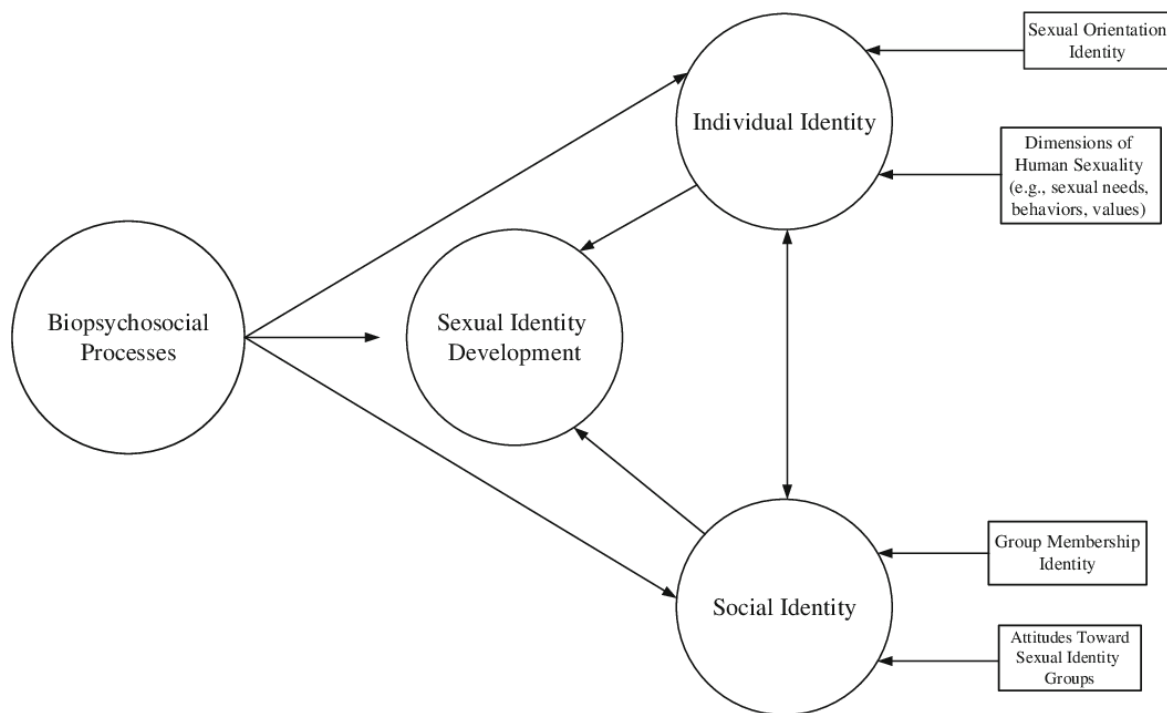


Figure 8: Dillon et al.'s. (2011) Determinants of Sexual Identity Development (p. 657, Fig. 27.1)

Additionally, the social identity development is influenced by many biopsychosocial influences not explicitly named in the Dillon et al. (2011) model, which aimed to serve as a unifying model of sexual identity development of many models previously proposed and validated (such as Fassinger & Miller, 1997, Worthington et al., 2002, and others). For the

purpose of making explicit assumed influences, I draw attention to the Worthington et al. (2002) model which lists six of the biopsychosocial influences as biology, gender norms and socialization, religious orientation, microsocial context, culture, and systemic homonegativity, sexual prejudice, and privilege. These items are grouped into the individual and social identity aspects of the unified model.

As previously stated, the models used to discuss the development of gender identity parallel those used to discuss the development of sexual identities (Strunk & Jang, 2022). Brinkman et al. (2014) propose that “children’s identity development and expression is a complex revolving input/decision/action process” (p. 846) and represent that through the input/decision/ action cyclical model in Figure 9. While there is a level of oversimplification that can be found in this model, the fluidity of the model that is addressed on an ongoing basis and consistently (re)negotiated aligns with the ongoing understanding and development experienced throughout the lifespan. The social and cultural influences are accounted for along with an emphasis on the subject’s agency through decision and action.

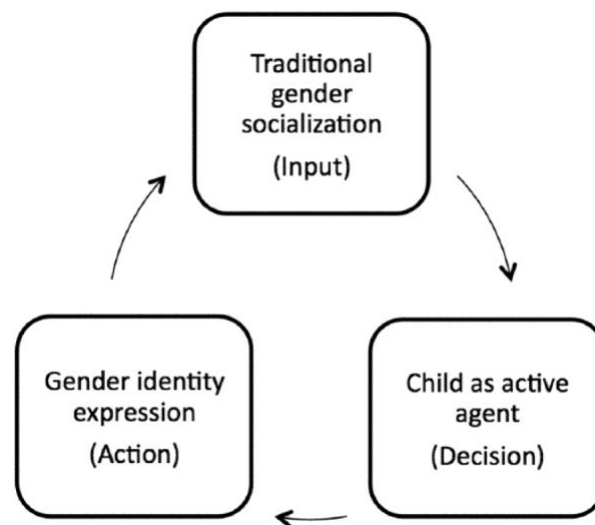


Figure 9: Brinkman et al.'s. (2014) Model of Gender Identity Development Demonstrating the Input/Decision/Action process (p. 847, Fig. 1)

Identity development is both an intrapersonally (internally) and interpersonally (externally/ socially) influenced process. Doyle (2022) provides a social feedback model on transgender identity that highlights key research topics that affect identity development, identity management, the socio-political context, and identify affirmation by others in Figure 10. In “conceptualizing transgender identity as a dynamic interplay between internal and external influences,” Doyle argues that this “will advance efforts to support transgender people’s self-expression and protect psychological health and well-being against stigma and discrimination” (p. 4). From this review of current research on the development of trans* identities, Doyle (2022) found that, as a collective, the research “points to the pivotal role of supportive social relationships and social environments in the healthy development and expression of transgender identities” (p. 4).

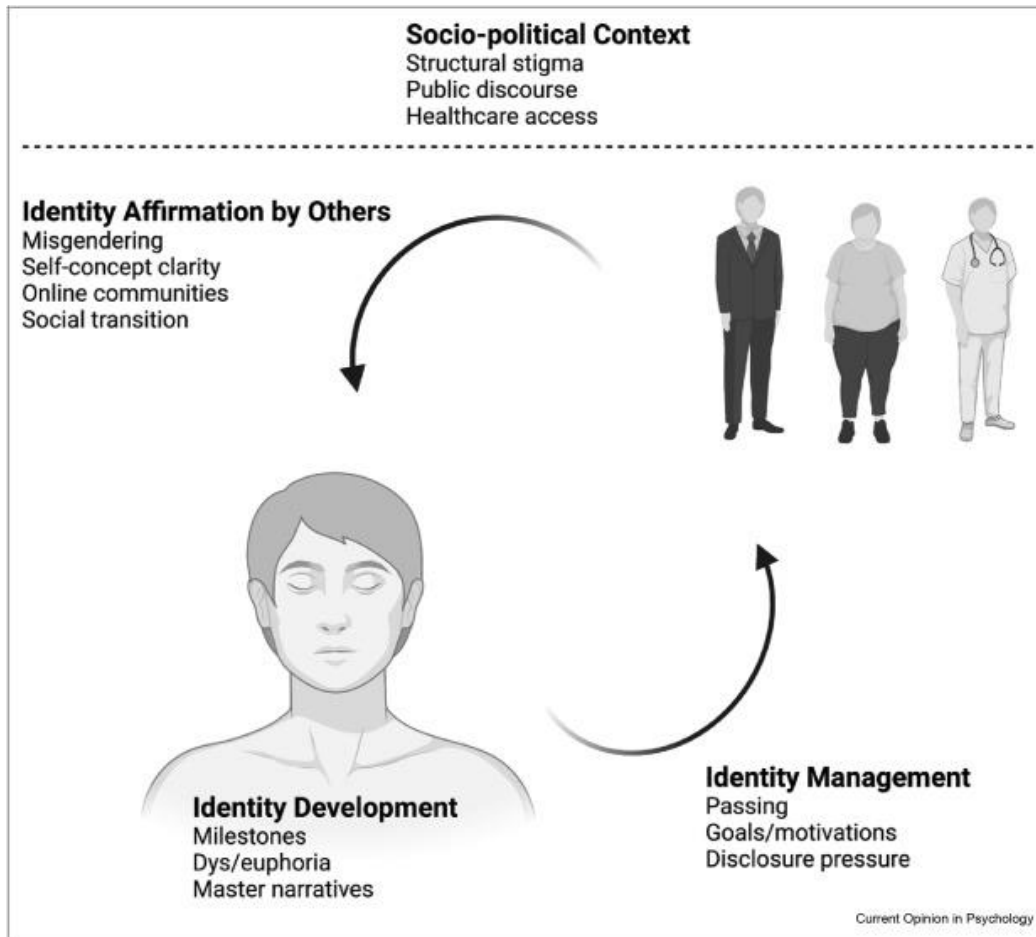


Figure 10: Doyle's (2022) Social Feedback Model of Transgender Identity with Key Research Topics Highlighted (p. 2, Fig. 1)

As individuals come to understand themselves, they must also navigate the (re)negotiation of the coming out process and how they desire to use identity management strategies to navigate or negotiate coming out. A continuum of identity management strategies used by lesbian and gay educators is worth exploring in terms of how “out” an educator may wish to be at the school. The model in Figure 11, proposed by Griffin (1991), describes the different stages (or levels) of “outness,” characteristics of each stage, and the management strategies of public/ private boundaries (Rudoe, 2010) Queer educators may employ.

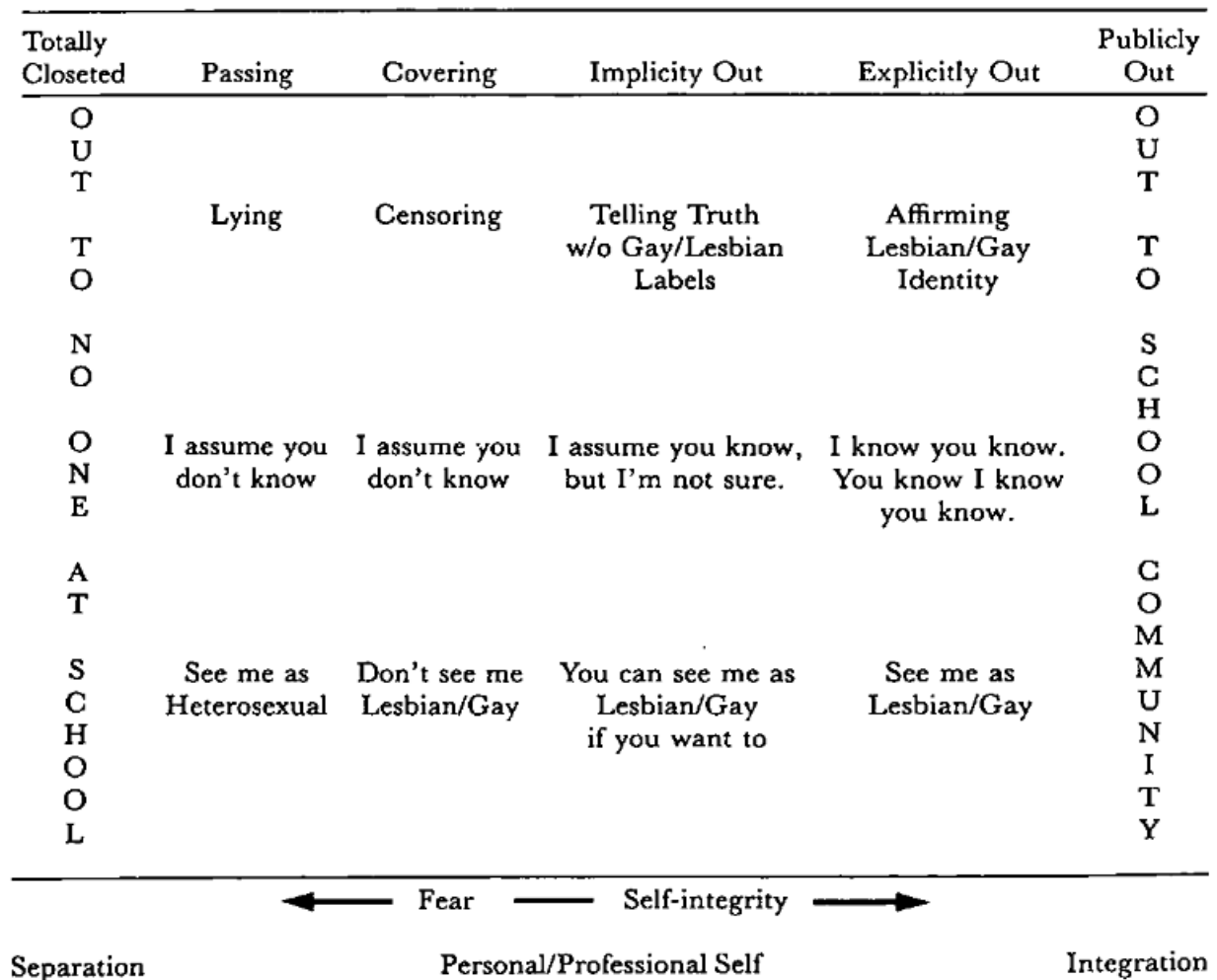


Figure 11: Griffin's (1991) Continuum of Identity Management Strategies Used by Lesbian and Gay Educators (p. 194, Fig. 1)

As I consider these concepts, and the data presented by subjects participating in this study, it is critical to recognize the various standpoints at play (of myself, of the participants) and the fluidity, multiplicity, and flexibility in the identity development process as an ongoing endeavor. It is key to remember that the contexts in which participants are placed have a major impact on their experiences, and that not all participants will have the same experiences. The development processes of participants will be influenced by personal characteristics (race, age, religion, personality, and factors related to gender conformity) and external factors (family, status, professional experiences, and community atmosphere) (Jackson, 2007). This is a deeply

interpersonal and intrapersonal experience where participants will fall into various stages, statuses, or in-betweens at various points in their narratives, and even at the time of the data collection.

While two main identities (those of Queer person and educator) framed the study, the participants are so much more than just these two things, though they may be a major component of who the person is. There is an associated risk by using QST of essentializing, or “focusing on a single identity and excluding other identities” (Miller, 2022, p. 295). It will be important to remember that the lived experiences of subjects are not compatible with an essentialist perspective because people are multifaceted. To combat this, Miller explains that intersectional thinking is necessary to view the multiple components of a person or group of people. I aim to detail the multifaceted, contextual aspects of subjects while exploring the centralized research questions focusing on the intersection of their experiences, their Queerness, and their roles as educators.

Additional Theoretical Underpinnings from the Dissertation Process

Integrating the Pilot Study into the Dissertation Study

As part of the pilot study utilized to inform this dissertation, a continuum was developed that incorporates the different influences on identity, practices, and outcomes that was based on the stories the two participants shared. Figure 12 aligns with the research described on contextual factors, experiences, identity development and management, and outcomes and the findings from this pilot study:

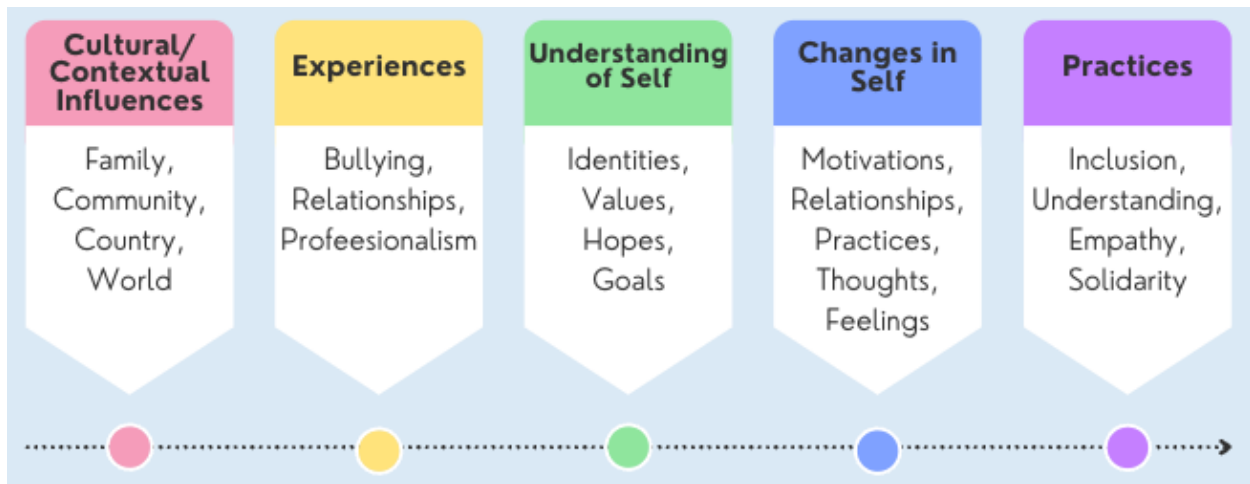


Figure 12: Pilot Study Continuum of Queer Educator Development

The questions posed at the intersection of ST and QT regarding my choices about which identity to center and bringing those aspects into focus without essentializing or reducing a person to a single defining characteristic is demonstrated here, showing that there is fluidity in experiences, but this research focuses on where one is, in this moment in time, in this context, and how that can be applied to the larger understanding of research regarding Queer educators, their experiences, and their practices. One addition to consider here may be the integration of a cyclical model to demonstrate the ongoing development and negotiation experienced throughout the lifespan.

Conceptualizing the Development of Queer Educators as a Cycle

Upon researching, describing, and summarizing the development of Queer educators earlier in this chapter, while considering the cultural factors that (re)produce systems, ideologies, values, and attitudes, I have come to understand the cyclical nature of the identity and praxis development of Queer educators in this way: that the systems produce, from their time participating as a K-12 learner, educators who complete teacher preparation programs, and then become teachers themselves, and influence the development of future generations of educators.

This final layer to the developing model of identity formation and development as a cyclical process is demonstrated in Figure 13. All of this occurs within sociocultural and temporal contexts which influence and exist surrounding an individual's identity development.

Sociocultural norms can be reproduced within these different generations, or they may be disrupted by educators who take a Queer approach to teaching and learning, who challenge norms and assumptions, and who make sure that every student is included.

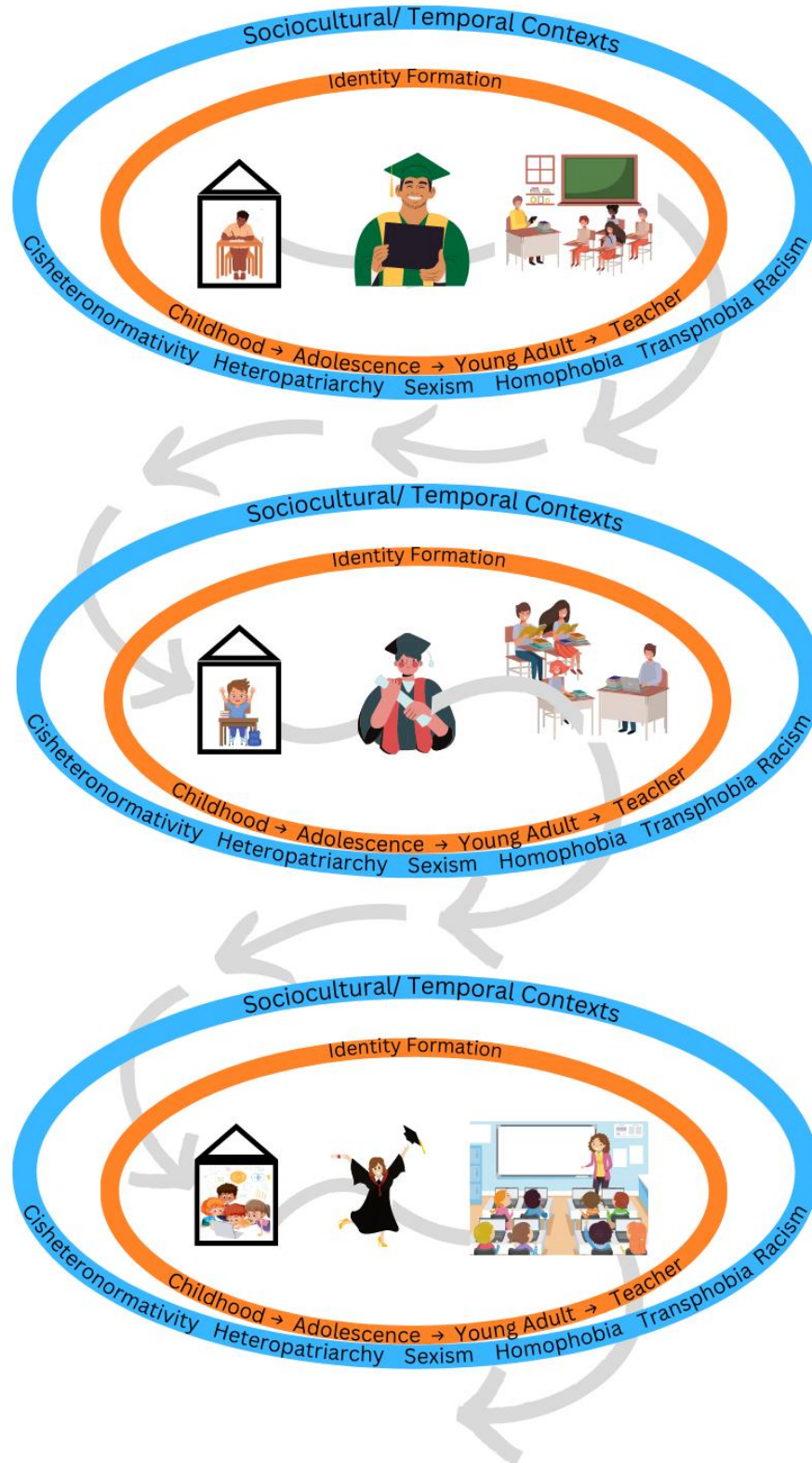


Figure 13: A cyclical model of identity formation and development within specific sociocultural/ temporal contexts, which (re)produces cultural norms, values, and practices and influences an individual's development throughout their lifetime.

Chapter Two Summary

This chapter began with an overview of the cultural frameworks at play within the U.S. K-12 public education system, and the larger culture in general, considering concepts such as cisheteronormativity, cissexism, heterosexism, compulsory (hetero)sexuality, (re)production of dominant norms, the role education plays in the cultural context, and what educators can do to address problematic systems. It then described the existing research on the experiences of Queer educators regarding legal protections, harm, fear of harm, and other positive and negative experiences, and discussed the outcomes of the intersection of Queer and educator identities/roles through “coming out,” how Queerness has been found to impact practice, and outcomes experienced by Queer educators and their allies.

This chapter then discussed the theoretical underpinnings of this study and described the formation of Queer Standpoint Theory (QST), which aims to explore the central perspective of participants using Standpoint Theory (ST), their experiences, negotiation of meaning, and unique understandings related to their positionality within a specific temporal and contextual moment, while also embracing the fluid, multiple, and shifting components of Queer Theory (QT). It then employ the use of QST to discuss current Queer identity development models that consider the interpersonal factors (such as self-awareness, biology, internal, etc.) and intrapersonal factors (such as socialization, norms, culture, systems, etc.) of identity development as a fluid experience that occurs throughout the lifespan.

Finally, this chapter explored how these many factors continue to (re)produce dominance, power, and norms through those involved in the education system as they develop their identities and ways of being throughout their lifetime, within and influenced by the larger sociocultural and temporal contexts. This is a cyclical process as norms, values, and ideals are (re)produced

within the education system and impressed upon those who go through the system, and then, as products of that system, become actors within that system. As actors within that system, they are able to reinforce or disrupt harmful norms and ideologies for future generations of educators.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Purpose of Research and Research Questions

As previously described, this study aims to explore the experiences of Kansas K-12 public educators who self-identify as Queer prior to, leading up to, and in their roles as Queer educators and to understand how those experience inform practice and professional interactions and answer the following research questions:

- **Research Question 1:** How do Queer educator participants describe their experiences prior to, leading up to, and as Queer educators? (RQ1)
- **Research Question 2:** How do Queer educator experiences and identities impact their practices? (RQ2)
- **Research Question 3:** How do participants describe the ways their Queer identities influence their professional interactions? (RQ3)

Methodological Foundations: Qualitative Inquiry

Due to the nature of making meaning from Queer educator experiences, as they are situated within a particular sociocultural and temporal context, including how they make meaning of their own experiences and enact that meaning in their praxis, qualitative methods and methodologies were employed in this study in order to develop an understanding of this phenomena. The use of Narrative Inquiry, as briefly described in Chapter One and described in depth below, situates this research within the larger qualitative domain, seeing to examine the phenomena (Queer educators) with depth of understanding prioritized over generalizable findings. The data shared by the participants in this study highlights how the participants have shaped meaning of and from their experiences and negotiate that meaning within their lives and roles. The prioritization of depth of understanding for a small sample over the breadth of

understanding through generalizable results is critical to understanding why a few stories are highlighted and their many aspects are explored. These stories form the basis for the use of narrative inquiry as this study's methodology. The use of narrative inquiry allowed an opportunity understand how participants share their stories and then to use those stories as the basic unit of analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Pilot Study Usage

Pilot Study Background

A pilot study (PS) on this same topic was completed as part of my graduate coursework in order to explore potential methodological and procedural issues (Ismail et al., 2017; van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002) and, if any were to arise, address those prior to initiating the full dissertation study. Two participants were identified and interviewed during the Fall 2021 term and the PS utilized an interview study methodology with interviews/ transcripts, analytic memos, and photo elicitation/ artifact review as methods. Data was stored and coded in NVivo (Version 12) and consisted of three interviews with one participant and two interviews with the other participant. In order to address one concern regarding the transparency of the lessons learned through the use of pilot studies (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002), this section is designed to be explicit about those concerns and the changes made between studies.

Changes to Dissertation Study

The original study proved to be a good learning experience for a new researcher. With the guidance of several experienced researchers (professors, GTA's), the PS had a good foundation and did not demonstrate a need for many procedural changes to be made. Some language in the interview guide, which can be found in [Appendix B -](#), was updated, though the lines of inquiry in the areas of participants background and information, their practices as educators, and their

interactions as educators were still relevant to be used in the dissertation study. A re-centering of the Queer identity was important to bring back into focus within the QST framework for the full study.

Additionally, there was a certain depth within the PS interviews that was not achieved at times, which was more reflective of my follow-up questioning skills as an interviewer instead of the procedures. Thus, it became imperative during the dissertation study that stronger follow-up questions and a willing to explore relevant narratives in depth were addressed through making listening and deepening the conversation the goal as opposed to trying to “get through” the interview questions.

A larger number of participants (an additional five Queer educators) was utilized in the full dissertation study to analyze their stories along with the stories of the original two participants. This increased number of participants allowed for the opportunity to triangulate or crystallize findings and look for trends between participants as they share their stories, which ultimately informed the findings of this study.

Finally, an interview study approach was utilized with the PS. The methodology approach was changed to narrative inquiry, with the goal to deepen the understanding of and (re)presentation of the stories told, by thinking about the stories as data themselves that can be analyzed AND choosing to engage with and to think with the stories in terms of (re)structuring larger narratives/ conversations as one who is actively engaged with the story (Rosenberg, 2020; Shaw, 2017).

Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

The use of narrative inquiry (NI) as a methodology sets the stories the participants share as the focal point and the core of this research, and allows for a depth of understanding that is

prioritized over generalizable findings, but can still produce grand narratives and narrative strands that connect the stories and can help to make sense of the experiences, influences, and outcomes faced by Queer educators through the sharing of their unique experiences (Rosenberg, 2020). This methodology holds a basic assumption that “human beings like to tell stories and connect socially through stories, and [that they] lead storied lives” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 93). Through these stories, NI helps to “understand a phenomenon or an experience rather than to formulate a logical or scientific explanation” (Kramp, 2004, p. 104). The framework “helps researchers explore, discover, understand, and construct stories based on the participants’ recounting of their experiences” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 93).

NI can be implemented as a powerful research tool because “it acts as a methodological tool and as a form of analysis to allow the participants’ experiences to be showcased” (MacDonald, 2015, p. 63). The participants shared these narratives, or stories, through interviews, their presentation of artifacts, and their discussion about the artifacts, which formed the basic unit of analysis for this study (Bhattacharya, 2017). The research purpose and research questions are inherently intertwined with the stories that the participants tell.

Following data collection, which is detailed later in this chapter, narrative analysis was utilized to identify the various narrative strands, key narratives, codes, categories, and themes, and those components allowed for the (re)construction of narratives to give voice to the participants’ stories and lived experiences through the findings of this research (Ely, 2007; Rosenberg, 2020). An in-depth discussion of the analysis process is provided later in this chapter as well.

By their very nature, humans “find and construct meaning in our lives by telling our stories” (Johnson-Bailey, 2004, p. 124). Storytelling through narratives “is a vital human activity

that structures experience and gives it meaning” (Kramp, 2004, p. 104). The reason the NI framework was chosen is because stories are familiar to researchers and readers. They are a form of discourse that can be understood easier than other discourses, and readers find that the “unobtrusively intimate format and ease of understanding” are appealing (Johnson-Bailey, 2004, p. 124). While this may make NI sound like an incredibly easy and effortless process, this explanation is an oversimplification of a complex process that cannot be done by just anyone without applying themselves, studying, reflecting, and listening, as it is a complex, disciplined process that requires attention, consideration, and thoughtfulness.

NI serves as a mode of inquiry that “is both a process, a narrator or participant telling or narrating, and a product, the story or narrative told” (Kramp, 2004, p. 104). It involves two aspects of the term narrative: telling (from the Latin *narrare*, meaning “to tell, relate, recount, explain”) and knowing (from the Latin *gnarus*, meaning “knowing” or “to know”) (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 93; Harper, 2020). It includes the methods used to collect data (i.e., the telling) – the interviewing, the listening, the recording, the notetaking, etc. – and the (re)construction of the stories told and discovered through analysis that are demonstrated by the product for deeper understanding (i.e., the knowing). The value of this process, then, is not found in a generalizable truth that is discovered, or a replicatable study, because “generalizations will not capture [how the] participants’ stories speak to [the researcher]” (p. 113). The value is found in the depth of understanding and the (re)telling of the narratives that make the stories and experiences understandable by those who may not understand due to their positionality or standpoints.

Kramp (2004) explains that “the object of narrative inquiry is understanding – the outcome of interpretation – rather than explanation” (p. 104). As the researcher who is

employing the use of NI in a research study, the goal is “determining the meaning of a particular experience or event” (or experiences or events) “for the one who had it, and [telling] about it in a story” (p. 108). The lived experiences are intertwined with the stories told and formulate the storied lives of the participants. They cannot be separated, because, as Bruner (2004) argues, “a life as led is inseparable from a life as told—or more bluntly, a life is not “how it was” but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold” (p. 708). The understanding that these aspects of participants are interconnected allowed for the study of the stories the participants tell, their lives, and how they come to understand their own story/ stories by telling, retelling, and interpreting their experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017; D. J. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

One final distinction to be made before discussing the different narratives/ narrative approaches, their (re)construction, and standpoints is that there are two types of restorying/ (re)storying. Both involve making meaning from stories and communicating those stories to others, but there is a slight difference that must be clarified: when restorying/ (re)storying is discussed in terms of the traditional interweaving of multiple ideas/ narratives where the researcher (re)tells and (re)constructs the meanings through a narrative lens (Rosenberg, 2020), it will be labeled as restorying (researcher)/ (re)storying (researcher). When restorying/ (re)storying is discussed in terms of how participants may consider their past and present realities to “name their own experiences, both the oppressions and joys that touch their lives... [and share] their lived realities – their truths” and then through an imaginative and speculative restorying process, aligning stories with themes of justice and hope to “re-write those stories to reveal a hoped-for future” (Coleman, 2022, pp. 606–607), it will be labeled as restorying (participant)/ (re)storying (participant). The first involves how I the researcher shares the findings from thinking about, with, and through stories (Rosenberg, 2020; Shaw, 2017) and the

latter involves how the participants, as storytellers in their own rite, (re)frame, (re)tell, (re)imagine, and (re)deploy their stories to (re)write and (re)make more hopeful and just futures (Coleman, 2022).

Standpoints and Context

The focus on the stories the participants share remains framed by Queer Standpoint Theory (QST), maintaining that the lived experiences may be better understood through stories and interpretations by those whose personal standpoints may not be situated in ways that they can fully understand experiences unique to Queer educators as the “other” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). QST maintains the central focus on the participants’ stories as they are negotiated and understood in a central, temporally locked moment, occurring within a specific context, with the recognition that identities, behaviors, understandings, beliefs, and experiences can shift throughout the lifespan. Basic, universally accepted tenants of qualitative research, including NI, include this attention to how “behaviors, events, and actions are meaningful as embedded in context” (Kramp, 2004, p. 105). These narratives and experiences happen within specific contexts that must be understood as part of the analysis process and are the focus of this research based upon the standpoint of Queer educators.

The stories told “exist on several levels – the macro through the micro – which include the community, regional, national, cultural, and individual [levels]” (Johnson-Bailey, 2004, p. 126) and understanding those levels, or contexts, is critical. Individual lives do not exist in a vacuum, but there are specific factors that impact peoples’ experiences, how they make meaning out of those experiences, and how they tell the stories about those experiences. In addition to these contextual levels, NI is a “multi-dimensional exploration of experience involving temporality (past, present and future), interaction (personal and social), and location (place)” (J.

D. Clandinin & Connelly, 2004, p. 576). Rosenberg (2020) further describes these three “commonplaces” (though she labels them as time, place, and sociality) that findings are gleaned from when thinking about and with stories, as the commonplaces relate to the story itself, and the context that the story is told and/or discovered. She describes these in this way:

Time, or temporality, acknowledges that everything is transitional and there is continuity between the past, present and future. The past reflects significance, the present infuses value, and the future conveys intention. Thus, understanding the past and imagining future possibilities takes place from the present viewpoint. Place refers to the concrete locations and surroundings of events and experiences, including the research context. Sociality has two parts. Firstly, it includes external social conditions, such as cultural, institutional, societal, and linguistic particularities, and, if relevant, the nature of the relationship and interactions between participants and the inquirer. Secondly, it includes internal personal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, existential viewpoints, and moral dispositions of the story’s characters and, if relevant, those involved in the research study (D. J. Clandinin et al., 2007; D. J. Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Rosenberg, 2020).

It is critical to maintain context as a major factor in the experience of, sharing of, and interpretation of the stories. Not only is this necessary theoretically, as the multiple and shifting perspectives allowed by QST must center the temporally locked identity and experiences to consider a particular standpoint and for participants to ensure that they meet inclusionary criteria for the study, but it is important methodologically, as the narratives exist within particular temporal, social, and location contexts, and the meaning-making process must be navigated with these in mind.

Thematic Narratives

As compilation of the data (stories) began, the analysis process also began. This analytic process is “a process of storying, such that stories are re-reconstructed or re-storied to create a grand narrative with characters, scene and plot” (Rosenberg, 2020). The analytic process involved a commitment to listening and re-listening (Kramp, 2004) to the stories told to better understand the individual, connected, and juxtaposed stories and the themes present between and across those stories. The participants’ narratives demonstrate how participants make meaning of their lives through an inductive analysis that identifies themes and represents those themes as part of a larger narrative (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Since there are multiple participants, with multiple stories and varying backgrounds and contexts, the goal was to look for overlapping, parallel, contrasting, and contradicting experiences and to see how those experiences have been, or are currently being, negotiated by participants. This analysis created the opportunity to make sense of what could be learned from the experiences that were communicated by participants, and with that deeper understanding, an opportunity to communicate the stories – the contradictions, the similarities, the nuances, the parallels – and other relevant narrative strands as research findings and implications (Ely, 2007; Rosenberg, 2020). In the process of (re)storying, (re)telling, (re)constructing, and (re)presenting the stories of the participants, multiple narrative strands and stories were woven together, with all their nuances, complexities and ambiguities.

Through this process, the interpretation of the data allowed for the story/ stories to be (re)told (Kramp, 2004). In a thematic narrative analysis, as with any research project, the impact that subjectivities may have had on the process were consistently monitored and reviewed. Throughout the analytic process the stories were approached through a variety of lenses to make

sense of the stories and to ensure that they are accurately, honestly, empathetically, and usefully (re)told in ways that portrayed the larger narrative holistically and in ways that could be understood by others.

Counter Narratives

Chapter Two alluded to how Queer ways of being disrupt sociocultural hegemonies. The counternarratives, which are “the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives” (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004, p. 1; Watson, 2009) can be employed to push against expectations or stereotypes and assumed outcomes. The use of counter narratives involves individuals and groups who choose to push against dominant norms, experiences, pathways, stereotypes, etc. and can also disrupt the pre-understood, expected, and normed experiences and expectations, while also being set in contrast to singular stories.

Counternarratives also help to highlight the dangers of a single story (Adichie, 2009), which may frame a certain experience as normal, impossible, or the only way to be. When one experiences a single story, they experience implicit or explicit sociocultural messaging that there is one way of being, doing, or thinking. Single stories can be deployed through power dynamics and the (re)production of dominant narratives that show people or experiences as one thing, over and over again, and that becomes how people view the subject of those narratives.

The narratives under study were not always counternarratives in the sense that they resist dominant narratives like described above. They include narratives that simply counter the individual narratives of others or are contrasting narratives between participants. The NI methodology seeks the common narrative strands to support making meaning of the narratives

shared, but there were also unique experiences that were set in contrast to each other to foster a conversation about findings related to where and how common narrative threads diverge.

However, with any story, there are multiple interpretations and vantage points, which is upheld by the ontological and epistemological perspective of NI (Rosenberg, 2020). There may be multiple interpretations across different times, situations, or contexts, and differing (or contrasting) vantage points (of personal stories, of stories years after the fact, or stories experienced by more than one person) are possible and should be identified and interrogated.

The restorying (participant) process is also applicable when considering counternarratives. The various vantage points that may lead to new understandings can also lead to restorying by the participant, which builds future hope and justice into the past and present stories (Coleman, 2022). Restorying does not necessarily mean that individuals are (re)telling their stories, but that they are (re)defining their stories with a focus on future hope and justice by (re)making meaning.

In the context of NI, the researcher must be aware of the counternarratives that are employed by participants, the restorying that participants may employ on their own stories, and how some narratives may be set in contrast to each other. The stories that were reconstructed in analysis aimed to describe a grand narrative or narratives, based upon the narrative strands which were woven together by the researcher. These strands are the interconnected components of shared storytelling and the (re)telling of participant experiences. Within this analysis and (re)telling, it has been important to acknowledge differences in time, locale, and sociocultural context. These differences led to narratives that deviated from one another along with narratives that were simply contrasting one another or may not have followed similar narrative strands of other stories within the data corpus or the larger stories told within the sociocultural context.

Narrative (Re)construction

It was a privilege to hear the stories told by the participants, and to seek the opportunity to connect the stories by thinking about and with stories to make sense out of and discover meaning in and through the narratives. This privilege was inherently followed with the task to share those stories and findings with readers through (re)construction of the narratives. I become the narrator after listening and analyzing the stories. A priority in the (re)construction and (re)telling of the participants stories was to “authentically [depict] the thoughts and sensitivities the participants experienced” (Mejía Vélez, 2017, p. 87). The task of the narrative researcher was to “relate the meanings of an individual’s story to larger, theoretically significant categories” (Josselson, 2007, p. 10), and that had to be done in honest, dignifying, clear, and professional ways.

The process of (re)constructing the stories and developing a plot, with characters, settings, and themes is referred to as emplotment, which “reflects the intentionality of the narrator, who does the arranging or sequencing” and using plot to “grasp together” the “multiple and scattered actions and events” (Kramp, 2004, p. 109). As the narrative threads were tied together, a story or stories were formed that give meaning and transferability or crystallization to the experiences shared by participants. The narrator held onto the perspective or point of view of participants, and this was reflected in the narrative. As the narrator constructs the plot, they are responsible for “selecting and sequencing actions and events, thereby imposing a meaning on these actions and events that comprise the story.”

As the plot is described and the narrative strands are highlighted, it is also important to consider how NI “remains an unfinished and unfinishable business” (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007, p. 14) because the stories themselves will always be incomplete, partial, and ongoing. The data

collection and analysis had to come to a conclusion eventually, and the stories must move on after this work is published. The way that the stories are (re)constructed and (re)told are based upon stories as they were socially, culturally, and temporally situated at the time of data collection and analysis. The same story can take on different meanings throughout different times, cultures, and contexts.

Collective Narratives

The participants are inherently members in two distinct groups: K-12 public educators in Kansas and Queer individuals. Certain affects (feelings) may bind people “into a collective group” (Helmsing, 2022, p. 9) and this collective identity represents “an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” and involves a “shared status or relation” and is “distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity” (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 285). While each person is an individual with their own unique experiences, there were times and ways that the stories tied together and provided a larger narrative of shared experiences that could be attributed to a collective understanding, collective experience, collective narrative, shared experiences, among a variety of other ways to label group experiences or understandings.

Ontologically and epistemologically, the NI framework assumes that “individual experiences can inform and give meaning to shared experiences and social reality” (Rosenberg, 2020). The issue of the individual experiences helped to make sense of the stories as they existed within the sociocultural and temporal contexts, which could be woven together to make sense of larger narratives. The larger narratives, while not generalizable, allowed for a degree of transferability, crystallization, and understanding and highlighted common threads between participants that have implications for research, theory, and practice. While a goal of this study

was to highlight these larger narratives and help bring meaning to the participants' stories, how individuals or groups interpret(ed) and enact(ed) their narratives can still vary.

The application of narratives can be used to shift stories, assumptions, or harmful experiences toward a future of hope on individual or collective levels. For example, "recounting personal experiences of queerphobia can provide anchor stories from which to restory [participant] or speculate toward new narratives of hope," and that these anchor stories "often intersect with other forms of oppression and sharing them, whether individually or collectively, allows queer individuals to reimagine and restory [participant] those oppressions" (Coleman, 2022, p. 607). How these stories are understood, interpreted, and enacted can be (re)claimed by both the individual and the collective.

(Re)telling Stories Through Narrative Inquiry

The stories that the participants told allowed for a deeper understanding of individual experiences while also highlighting common threads and stories that were told to (re)present experiences that occurred a part of the collective. The standpoint of the participant was important to consider as it is temporally, socially, and culturally locked and as the narratives produce grand themes. It was necessary to remember that not all narratives may be shared by the collective, and periodically individuals may experience or employ counternarratives or (re)storying (participant) strategies to describe their experiences. By thinking about, with, and through stories, it was the goal of this study to (re)tell the stories shared by participants by identifying the grand narrative or grand narratives described within, between, and across stories, while also discussing the ways that stories overlapped, were juxtaposed, contrasted each other, or contradicted each other (Ely, 2007; Rosenberg, 2020), and how those stories were shared throughout the research process based upon the research procedures.

Research Procedures

Selection of Participants

This study involved an additional five participants (in addition to data collected through the pilot study from two previous participants) who met inclusionary criteria relevant to addressing the research purpose and questions. The criteria set for this study was that participants must have (at the time of the study) been licensed and practicing K-12 public educators (classroom teachers, administrators, etc.) who self-identified as Queer (some identity outside of the normative cisgender/heterosexual framing that is part of the LGBTQ+ community), and were "out" about that identity openly (this meant that others knew about their identity and that it is not hidden; being "out" did not have to mean students are aware, but the participants were out to the degree that their families, friends, and even some coworkers knew about their nonnormative identity). Participants, at the onset of this study, were expected to reside and work within the Midwest, but upon recruitment, all participants resided and worked within the state of Kansas, which narrowed the scope of participants. Exclusionary criteria included anyone who did not fit the inclusionary criteria or that the researcher had a close, personal relationship with due to their status as a Queer K-12 public educator.

Recruitment of participants in the pilot study was done based on the researchers' professional connections with other Queer K-12 public educators. A couple of individuals were known to the researcher professionally and interviews were set up with them after going over the informed consent and the individual's agreement to participate. Recruitment of additional Queer K-12 public educators included the use of professional connections and networks to ask individuals I know if they are interested in participating, social media postings, emails, word-of-mouth, and other similar recruitment methods. After meeting to go over the study and informed

consent, participants were enrolled in the study upon signing the informed consent form.

Participants were able to be unenrolled in the study if they choose to opt out at any point in the process.

Due to the nature of this research, the standpoint of the researcher, and the narrative focus of this study, it was necessary to “gain access” to participants, their stories, and research “sites.” Gaining access can be a difficult and time consuming hurdle (Okumus et al., 2007), as there are often gatekeepers involved in how a researcher may enter a physical or nonphysical space (Bhattacharya, 2017). However, due to the researchers’ “in group” status as a Queer individual participating in Queer culture and spaces along with the “in group” status as a K-12 public educator actively working in the American public education system, there was a certain level of automatic trust, rapport, and access than non-Queer and/ or non-educator researchers. It was necessary to still “gain access” to the participants and their stories and I remained open to any additional work that may be asked of me to build rapport or give back to the community (Bhattacharya, 2017). There was no “site” needed to gain access to, as interviews were conducted in locations comfortable to participants, which included virtual locations (Zoom, etc.). The gatekeepers were the participants themselves.

Researcher’s Role

It is important to explicitly outline the role of the researcher in this process while also actively monitoring and reporting on subjectivities and standpoints as they pertain to the study. The researcher’s role in the study (in an oversimplified way) was to collect the stories shared by participants, analyze those stories, and weave them together to present findings and discuss implications of those findings. The researcher was an active participant in the acquisition of knowledge in order to develop an understanding of the stories the participants shared.

This role involved the “in group” status previously mentioned. Holding the intersectional identities/ roles being studied afforded particular insight that was applied to the meaning-making process and used to understand references, concepts, and terms that may not be understood by those outside of Queer or educator communities. This also allowed for insight into the development of the stories being told and an understanding where deeper explanations needed to occur. As the one who aimed to negotiate meaning and make sense of the data corpus, the researcher had an “insider understanding” of the phenomena at hand due to “in group” status.

The interviewer held an active role in the research process. Through the use of responsive interviewing techniques (H. J. Rubin & Rubin, 2011), rapport and trust were established with participants by connecting with their stories, asking questions, sharing relevant similarities or observations, and generally having conversations with participants. This approach allowed for the maintenance of a researcher’s stance and role, while also connecting with participants and facilitating interactions that developed trust and allowed for openness throughout the process. This allowed for deeper, more complete expressions of the stories told and thus deeper, more complete analysis of participants’ narratives.

Data Collection Methods

Data was collected in a variety of ways to develop the most complete understanding on the stories being told as possible. Interviews and conversations were used as the primary forms of data collection, with a focus on using responsive interview techniques, along with artifact review and photo elicitation within the interviews themselves. Because humans lead storied lives (Rosenberg, 2020), the interview approach, supplemented with artifact review and photo/ video elicitation, were appropriate to use to develop a more complete narrative.

Responsive Interviews

Interviews were utilized in this study in order to form the basic unit of analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017) that formed the narrative strands used to describe the experiences that the participants shared during the interviews. Open, honest, and real conversations with participants were the goal to make learning about and from their experiences possible. This was not a sterile, boring interview approach with monotone questions and cut-and-dry pacing, because qualitative interviewing requires researchers to develop rapport with participants and discussing a particular phenomenon or experiences that is/ are being studied (DeMarrais & Lapan, 2004). Because of the relational nature of narrative inquiry, it was necessary that I “develop[ed] and maintain[ed] a caring, respectful, reciprocal working relationship” with the participants (Shaw, 2017, p. 212). Because of the relational aspects and the sensitivity to interviews that is needed, a responsive interview style was adopted.

The researcher’s natural interview style was composed of a relational, conversational, casual, and flexible approach. This aligns with the H. J. Rubin & Rubin (2011) framework that allows for the researcher to engage with participants who “have knowledge of or experiences with the problem of interest” so that they can “learn to see the world from perspectives other than [my] own” (p. 3). Responsive interviewing involves “picking people to talk to who are knowledgeable, listening to what they have to say, and asking new questions based on the answers they provide” (p. 5) and may appear as an ordinary conversation, diverging in its goals, expectations, records, details noted, depth, nuances, and richness.

While interviewing Queer educators, as a Queer educator, questions of how much the interviewer could or should share with participants arose. In order to develop relationships, engage in reciprocity, and foster trust, the researcher was willing to be open during

conversations. Within the responsive interview framework, the researcher, at times, shared experiences and observations with the participants in order to create a stronger interview context and add depth to the conversations. This concept of “style” was important to note as it had an effect on the interview process and researcher subjectivities, which were continuously monitored and interrogated.

A semi-structured approach utilized a series of pre-determined questions to be utilized within the interview in an in-depth open interview style that allowed the researcher to “focus on digging deep into one’s experiences with a few key questions prepared in advance” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 127). However, there was a need for flexibility and responsiveness based upon the stories participants were telling, or lines of inquiry that appeared during the interview process. These questions and stories were expected to align with the relationship building needed for the responsive interview style and allowed for the discovery of narrative threads within and between participants’ stories.

Artifact Review

As part of the research process, participants were asked to submit photos of their classrooms or workspaces, while also being invited to submit other artifacts that they felt were relevant or that came up during our interview sessions that they were comfortable sharing. This artifact review allowed for the consideration of the stories that were told and how those played out in their classrooms. Some teachers set up their classrooms in ways that represent themselves and their interests. Teachers also, as Jackson (2007) found, were deliberate in how they set up their classroom appearance as it signals safety to Queer students or. It also allows for the use of signs and symbols present in the classroom to be examined to conduct an analysis of how the

classrooms were be designed, or which photos were deliberately chosen, to answer the research questions.

Photo Elicitation

As participants brought artifacts to the second or third interviews (photos of their classrooms or workspaces, in particular), an elicitation approach was utilized that allowed participants to share about the artifacts. The elicitation process created “a context where the participant [spoke] about [their] experiences elicited by some sort of external trigger” in order to generate conversations and develop meaning about their experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 52). It allowed participants another avenue to share their experiences that aided in the construction of the narratives that were told between participants.

Croghan et al. (2008) found that “combining verbal and visual forms of self-presentation allows individuals more scope for presenting complex, ambiguous and contradictory versions of the self” and that using this “verbal re-editing” approach “gives participants the chance to focus on process, on how things have come about... [and] therefore offers interviewees an opportunity to explain why choices have been made and thus allows them to elucidate their motives and values in the context of the constraints and choices available to them” (p. 355-356). This “photo-elicited interview” also allowed for interviewees “a chance verbally to improve an impression that may have been given and to construct the meanings they favour” (p. 355).

Data Management

Data was collected through interviews and the artifacts/ photos that participants choose to share. Interviews were recorded based upon the modality participants choose to use for the interviews. Interviews that were done via video chat were recorded using the chosen tool’s recording software. In person interviews were recorded using a phone voice memo recorder.

Recordings were made with password protected programs, and then uploaded to the approved management system and NVivo (Version 14), which was the data management and analysis software used for this study. Recordings were deleted from the original devices after being transferred to these programs. This includes recordings were transcribed using otter.ai, which is a transcription software that requires a password protected account. The transcriptions were uploaded to the management software following transcription verification. The approved management system and NVivo were the primary means to manage electronic versions of data and for analyzing the data. Artifacts/ photos were shared electronically (messaging platforms, email, etc.) and were also uploaded to the management system and NVivo.

Any paper or otherwise physical forms of data or interview information were uploaded to the approved management tools and then destroyed. Any forms of physical data or information that was not able to be stored electronically was stored in a locked box and was or will be destroyed within the timeframe set for this study. The utmost care has been given regarding the confidentiality of participants and their personal information.

Data Analysis

The data management software, NVivo, was the primary tool for data maintenance and analysis. Data analysis began the moment study methods were implemented through analyzing the conversation “on the fly” as interviews began. Interesting quotes or threads appeared and were written down during each interview, and even outside of interviews. This highlights the importance of writing analytic memos or journaling. The use of a field journal or memo process was critical here, though confidential and personal information remained protected. Saldaña (2021) describes the difference between analytic memos and field journals being that the field journals or notes serve as “the researcher’s written documentation of participant observation,

which may include the observer's personal and subjective responses to, and interpretations of, social action encountered" (p. 59). Some notes in a journal at times address analytic memos. As such, they were also uploaded to NVivo for analysis as part of the data corpus.

Analytic memos, including ideas, musings, questions, and a host of other "thought tangents" or observations can come to mind at any time, so an electronic journal was kept to note these ideas as they came up because, as Miles et al. (2020) notes, "when an idea strikes, stop whatever else you are doing and write the memo" (p. 90). The authors go on to state that it is not important to worry about prose or grammar, but to include all musings, "even the fuzzy and foggy ones." They state that is important to "give yourself the freedom to think" and not to "self-sensor" (p. 90). The thoughts, wonderings, musings, questions, feelings, "light bulbs," and observations all demonstrated the application of "good thinking" skills applied to the data analysis process, because "good research is not about good methods as much as it is about good thinking" (Stake, 1995, p. 19).

NVivo is embedded with coding and analysis tools, which is why it was chosen as the data management and analysis software for this study. The interviews for the pilot study were previously coded and analyzed, but they were re-coded and re-analyzed alongside the data from the additional participants, which allowed for a "fresh look" at the stories that were shared. An inductive approach was utilized for meaning making by "working up from the data" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 150) to identify codes, categories, and themes through various coding cycles (Saldaña, 2021) alongside the identification of narrative strands within, between, and across stories (Rosenberg, 2020) that included the overlapping, juxtaposed, and contradicting experiences shared by participants to make sense of what could be learned from their experiences

as they were communicated through their stories and (re)presented as part of the findings and implications sections of this dissertation (Ely, 2007).

Various codes were produced throughout the process using a variety of coding tools and approaches. Example categories and sub-categories are described in Table 1 with segments of the data that were coded within that code or category.

Table 1: Themes, Categories, Sub-Categories, and Data Segments Used During Analysis

Theme	Category	Sub-Category	Data Segment Samples
Solidarity	Empathy & Awareness	Feeling Different	“The queerness as an educator, it just makes me more empathetic to those who might feel different.” “The awareness of marginalized, potentially marginalized kids I know comes from that [Queerness], at least in part.”
		Being Bullied	“I really felt like I was defending that boy and the- my second grade self too” “When I was like, pushed into a locker.”
	Relationships with Students	-	“I’m just I’m a big relationship guy.” “I almost wonder if that would be helpful for the student just to connect with a teacher a little bit more, or have one in the past.”
	Signs & Symbols	Rainbows & Signage	“Everything shall be rainbows.” “I also don’t, you know, fly flags in my room or anything.” “The more normalizing of sharing pronouns.”
		Coming Out/ Being Out	“He used me as a kind of an example as she has a normal life. I can be normal, it’ll be okay.”
		Curriculum & Books	“Being outside of the binary has influenced the way I teach that, that it’s not either, or, it can be all of them all at once.”

			“We talked about how you know, families, our mommies and daddies and families are also mommies and mommies and daddies and daddies, grandmas, and grandpas.”
Extra Work	Doing Extra Mental Calculations	Because of Fear	“I am not naive to the fact that a parent or a guardian could pull their kid from my class if they knew.”
	Acting as a Spokesperson	-	“I become like the spokesperson for it, right? Because I am one of two openly queer teachers at our school and I'm the only one that's full time.” “That kind of spokesperson type of approach where people will say, Oh, you must have knowledge because you're part of this group.”
	Dealing with Homophobia & Intolerance	From Stakeholders	“And he goes, oh, he is a faggot.” “Then he yelled at me for half an hour and then left and then went down to the office and yelled at the principal for probably half an hour”
		From Students	“He found out somehow at the high school and he wouldn't come to my class.”
		From Communities	(Reading from a social media post) “Yesterday, I marched with my boyfriend, holding hands the entire way. There were moments I felt safe. People saying you guys are beautiful, keep doing what you're doing. Then I felt unsafe. Those awkward stares for too long, people scratching their heads, people moving away. I felt, as a black man first, my obligation was to stand with my people continue to walk down the enemy lines, then I thought these people I'm marching with are the same ones killing my second community. The lives of our gay and trans brothers and sisters matter as well. We must stand

			together as one. It breaks my heart to not have a sense of where I belong in the world. And what community will really stand by us." "And they found out about it, and they kind of cut me out. And so that really messed me up.
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The data analysis process was an ongoing, holistic, multiperspective process which utilized multiple coding cycles and methods to examine the data. The inductive approach, which started with the data and built-up findings from the stories told by participants, allowed for the data to "speak for itself" and for findings to be gleaned from that data without looking for predetermined answers, which also served as a mean to increase the rigor and credibility of this study. This was completed through multiple exposures to the data, the use of analytic memos and journals, and through various cycles of coding.

Saldaña (2021) describes two cycles of coding, which each use distinctive coding methods. He also notes that "data are not coded – they're *recoded*" (emphasis in original) and because of the iterative, nonlinear nature of coding, refers to these as cycles. The first cycle includes methods described as "those processes that happen during the initial coding of data" and includes subcategories of "grammatical, elemental, affective literary and language, exploratory, procedural, and theming the data" (p. 88). The second cycle includes methods that "require such analytic skills as classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting, conceptualizing, and theory building" (p. 89).

The holistic, multiperspective approach that was used with data analysis centered on the use of eclectic coding, which involves employing "a select and compatible combination of two or more first cycle coding methods" (p. 223). This approach allowed for a variety of methods to be implemented to examine the data from various viewpoints to order to best understand the

stories and narratives shared. Within the eclectic approach, the use of a priori methods was implemented to look for specific segments of the narratives that answer the research questions explicitly, by identifying codes and/ or categories that relate specifically to the research questions in a “question and answer” format. This also included codes that were developed during the pilot study used to inform this dissertation. In addition, in vivo coding methods were applied, referring to a code that was “a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record” (p. 137). This approach helps the researcher to stay “grounded in the participants voice” (p. 100).

Within the first cycle, the use of emotions coding and values coding was also embedded. Emotions coding allowed for the exploration and labeling of the emotions described or demonstrated by the participants and helped to “provide deep insight into the participants’ perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions” (p. 160). The number of words that can be used to describe emotions are vast, and so these were only be applied through participants narratives and not as a priori codes. Values coding considers the values, attitudes, and beliefs, which will represent the worldviews of the participants. The key components of values in this approach included “the importance we attribute to ourselves, another person, thing, or idea... the principles, moral codes, and situational norms people live by,” an attitude included “the way we think and feel about ourselves, another person, thing, or idea,” and a belief included “part of a system that includes our values and attitudes, plus our personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, assumptions, biases, prejudices, morals, and other interpretive perceptions of the social world” (p. 168). Because of the focus on participants’ identities and stories, along with how those identities and experiences impacted them, the focus on emotions and values was beneficial for making sense of the stories and identifying commonalities between and through the different

narratives.

The transition to second cycle approaches includes reorganizing and reanalyzing the data. The second cycle approaches helped to “develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from [the] array of first cycle codes” (p. 297). This transition was used to develop a deeper understanding of the data and work to identify categories, themes, concepts, and assertions/ theories.

Within the second cycle of coding, code mapping was used to categorize the initial codes found during the first cycle into several possible categories, which were then grouped into larger categories. This formed a traditional thematic approach to the data, which produced larger categories and themes that helped to interpret the data. This second cycle afforded the opportunity to pull the various aspects and narrative threads together to make sense of the range of data.

Finally, a variety of additional strategies were implemented that the researcher has found assist with data analysis and interpretation. In the same vein that “good research is not about good methods as much as it is about good thinking” (Stake, 1995, p. 19) is applied, taking time to get up, walk, and move while considering or listening to the data was a useful tool for the analysis that helped provide insight into the data. This is also supported by research that walking boosts creativity (Oppezzo, 2018; Oppezzo & Schwartz, 2014). In addition to this, taking time to sit down, draw pictures, journal, write about, read and re-read, etc. also assisted with data analysis and the “good thinking” needed to produce good research. The variety of methods allowed for various ways to (re)experience the data and foster creative thinking to see connections and make sense of the stories that are being told, which ultimately impacted the findings and how those were communicated to readers.

The goal of this data analysis process was to make the lived experiences and interpretations easier to understand by those who are not situated in a way to fully understand the experiences that uniquely affect Queer educators, who are often viewed as the “other” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). By systematically applying a variety of coding methods, revising the data and considering a variety of perspectives, taking notes along the way, and developing a deep understanding of the data, grand narrative or narratives were identified from the stories that were shared and were (re)constructed in analysis as parts of each person’s stories are woven together by their narrative strands (Rosenberg, 2020).

Research Timeline

Interviews for the pilot study were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed during the Fall 2021 semester as part of the researcher’s graduate coursework. In addition to this, as part of the doctoral program’s preliminary exams, data continued to be analyzed and presented the form of a pilot study, which was presented to my dissertation at the beginning of the Fall 2022 term. The initial data set continued to be utilized as part of this dissertation study.

This study was proposed to the dissertation committee and received IRB approval in March 2023. For the remainder of that academic term, participants were identified and interviewed, and preliminary data analysis began. The data continued to be analyzed and findings were compiled and presented during the summer 2023 term.

Quality Qualitative Research

Qualitative methodologies face regular critiques, but the standards of quality qualitative research have become well-established within qualitative communities such as maintaining strong rigor, credibility, coherence, and trustworthiness, to name a few of these standards. While there are limitations that have been explored in the last three chapters, that does not discredit the

standards the researcher is held to, and the quality of research produced. This only highlights that the research, like every other study, has its own limitations and contexts. The rest of Chapter Three details how quality research practices and standards were maintained within this study, and how potential concerns, shortcomings, or limitations of qualitative research were addressed.

Tracy's "Big Tent" Criteria

One of the primary methods of evaluating qualitative research for its quality is through criteria described by Tracy (2010). Tracy argues that "high quality qualitative methodological research is marked by (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence" (p. 839). This section aims to discuss subjectivities, power at play in the context of the study, and standpoint factors that must be considered as part of evaluating the research process and outcomes. Many of these were also discussed in this dissertation's preface.

Worthy Topic

According to Tracy (2010), a worthy topic involves research that is "relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative." The worthy topics can "grow from timely societal or personal events... [and] current political climates or contemporary controversies" (p. 840). These studies are interesting and can point out surprises and challenge "common-sense assumptions and practices" (p. 841).

This study meets the worthy topic criteria because of several factors described in Chapters One, Two, and Three. This study is deeply personal to me because as a stakeholder in the acquisition of knowledge, and a member of both Queer and public K-12 educator communities, an accurate representation of these communities and the common narrative threads that bind us together was the goal, while also representing the findings within the particular

sociocultural context in which this study occurred, including legislation such as the “Don’t Say Gay” bills, book banning movements, attempts to overturn the federal protections of gay marriage, and even within the identified self-replicating sociocultural systems. The experiences of Queer educators have been documented, but the rapidly changing social, cultural, and political climates indicate a need for ongoing, updated (re)presentations of Queer experiences and narratives.

Rich Rigor

Tracy (2010) describes rich rigor as a rich complexity of abundance through a variety of theoretical constructs, data sources, contexts, and samples. A researcher “with a head full of theories, and a case full of abundant data, is best prepared to see nuance and complexity” and when they meet the criteria of rigor, they are “better equipped to make smart choices about samples and contexts that are appropriate or well poised to study specific issues” (p. 841).

The theoretical constructs proposed in Chapter Two allow for a range of perspectives and considerations when considering the data and the larger context within which it is situated. The merging of QT and ST into QST brings unique vantage points to the research process. Additionally, the theoretical model of Queer educator identity development within the larger sociopolitical climate that occurs within a self-replicating system (Figure 13) provides additional perspectives through which to consider the data and improve rigor.

This chapter also detailed the data collection and analysis procedures that were employed in this study. Tracy also highlights that “rigor is also judged by the care and practice of data collection and analysis procedures,” which is communicated throughout this study. The primary data source is through the interviews with participants. Rigor, in this case, can be considered in reference to the number and length of interviews, the appropriate and breadth of the sample, the

questions asked, the detail of the transcription, the practice of ensuring transcription accuracy, and the number of pages of the interview transcripts (Tracy, 2010). As was previously detailed, three interviews with each participant, and pre-determined interview questions allowed for consistency in questioning and develop a focus on the types of stories that were relevant to the research questions.

Tracy argues that “rigorous data analysis may be achieved through providing the reader with an explanation about the process by which the raw data are transformed and organized into the research report... [and] is marked by transparency regarding the process of sorting, choosing, and organizing the data” (p. 841). The multiple approaches to data analysis, how data was organized, and what that process looked like was detailed as.

In addition to the rigorous data collection and analysis methods, the use of bracketing within the preface and throughout this dissertation also increases the rigor of the project (Tufford & Newman, 2012). By providing an explicit expression of the subjectivities and biases at play, and the continued strategies used to monitor and address those, the rigor of this study is improved through reflexivity and reflection.

Additionally, rigor was increased between the pilot study used to inform this study, and the full study by examining the current narratives with more depth based upon how previous interviews went along with an increased sample size. While rigor does not inherently mean “more,” the use of “more” in this sense allowed for the identification of additional narrative strands between and across stories.

Sincerity

Tracy argues that sincerity can be achieved through self-reflexivity about subjective values and biases, vulnerabilities, and honesty and transparency about the motivations, methods,

and challenges. The authenticity and genuineness presented as part of sincerity aims to communicate clearly with the readers the process, motivations, concerns, personal connections, and celebrations as a researcher who aims to contribute additional scientific knowledge about the subject being studied to the academy.

In order to maintain sincerity, researcher motivations, positionality, subjectivity, and relationship to the phenomenon have been described throughout this work. These are outlined periodically throughout the study, through the researchers' use of bracketing in the preface, the researchers' subjectivity statement in Chapter One, the researchers' personal connections throughout Chapter Two, and the researchers' expectations, approaches, and preferences in Chapter Three.

Credibility

Tracy describes credibility as “the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research finding,” which is “achieved through practices including thick description, triangulation or crystallization, and multivocality and partiality” (p. 842-843). Thick description is the use of an “in-depth illustration” that explains the “culturally situated meanings” with “abundant concrete detail” (p. 843). The descriptions provided in this research are plentiful, thorough, concrete, and employ the “show, don’t tell” method of showing how the data connects with and supports the findings instead of just telling readers what the data says. A robust description supports the credibility of a study.

Additionally, the use of triangulation or crystallization was employed to showcase the credibility of a study. Triangulation “assumes that two or more sources of data, theoretical frameworks, types of data collected, or researchers converge on the same conclusion, then the conclusion is more credible” and tends to assume a fixed reality. While NI aims to uncover how

narratives are interconnected between participants with common threads, the theoretical frameworks employed cannot allow for a singular truth, or fixed reality to be argued. Instead, the use of crystallization may be more appropriate. This “encourages researchers to gather multiple types of data and employ various methods, multiple researchers, and numerous theoretical frameworks” with the goal of opening up “a more complex, in-depth, and still thoroughly partial, understanding of the issue” instead of providing researchers with “a more valid singular truth” (p. 843).

Credibility of qualitative studies can be enhanced with the use of multivocal methods, including the “multiple and varied voices in the qualitative report and analysis” (p. 844). The interview style that was described as part of the methods of this study highlights the level of collaboration and relationship brought to the “field” by emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the participants as subjects, and implementing stylistic approaches to build the participant-researcher relationship and collaboration. The inclusion of participants in the findings, discussions, and implications portions of this study allowed for “sharing and dialoguing with participants about the study’s findings, and providing opportunities for questions, critique, feedback, affirmation, and even collaboration” and has been built into the research process.

In order to build credibility in this study, descriptive tools were employed that explained the context, experiences, verbal, and nonverbal cues that communicated findings relevant to the research questions through showing about the findings with the data instead of telling about the findings. A variety of approaches, frameworks, viewpoints, methods were applied with the aim of uncovering deep and meaningful narrative threads that helped to make sense of the experiences and outcomes of Queer educators.

Resonance

The concept of resonance, according to Tracy, refers to the researcher's ability to "meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience" through "practices that will promote empathy, identification, and reverberation of the research by readers who have no direct experience with the topic discussed" (p. 844). Resonance brings meaning to the data and findings through connection and empathy. The aesthetic approach to resonance is achieved through the use of visuals that communicate findings and represent ideas, while providing the reader with an engaging experience that is meaningful to them and is presented in ways that intentionally avoid boredom.

Resonance is also achieved "through a study's potential to be valuable across a variety of contexts or situations—practices that have been called generalizability or transferability" (p. 844). As previously articulated, this qualitative study did not aim to provide generalizable results, but instead aimed to identify narrative threads that were shared between participants and work together to compose a grand narrative or grand narratives. This allowed for transferability to take place. In their study on a Queer middle school teachers' narrative, Coker & Cain (2018) described how they substitute generalizability with transferability:

Though lack of generalizability may be seen as a limitation, it was not our intention to be generalizable. Instead, we argue that Jonathan's story has transferability. His experiences are relatively common throughout available literature, but his particular story lends depth and personalization to better researchers' understanding of queer middle school teacher experiences (p. 7).

Transferability applies direct testimony, rich description, and accessible and invitational writing to the rich, grand narratives, and can help readers connect with the participants (Tracy, 2010).

The goals of resonance and with NI are not to “generalize cases,” but instead “to generalize within them” (p. 844).

Significant Contribution

Tracy explains that significance considers whether the contribution to the body of knowledge extends knowledge, guides practice, generates ongoing research, liberates or empowers, contributes to our understanding of social life, brings clarity to areas of confusion, makes visible that which was previously made invisible or hidden, and generally produce insight and a deeper understanding of a phenomena. Significance had previously been an area of concern regarding this study, where questions arose regarding if the stories told by participants would produce any new knowledge, or only confirm existing knowledge. However, with the understanding of how knowledge can be extended in the present sociocultural context, how practice may be influenced by this study’s findings, how the findings could liberate or empower Queer staff, and how making Queer educators’ stories visible that were previously made to be hidden, there were many ways in which this study could be significant.

Additionally, theoretical significance is another area that may be highlighted in this research. This research has intellectual implications for the academy, which can extend, build, and critique disciplinary knowledge. The examination of the existing theory or theories as they were applied to the current study/ contexts provides a lens to view not only new and different theories in the current context, but to consider existing theories or concepts in the current context.

Chapter Two described two theoretical concepts that drive this study and have built on previous foundations. The first of which was the cyclical model of identity formation and development within specific sociocultural/ temporal contexts, which (re)produces cultural norms,

values, and practices and influences an individual's development throughout their lifetime. The second of which was the explicit naming of QST and building from the work that scholars have described previously. While it is possible that many have likely used these theories in their approaches and their arguments, finding instances of it being named in this way and conceptualized in depth proved difficult.

Ethical

The ethical considerations of the implementation of a study must be considered and highlighted on an ongoing basis. The pilot study used to inform this dissertation study received IRB approval through the university, and additional IRB approval was obtained for the research needed involving the additional participants. The IRB application explored the ethical concerns of conducting research and required the researcher to maintain necessary trainings to engage in research as part of the university.

Tracy explains that ethical research can be broken down into four categories – procedural (categorical), situational, relational, and exiting ethics. Procedural ethics include the completion of the IRB process, processes that were implemented to protect confidentiality and subject information, required trainings that must be completed, and the informed consent process. This includes that “research participants have a right to know the nature and potential consequences of the research—and understand that their participation is voluntary” (p. 847). The procedural ethics considerations have been described in depth previously in this chapter.

Situational ethics considers the differing circumstances and requires the repeated, consistent interrogation of and reflection on methods, critiques, and decisions. Situational ethics consider the risk/ benefits analysis and how those may outweigh one another. Tracy acknowledges that “certainly, there are no easy answers,” but states that we must “constantly

reflect on our methods and the data worth exposing” (p. 847). Each situation contains its own particularities, and ethical decisions must be made based upon those influences. Describing situational ethics is more difficult at the onset of a study, without situations that needed to be considered and negotiated having not yet occurred. Within this study, one ethical situation occurred where a participant brought their spouse along to the interview for comfort meeting a new person. The researcher had to determine, with the help of the advisor, if the data shared by the spouse could be used, if the IRB should be amended, etc. It was ultimately determined that the data should not be used (and should be deleted), and appropriate actions were taken in response to this decision.

Relational ethics describes how a researcher must be “mindful of their character and consequences on others” through engaging in “reciprocity with participants” and avoiding “co-opting” others just to “get a great story” (p. 847). As a researcher in relationship with the subjects (and particularly, in a relationship where participants may share vulnerable information with the researcher, like in this study), the researcher must always respect others, and include participants in defining the rules of participating in the research. The researcher-subject communication is hallmarked by promise keeping, positive relationships, caring, collaboration, connectedness, compassion, and nurturing, among other factors. The relational ethics align with the responsive interview style described previously in this chapter and were maintained through professionalism, tact, poise, and care in reporting.

Finally, exiting ethics considers how the researchers share and re(present) the findings of the study. Researchers recognize that they “never have full control over how their work will read, be understood, and used,” but that they can be careful in considering how to best “present the research so as to avoid unjust or unintended consequences” (p. 847). Researchers can

acknowledge how their research may be misread, misinterpreted, or manipulated in attempts to avoid unjust or unintended consequences for participants, and intentionally structure their reporting in ways that minimize risk of harm. Teachers in public education experience scrutiny due to the “public” opinion that some stakeholders hold about Queer educators, which was explored in Chapter One and Chapter Two. Because of this, vigilance and intentionality were present in how narratives were structured to accurately communicate findings, with sensitivity to the ways that some may manipulate or weaponize the participants’ stories.

Meaningful Coherence

Tracy’s final criteria of quality qualitative research is that of meaningful coherence.

Tracy states that meaningfully coherent studies achieve the following:

(a) achieve their stated purpose; (b) accomplish what they espouse to be about; (c) use methods and representation practices that partner well with espoused theories and paradigms; and (d) attentively interconnect literature reviewed with research foci, methods, and findings (p. 848).

The research, design, data collection, data analysis, theoretical framework, research purpose, research questions, and goals must “eloquently interconnect,” and “the style of representation employed [must also align] with the goals of the project.”

Coherence indicates that the various aspects of the study are not only interconnected eloquently, but that they “hang together well.” The literature review ties to the findings, the findings tie to the research questions, the conclusions tied to implications, and the literature is tied to the data presented. The study “makes sense” and “flows.”

Subjectivity, Power, and Standpoint

In an ongoing effort to clearly describe subjectivities at play within the research process, This has been made explicit in this dissertation's preface, in Chapter One (["Researcher's Stance"](#)), through Chapter Two, and in Chapter Three (["Researcher's Role"](#)). Embedded in the management, negotiation, listening, and (re)telling of narratives is the need for researchers to "remain vigilantly aware of power issues" and monitor "the balance of voices, competing political agendas, and the social hierarchies enveloping the process" (Johnson-Bailey, 2004, p. 138). Being privileged to listen to the stories, experiences, and narratives of the participants is a great honor, and one that must be handled with the utmost care, dignity, and respect. While listening to these stories, being attuned to the various power dynamics, the voices, agendas, and structures that are omnipresent helps to maintain care, dignity, and respect with participants and the larger communities.

The researcher's standpoint, and the standpoint of the participants, influenced the narrative strands and the development of a grand narrative or grand narratives as the stories became connected. The researcher was tasked with connecting these stories, which were told by people who, to my knowledge, have never met, yet are strangely connected. The reconciliation of power and positionality "seems impossible to accomplish with any degree of finality" (Johnson-Bailey, 2004, p. 137), yet the interplay of power and positionality continues to be defined, described, detailed, and established throughout this study to maintain the rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, ethics, and coherence needed to produce a quality qualitative study

Chapter Three Summary

This chapter provided a brief overview of the research purpose and questions as they were outlined in Chapter One, and then summarized the use of a pilot study to inform the

dissertation study, along with changes made between the two studies that were used to improve the dissertation study. It then described the use of narrative inquiry to frame the study as the methodology in order to think about and with stories through the experiences as told by participants while searching for common narrative threads and themes that were shared by participants to develop grand narratives that answer the research questions. It described the research procedures regarding participants, methods, data management and analysis, and the research timeline. This chapter concluded by utilizing Tracy's "Big Tent" criteria to ensure that the research conducted is quality qualitative research and demonstrated the safeguards and steps have been taken to conduct this research responsibly and effectively.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Introduction

This study explored the experiences of Kansas K-12 public educators who self-identify as Queer prior to, leading up to, and in their roles as Queer educators and aimed to understand how those experiences informed practice and professional interactions. It was guided by the following research questions:

- **Research Question 1:** How do Queer educator participants describe their experiences prior to, leading up to, and as Queer educators? (RQ1)
- **Research Question 2:** How do Queer educator experiences and identities impact their practices? (RQ2)
- **Research Question 3:** How do participants describe the ways their Queer identities influence their professional interactions? (RQ3)

This study is framed by a Queer Standpoint Theory perspective and is methodologically built around Narrative inquiry. It utilized semi-structured interviews with seven different participants, along with artifact review and photo elicitation, in order to develop a data corpus that would then be analyzed using a variety of methods. Through these processes, the various codes, categories, and themes, along with the general findings of this study, were developed and are described within this chapter.

Participant Information

Seven educators across the state of Kansas participated in the interviews for this study. Some interviews were conducted at a local coffee shop at the request of participants. The rest of the interviews were conducted via Zoom. In person interviews were audio recorded, and virtual interviews were audio and video recorded. Six of the participants completed all three interviews

and one participant completed two of the three interviews. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, except for the researcher, who is identified by his given name. Identifying information was mostly provided by the participants, but additional factors, such as the school size, district size, and community type were obtained through the Kansas State Department of Education report card (KSDE, 2023) and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023). Student enrollment numbers were rounded to the nearest tens place to assist with protecting the confidentiality of participants. Table 2 provides an overview of the participants of this study and [Appendix D -](#) provides an overview of the state of Kansas and the various community types that could be represented.

Table 2: Study Participant Information Overview

Name	Seth Dills	Dani White	Diana Buckley	Dillan Bender	Eric Banks	Gloria Taylor	Jayden Harris	Will Grace
Pronouns	He/ They	She/ Her	She/ They	He/ Him	He/ Him	She/ Her	He/ Him	He/ Him
Gender	Queer	Cis Female	Apathetic	Cis Male	Cis Male	Cis Female	Cis Male	Cis Male
Sexuality	Queer	Lesbian	Queer/ Bisexual	Gay	Gay	Bisexual	Gay	Gay
Race	White	White	White	White	White	White	Black	White
Age	Late 20s	Mid 30s	Mid 40s	Late 20s	Late 20s	Late 50s	Late 20s	Late 30s
Years Teaching	5	9	19 Public 2 Private	5	1	35	4	16 Teaching 1 Coaching
Current Role	MS SPED (Resource)	K-5 "Special"	MS Sci.	MS Sci.	MS SPED (Resource)	MS Math	2 nd Grade	Instructional Coach
Previous Role(s)	MS SPED (ED Prog.)	2 nd Grade	MS Math Dir. Of Learning	3 rd Grade 4 th Grade K-6 Sci.	N/A	At-Risk HS Alg. 1	Pre-K 1 st Grade	Kindergarten
District Size	6A	6A	4A	3A	5A	2A	5A	6A
School Type/ Size	6 th -8 th 730 Students	K-5 th 390 Students	6 th -8 th 350 Students	6 th -8 th 240 Students	7 th -8 th 790 Students	PreK-8 th 300 Students	PreK-5 th 260 Students	As Coach: N/A – Multiple Schools As Teacher: PreK-5 th – 610 Students
Community Type	Small City	Small City	Fringe Town (Near Small City)	Rural	Midsized City/ Suburban	Rural	Midsized City/ Suburban	Small Town
Notes	The PhD Candidate Acting as Researcher/ Facilitator		Prefers to go by Buckley			Retired After Last School Year		

Approach to Data (Re)Presentation

Two approaches have been taken for the (re)presentation of the data. The first is a traditional model of the themes, categories, and subcategories produced through analysis. This is also briefly described in the following section in order to provide an overview of these concepts prior to the second approach to (re)presenting the data, which is through the use of a creative nonfiction narrative. The narrative provides an engaging and thorough review of the data, themes, and categories following the brief overview and traditional (re)presentation of the data.

Brief Findings and Traditional Data (Re)Presentation

The participants stories were transcribed, coded, and analyzed in order to identify overarching themes, narrative threads, conflicts between narratives, and narrative juxtapositions. The analysis identified two key themes that are influenced by Queer educator identities and experiences. Those themes are solidarity and extra work. The categories that make up these themes are depicted in Figure 14, which includes a representation of how the categories are connected to the themes. The themes, categories, and sub-categories are briefly organized by the research questions in Figure 15, though it is worth noting that the model organized by research question does not represent the interconnectedness of the various categories.

When compared to the overarching theme in the (unpublished) pilot study that was used to inform this dissertation project, which consisted of data from two of the seven total participants, two key differences should be noted. The pilot study produced a theme of “solidarity through understanding of self” and explored the various connections between contextual influences, experiences, understanding of self, changes in self, and educator practices. While solidarity continues to be a theme in this study, an additional theme of extra work surfaced, and both themes are influenced by Queer educator identities and practices.

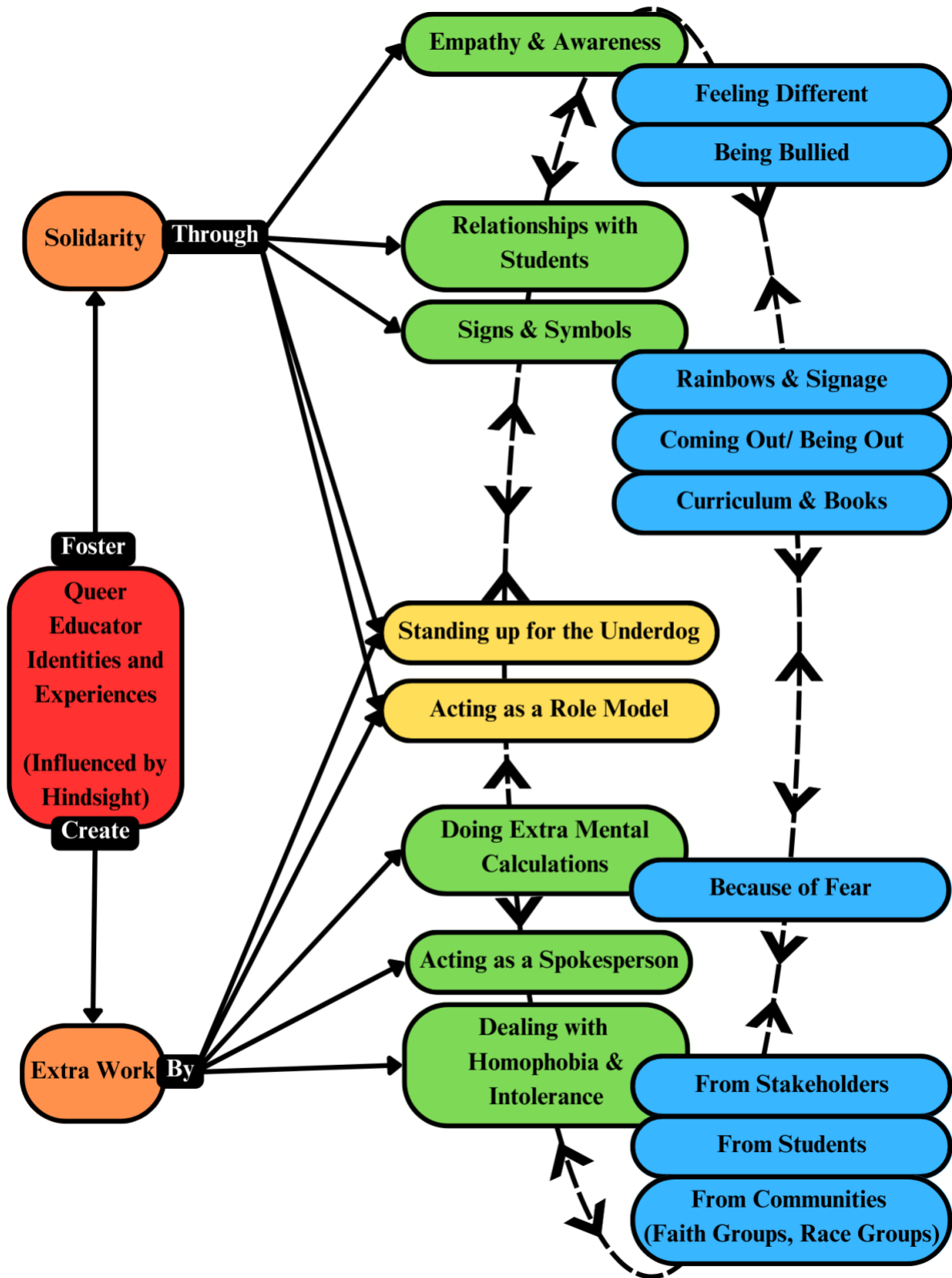


Figure 14: Traditional Representation of this Study's Themes and Categories

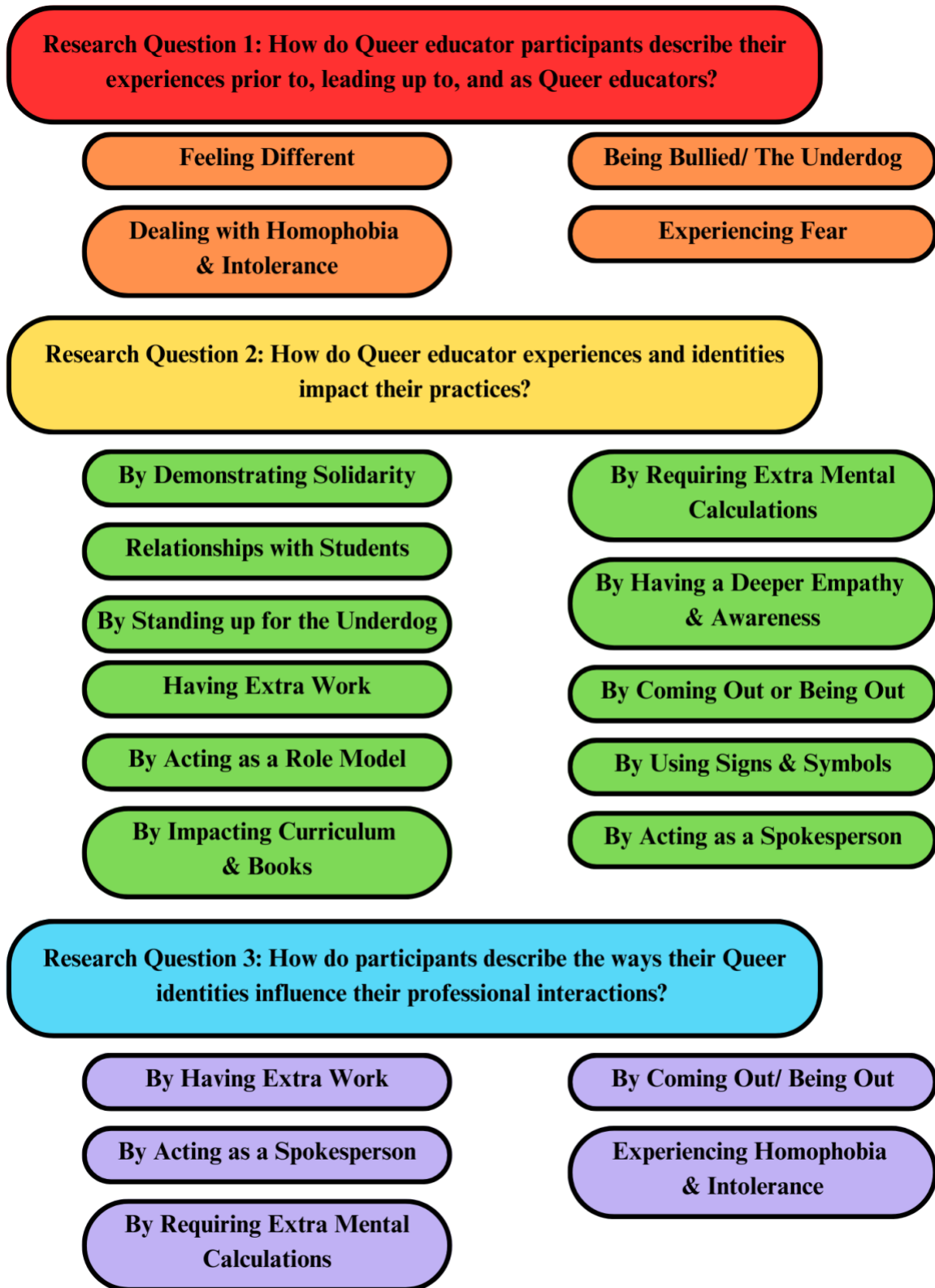


Figure 15: Representation of this Study's Themes and Categories, Organized by RQs

Queer educator identities and experiences foster solidarity through five key categories: empathy and awareness, relationships with students, signs and symbols, standing up for the underdog, and acting as a role model. This is to say that participants demonstrate solidarity through actions associated with these categories. In addition to this, participant identities and experiences create extra work, which is demonstrated by five key actions, which compose the additional categories of standing up for the underdog, acting as a role model, doing extra mental calculations, acting as a spokesperson, and dealing with homophobia and intolerance. Queer educators demonstrate solidarity through and do extra work by standing up for the underdog and acting as a role model, which are categories that fall under both themes.

(Re)Presentation of Findings Through Creative Nonfiction

The findings are (re)presented through the development of a creative nonfiction (CNF) narrative. My interest in this style was first inspired by Mayo (2020), who utilized the interviews conducted in order to create a conversation between aspiring teachers who are Queer and practicing teachers who are also Queer. Where Mayo had decided from the onset of the study that he would be using the interviews to formulate a conversation, this was not something that was decided upon from the onset of this dissertation, but rather came up while interviewing, transcribing, and coding the interview data.

As the narrative threads were coming together during analysis, a form was sought out that would allow for the participants to “speak” to each other, even though they had never, and likely would never, meet. I hoped to find a way to put their stories together, through some form of conversation, that would help to demonstrate the various codes, categories, and themes as they developed, but knew that there would need to be some level of creativity or fiction to accomplish

this. This approach was a way to highlight the narrative similarities, differences, contradictions, and variations within the narrative inquiry framework.

In searching for information about this approach, the ethnotheatre form of (re)presentation described by Saldaña (2011) was considered. This uses the data to produce a script or performance text, which is “solidly rooted in nonfictional, researched reality – not realism, but reality” (p. 14). This enmeshment of ethnography and theatre “employs the traditional craft and artistic techniques of theatre or media production to mount for an audience a live or mediated performance event of research participants’ experiences and/ or the researcher’s interpretations of data” (p. 12). However, the stories being told during interviews did not seem to lend themselves well to a theatrical approach, and instead needed a conversational or narrative-focused approach. Additional searching revealed the existence of the CNF genre.

The CNF genre “is focused on story, meaning it has a narrative plot with an inciting moment, rising action, climax and denouement, just like fiction” (Purdue Owl, 2023). However, the nonfiction component relies on the story being based in truth, ensuring that stories actually happened, at least from the perspective that they were shared or observed. Since the narrative is focused on reality, “it relies on research to render events as accurately as possible.” However, it should be noted that while the writer “will certainly use imagination and craft to relay what has happened and tell a story... the story must be true.”

This is the form that was used to represent the findings of this study, which are rooted in the interview data. This approach was inspired by Mayo and Saldaña and then incorporated a wealth of information and standards from CNF scholars (Caulley, 2008; Cheney, 2001; Gullion & Williams, 2019; Gutkind, 2005; Ligon et al., 2009; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018). There are

different approaches and nuances that could be utilized, so before sharing the narrative, it is necessary to make explicit the care and approach that was taken when creating this product.

One reason for this approach is to create an engaging product to share the qualitative findings. Some scholars have openly discussed how it can be difficult to read or engage with qualitative work, due to finding traditional research reports boring (Caulley, 2008; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018). Qualitative researchers hold unique positionality where they collect people's stories "and then honor those stories through our writing" (Gullion & Williams, 2019, p. 334), and the goal is for people to reach and access those writings. To create a more rhizomatic product, and to break the mold of traditional writing, a creative writing approach was used to increase accessibility to the content of this study.

In addition to increasing accessibility and opportunities for readers to connect with these participants and their stories, the writing itself is an avenue for analysis. As the story came together through interviews, coding, and ongoing analysis, it was also shaped through the writing itself. Richardson and St. Pierre (2018) note that "a great part of [this] inquiry is accomplished in the writing because... writing is thinking, writing is analysis, writing is indeed a seductive and tangled method of discovery" (p. 1423)

The nature of CNF points toward certain truths or realities. The use of the word creative can seem counterintuitive to this position, but in fact, CNF "is deeply committed to the truth" (Caulley, 2008, p. 426), as Cheney (2001) describes:

Creative nonfiction tells a story using facts but uses many of the techniques of fiction for its compelling qualities and emotional vibrancy... it delivers facts in ways that move the reader toward a deeper understanding of a topic. Creative nonfiction requires the skills of the storyteller and the research ability of the conscientious reporter. [The writers] must

not only understand the facts and report them using quotes... they must also see beyond them to discover their underlying meaning, and they must dramatize that meaning in an interesting, evocative, informative way (p. 1).

The use of direct quotes as the foundation of the CNF story is critical in highlighting the truths shared during data collection. CNF writers “use the spoken word in the form as people communicate in everyday life” (Caulley, 2008, p. 435), or otherwise uses “captured conversation,” to form CNF dialogue (Cheney, 2001, p. 93). This approach “enhances action and characterization [of characters, and] is a most effective technique for involving readers, making them feel as though they are right there.” It allows for the participants, experiences, and stories to be highlighted as they are, without altering their nature.

Lee Gutkind, who is often referred to as the godfather of creative nonfiction (Gutkind, 2006, 2012), highlights several critical components of utilizing this genre, while recognizing that stylistic and content questions “have a lot to do with a writer’s ethical and moral boundaries and, most importantly, how hard writers are willing to work to achieve accuracy and credibility in their narratives” (Gutkind, 2006, p. 8). In an effort to increase transparency about these boundaries. “The Five R’s,” which Gutkind describes as essential elements of CNF are highlighted along with the additional boundaries and approaches that were taken by the author. These five elements are real life, reflection, research, reading, and ‘riting.

Real life refers to the lived experiences and observations that take place to create the narrative. It can include the immersion of the writer into the experiences of others, and it can also include the writer’s personal experiences. These writings are based on real life events and experiences, but many have “also contained personal messages from writer to reader, which gave them extra meaning” (Gutkind, 2006, p. 10). The real life experiences are described by

participants, using their words and perspectives to communicate those, while also highlighting my experiences and perspectives in the form of subjectivity statements.

Gutkind describes the use of reflection to note that “a writer’s feelings and responses about a subject are permitted and encouraged [, but] essays can’t just be personal opinion; writers have to reach out to readers in a number of different and compelling ways” (p. 10). He goes on to say that a common reason that essays are rejected in his CNF journal is “an overwhelming egocentrism: In other words, writers write too much about themselves and what they think without seeking a universal focus so that readers are properly and firmly engaged” (pp. 10-11). The reflection necessary throughout the process is also closely tied to subjectivity, which was described in the preface to and throughout this dissertation.

The third element is research. This highlights the careful research that is completed about the subject, and the use of that research to inform the descriptions and explanations provided for the readers. The use of research “launches and anchors the creative effort” (p. 11). A writer who does not display knowledge regarding the subject, which is gained through research, “will lose the confidence and support of the people who [provide] access to the experience” (p. 12). This element was addressed by conducting the research itself and learning from the study participants.

Reading, the fourth element, refers to the expectation that writers are not only reading the research material found in the library, in journals, or online, but that they should also be reading “the work of the masters of their profession” (p. 12). This assists writers with understanding various stylistic approaches and the intellectual content found in the work of the masters.

The final element, ‘riting, is “the most artistic and romantic aspect of the whole experience” (p. 12). The first four elements “relate to the nonfiction part of creative nonfiction,” but the final element “is the phase where writers get to create.” This element is broken into two

parts: the “inspirational explosion” where initial writing and drafting takes place, and the “craft part,” where editing and revision occurs.

Additionally, Caulley (2008), describes and summarizes four components of a code for writing CNF described by Gutkind. Caulley’s summary includes a focus on striving for truth and accuracy, recognizing the “distinction between recollected conversation and fabricated dialogue” (p. 446), to not create unnecessary compressions (the moving, squishing, or compressing) of situations, dialogue, or characters, and to complete member checks.

While CNF is the chosen approach, the ethnodramatic approach described by Vanover (2016), in which “all scripts used verbatim transcripts from the interviews” in order to “let the teachers tell their own story” (p. 6) was also kept in mind. Vanover describes that “no editorial changes were made in the content of the interviews besides the additional of a couple of words for clarity, and the extensive cuts... to compress the source narrative” (p. 7). Due to the range of experiences, number of participants, and extent of the interviews, there were several times that compression could not be avoided. Oftentimes, the transitions or lead-ins were created to create a narrative flow, or the content of the message was synthesized/ compressed, with the core message remaining the same and as true to the original words as possible.

Gutkind (2012) explains that while the core message must remain as true as possible, the CNF writer must have some freedom in preparing and presenting the narrative in order to communicate the story effectively:

it’s a given that a writer of creative nonfiction takes some license in recreating a circumstance, event or memory – as a friend might do when telling a story to another friend. This is vital to creating compelling narratives; the only caveat is that the writer must remain as true to the spirit and facts of the circumstances as possible (p. 186).

The priorities when sharing these narratives were to truthfully communicate the participants experiences while creating an engaging story. The nature and examples of changes made have been noted in [Appendix C - \(Table 3\)](#), though it is not possible to list every change made. The aim of this is to provide transparency by describing instances of compression, filler removal, transition words and phrases, additions, etc. Additionally, member checks were utilized by sharing the narrative and findings with participants to ensure that their stories were told accurately and that the findings were representative of their experiences.

The member checks yielded positive results from those who responded, and one change was requested to further de-identify the person that one participant mentioned. Even with the use of pseudonyms and providing protection not only for participants, but also for those who they shared stories about or were included in their stories, this individual felt more comfortable making the reference to how they were connected to that person even more vague (instead of specifying orientation or how they were connected to the participant, I described them as a friend).

The nonfiction component of this narrative is based in the lived experience as described by the participants during data collection. The creative component of this narrative includes the arrangement, compression, and flow of the stories that were shared while staying true to their original meaning. An additional creative component is the fictional scenario of participants gathering together to share their ideas through a group discussion. All interviews were conducted with the participant and the researcher and then were put together in conversation that occurs within a fictional scenario.

Various “scenes” were constructed in this narrative. These scenes are little stories that form “the building blocks of creative nonfiction” (Ligon et al., 2009, p. 87). These scenes

include vignettes shared by participants and move the fictional scenario's plot along. The term representing the development of the plot structure in the NI framework is emplotment. These scenes are centered on the various questions or topics being discussed and the general plot, or the pattern “– a story in itself – is called a frame” (p. 87). This plot is described in [Appendix E -](#) to provide an additional roadmap of the story for readers who may find this beneficial.

Information on Style

This form was used to share the various similar, different, surprising, difficult, and joyful experiences described by participants in the interviews and through the researcher's own self-reflexivity. The stories shared highlight various themes and categories. During this narrative, each participant acts as themselves, representing their own words and actions. The researcher acts as the facilitator, who helps to keep the fictional scenario and the plot elements moving along. The facilitator role also allows for an additional avenue for representing researcher subjectivities, how the researcher engaged with participants during the responsive interviews, and to present areas where experiences and perspectives of the researchers were highlighted as a form of bracketing and to explicitly demonstrate subjectivities.

Additionally, Gutkind (2006) also explains that the “most important and enjoyable [part about] creative nonfiction is that it not only allows but also encourages the writer to become a part of the story or essay being written” (p. 7). This insertion of self, through the role of the facilitator, “creates a special magic that alleviates the suffering and anxiety of the writing experience; it provides many outlets for satisfaction and self-discovery, flexibility and freedom.”

This narrative was constructed around a fictional encounter using the private conversations between the researcher and the participants to communicate themes, commonalities, clarifications, juxtapositions, ideas, beliefs, values, and experiences that appear

within these conversations. They are grouped by scenes, which act as the “show” portion of the research, followed by a brief discussion that creates the opportunity for clarification, insights, and information on how themes and categories were present in the scene to provide a roadmap throughout the narrative.

Creative Nonfiction Narrative (Data (Re)Presentation)

Introduction

Finding themselves at yet another professional development session on diversity, eight educators have joined a breakout group together to discuss issues related to a diversity category of their choosing. Looking around the table, one can guess that there is a wide range of personalities, experiences, and ideas. It’s the last professional development of the year and several of the educators are busy planning for how they will wrap up the school year. As is typical, a professional development session is one of the last places they want to be.

As the group gathers around the table marked by a table tent that has “LGBTQIA2...” printed on it, the groups facilitator, Seth, speaks up and shares, “For me, personally, I prefer the term Queer. I want to try to be as inclusive as I can.” The group members settle into the plastic cafeteria chairs.

Scene 1 Narrative

The facilitator begins with an announcement, “I imagine that there are probably many things on your mind today that you would rather focus on instead of having to talk with strangers. I am so thankful that you have chosen this group, though. I recognize a few faces and am excited to get to know the new faces here. I was asked to give you a pre-session announcement that if at any point you need to step away for a moment due to difficult or triggering content, or because you simply need to take a break, to please do so without being worried about what we will think of you. I imagine we might discuss some difficult things today and I want you to be comfortable with stepping away.” He pauses for a moment to look at his notes. “Additionally, I want to make sure to share some norms and expectations for our time together. It’s very important that we keep in mind the importance of confidentiality as we listen to each other’s stories. What is said in this group should remain in this group, because we do not want to broadcast other peoples’ personal information to the world. As you’ve chosen to participate in this group, I should also remind you that your participation is voluntary and that you may choose to share as much, or as little, as you would like, and that you may choose to dismiss yourself as well at any point.

As the group nods in understanding, the facilitator smiles and says, “Let’s begin.” He begins to read from his notes. “We are all here because of our interest in blank- oh wait, sorry... because of our interest in LGB-” he pauses and follows up with “our interest in Queer issues as educators. Why don’t we start by briefly introducing ourselves with-”

The facilitator is cut off as groans can be heard around the table. A couple group members roll their eyes. Seth smiles. “Now, how will we have honest conversations if we can’t

even begin to connect with one another? We will introduce ourselves with our names, pronouns, teaching context, and can add in why we're here today or other information if you'd like. I'll get us started." Some group members shift in their seat, but everyone gives their attention to the facilitator. "My name is Seth Dills, I use he/ they pronouns, and I am a middle school special education teacher in a large 6A district in Kansas. I am finishing my fifth year teaching. My first three years I worked as a special education teacher for students with severe emotional disturbances, and the last two years I've worked as a general resource special education teacher. I identify as Queer and am interested in learning more about the intersection of Queer topics and education. Who would like to go next?"

After a moment of silence, one of the members, a Black man with an air of enthusiasm jumps in and offers to start. "My name is Jayden Harris, and I use he/ him pronouns. I identify as the G-to-the-Gay," he says with excitement. "I teach second grade in a mid-sized city in Kansas and have taught pre-k and first grade as well. I'm finishing my fourth year of teaching. I am here today, because as a Black male educator, I hardly get to talk about it as a Queer person. That's a part of me, too, but you know, that's just something that people wouldn't know, off the bat, I'm a Black man in education, which I just take with so much pride. But I hardly ever get the platform to speak as a Queer educator, and how that looks different."

Seth takes a moment to thank Jayden for starting the introductions. "Would anyone else like to go next?" As he's practicing the appropriate "wait time," the gentleman next to Jayden begins humming a familiar tune, and Seth sees this as an opportunity to keep the conversation moving. "Sounds like you've got *Rent* on your mind. Would you be willing to share next?"

The gentleman in question pauses his humming and agrees to go next. "I'm Will Grace, my pronouns are he/ him, and I'm gay. I spent 16 years teaching kindergarten and am finishing my first year as an instructional coach in a large 6A district. And, if you haven't noticed, I have a pretty flamboyant way about me. So, I mean, I let everyone see that and, like everyone at school, knows when I'm coming because I'm usually singing a Broadway show tune down the hallway."

"Thank you for sharing, and we're glad you're here today. How about we just continue in a circle at this point?" Seth looks at the next group member.

"Oh, hi. Well, my name is Diana Buckley, and I use she/ they pronouns. When I think about my gender identity, I actually had to look up 'so what is the term for someone who just doesn't care,' and it's gender apathetic. And I'm absolutely gender apathetic. I also have used the word bisexual to describe myself, but I, I like the word Queer. That's, that's the word I like, because then I can use it with kids. And I don't have to specify anything. It is nice and generic, and I find it to be the least- it doesn't include the word sex, which is helpful with middle school kids. Um, and I... What were the next questions?"

"What and where do you teach?"

"Yes! Thank you. I'm also an ADHD dumpster fire if you can't tell. I currently teach middle school science in a smaller 4A community, but previously I taught middle school math in a larger 6A communities and worked as a director of learning for a tutoring agency."

"I am also an ADHD dumpster fire most days, so we will show you grace," Seth adds with a chuckle. "It looks like you're next," he says as he nods in the direction of the next educator.

"My name is Dillan, or the kids call me Mr. Bender or Bender. I use he/ him pronouns and am a gay man. I teach middle school science in a rural 3A school district and have taught third grade, fourth grade, and K-6 science."

"Thank you! Who's next?"

“I guess that’s me,” the participant next to Dillan shares. “My name is Gloria Taylor and I use she/ her pronouns. I would think that most people view me as lesbian, because I’m married to another woman, but I would say bisexual. I mean, I was married to a man, I have two beautiful children. And yeah, I would say bisexual myself, but most people would think I’m a lesbian. I teach middle school math in a rural 2A school district, and this is actually my last year teaching, as I’m retiring at the end of this year.”

“We’re glad to have you here, Gloria.” Seth pauses. Then, looking at the next person, continues, “Okay, we have just a couple of more introductions to make.”

“Hi. My name is Dani White, and I use she/ her pronouns. I now identify as a lesbian, but this was a newer discovery for me over the last year and a half. Yay, therapy!” she adds with a chuckle. “I am an elementary specials teacher, and I work with kindergarten through fifth grade, and I’ve been doing that for 8 years. My first year teaching, I taught second grade. All of this has been in a large 6A school district.”

“I imagine several of us have thought ‘yay, therapy!’ on several occasions as well,” Seth adds. “Now, last but not least.”

“Hi, I’m Eric Banks and I use he/ him pronouns. I identify as gay, or a big ole ‘mo (homo). This is my first year teaching and I am a middle school special education teacher. I work in a resource classroom for a 5A suburban school district.”

“Thank you, Eric. And welcome, again, everyone! We have several discussion questions we’re going to try to get through today, but I figured we could begin with an easier question as an ice breaker: *why do you teach or what are your reasons for becoming teachers?*”

Scene 1 Discussion

This first scene provides a quick glance into the characters and personalities that are sitting together at the fictional professional development. It highlights that the data from this study included a large range of voices, experiences, contexts, and backgrounds. There are various sexualities represented, including the umbrellas of gay, lesbian, and bisexual. There are cisgender, Queer, and gender apathetic voices present, though the lack of trans* voices should be noted and is an unfortunate limitation of this conversation.

There are various limitations present in this study, as it typical with any study. For instance, there is limited BIPOC representation, which is provided by one participant (Jayden). Additionally, another limitation that is present early on is that the participants are limited to currently working in elementary and middle school contexts. One participant (Gloria) has worked in high school contexts previously.

It should be noted as well that the introductions required extensive compressions in order to provide brief introductions from several different parts of the interviews. This approach was chosen in order to provide a concise summary and easy entry point into the conversation. The various pieces of data that provided this information are often revisited throughout future scenes, and it was also necessary to generate introductory phrases (“hi,” “I guess that’s me,” etc.) as the writer in order to produce the flow of dialogue.

For the visual readers, one could imagine that the group is sitting at a cafeteria table in the order presented in Figure 16.

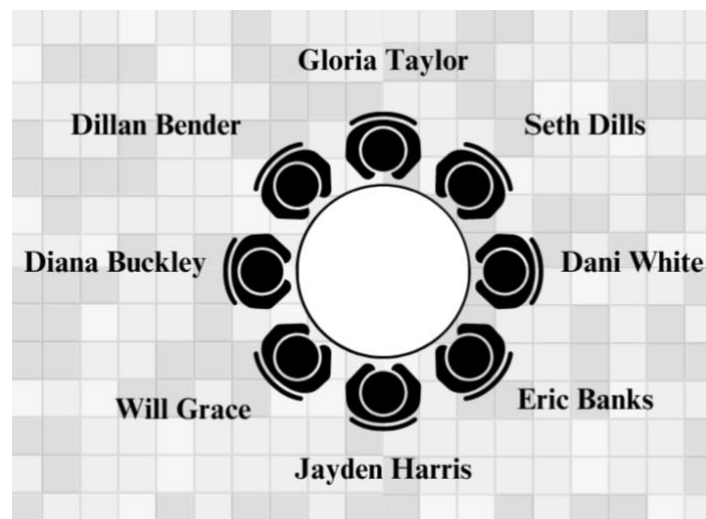


Figure 16: Visual Example of CNF Seating Arrangement

Scene 2 Narrative

Dillan laughs excitedly to answer, and exclaims, “This is one of my favorite questions! So, growing up I actually had no desire to teach. I wanted to be a farmer, and my mother very quickly informed me so that's not going to happen. She said, ‘I hate to break it to you, but you're inheriting nothing as far as land or equipment or anything goes.’ So, I was super involved in 4H and FFA all growing up, and I really loved working with the younger people, especially the elementary aged kids, and I think that's what kind of drove me towards working with elementary students because I thought I wanted to be an ag teacher because I was very passionate about agriculture and agriculture education. That was a big thing for me. My mom kind of persuaded me to try to do Elementary, just because I'd always showed a real passion and a real knack for working with younger students. So that's what kind of drove me to go into education: lack of being able to fulfill a dream and then my mom very kindly pushing me in the direction of education. Along with that, I've always known that I wanted to work with youth, and I just really

enjoy it. It doesn't feel like work to me. I think I was truly meant to be a teacher, or at least I was meant to work with kids. And teaching was the most logical way to do that. At one point, I was becoming frustrated with my job and was searching for other jobs and applied at a couple of schools. I got offered both positions, and I was like, well, clearly, I'm supposed to keep teaching and stay in education. So that's cool. But yeah, I think it's just like I fell into teaching, and I've just not really looked back. I've not really thought of anything else to do other than working with youth. And, yeah, teaching has just been something that's fit me really well at this point in my life."

"I love the enthusiasm! Who wants to piggyback off of that?"

Jayden is the first to respond. "I don't know if y'all saw my face when Seth asked that question, but I just love that question, oh my goodness, I love that question. I've talked about this in, you know, different interviews and stuff that I've done before, but I love the youth, they're just, there's something about them, they are so pure. They are. They're just cool to work with. I just feel really blessed to be able to work with them. You know, it is a lot of work. Teaching is so much hard work, but the kids, they're the best part of it. I truly say that not to be cliché, like there are a lot of things, like politics making our job hard. The kids aren't one of them. They're the best, easiest part of the job. And that's really my answer. I just love working with the youth. And I love that every day is different., Now, I don't want to say every day is sunshine and roses, either. I've just always been drawn to the youth and working with them."

Before Seth gets the chance to ask for another volunteer, Eric offers to go next. "So, I was doing an online program at night to be a paralegal, and I was like, I need something to do during the day. It was the end of 2020, COVID restrictions were lifting, and the schools were doing hybrid learning. So, I was like, I'll have clear hours, I won't have to take any work home really, as a para, it would be like, perfect. Quick, simple, and easy. And then as the year progressed, I just hated the law field, it was so icky. And like, a bunch of people say they're going in for like, the little guy. But they don't. And so like, that's what I wanted to do, I wanted to be able to help the little guy. And I really liked education and seeing the impact. You get to see your results quicker, and the kids are actually weirdly thankful that you're there. And I just fell in love with the field, so I was like, I guess I can do this one more year, and through that I decided that I should be a teacher.

"What did you want to do when you were growing up?

"It depended on the day. I wanted, for the longest time, I did want to be a teacher, but I wanted to teach social studies. But I had told a 100-level history professor that his class was less informative than my seventh grade social studies class, my grade went from an A to a B, and I was like uhhh... I don't want to do that anymore. So I got a degree in communication studies, tried the paralegal route, became a paraeducator, and now I'm finishing my first year teaching."

The group chuckles a little bit about the comments made to the professor, since many of them know people who were or remember being the 18/19-year-old who knew everything.

"I'd like to go next," Dani says to jump into the conversation. "So, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. There was a lot of, so I have a chronic illness. During the time where people were figuring out what they wanted to do with their lives, I was figuring out what the heck was wrong with my body, and why it was not able to function the way that other people's bodies functioned. And so when it came time to be like, alright, I have to go like to college and figure out a career, I was like... say, what now? But I'd worked with kids at my church. I worked in our like, daycare, I babysat, and I did all those things. So somebody pointed out that, 'oh, you would be a good teacher,' and I was like, 'Sure, that! I'll go with that.' So I don't have a really great

answer for it. It wasn't one of those like, oh, it was my calling, or my passion kind of deal. It's just someone was like, hey, you'd be good at that. And I was like, well, okay, I'll do that. I really liked science, and I think that honestly, I wanted to go into something like that, but I was constantly being told I wasn't good at science. So it's kind of fun that I ended up teaching STEM because I'm like, all right, this is cool."

"And there are going to be some of us who got into the field by accident, or that started on one path and ended up on another," Seth adds. "Will, would you be able to go next for us?"

"Well, growing up I didn't ever think I wanted to be a teacher. My mom was a kindergarten teacher. I grew up like loving animals and loving being outside, so I always thought I would be a zookeeper or veterinarian. That's what I wanted to be more than anything. And then high school hit and there comes a point where you have to start thinking, okay, what am I going to do with the rest of my life? I did not like my science classes and math was hard. I started to realize I didn't have to be a veterinarian anymore, but the people in my life who I had told about my goals growing up were pushing that on me, but I really didn't want to do that anymore. So, to everyone's surprise, I decided I wanted to be a teacher because I loved school. I loved kids. And when I would be sitting in class, I would be thinking, like, this lesson is stupid. This is how they should be teaching it. So I went into teaching, and it was really the best thing for me. It was a relatively safe career choice, being that as long as there are children, there will be teachers. Going through college, my mom, taught at an elementary school in town and I still lived with my parents, so I would just pack all my stuff in my car and park it at my mom's school and volunteer until it was time for class then after class, I'd go volunteer till it's time for the next one. I got a very real hands-on authentic experience, and it was a good choice for me. What I love about teaching, and why I do it, is the hope that it gives me. Our world sucks, like, in so many ways. And I feel like, if kids are given the right chance, and given the right opportunity, they can start making those decisions that can help change the world for the better. Maybe that's naive for me to think after teaching for 17 years, that I can have that type of impact, but that's what I truly think. My biggest thing is hope for the future, as cheesy as that sounds."

As he's sharing this, he has the undivided attention of the entire group. The passion in Mr. Grace's voice is evident, and he truly believes in the impact of a good educator.

"Another reason why I do it is out of love. There are so many kids who have too many changes or miss out on opportunities or love. I love that I can be a loving and constant source in the kiddo's lives, even when their life is all over the place. They know that at least when they come to school, they have Mr. Grace. They know that if they couldn't get a hug from their mom or dad, they could get a hug from me, you know? Another reason I do it is because, and this is gonna sound stupid too probably, but it just needs to be done. Like, there are so few people willing to step up to the plate to teach nowadays, and for so many valid reasons. There's not a lot of incentive to be a teacher these days, but it needs to be done. It's good work, and it's hard work, but it is necessary and it's the right thing to do. I have a billion reasons, like I've done it for forever and I don't want to think of a day where I stop working. I do it for creativity. I love the challenges and I love the rewards. I'm at the point in my career where my first group of students are grownups and they have their own kids, and they're messaging me on Facebook like 'you changed my life,' and that's a big deal, that's validation, and it takes a long time when you teach little kids because they have to grow up to realize that, but it's huge. I could probably talk forever about it. I love it. I mean it. It's my life."

"You know, I don't think I can top that one," adds Gloria. "But for me, I don't really know what drove me to become a teacher. When I talk about what I always wanted to be, I

wanted to be a police officer. I was in the gifted program in middle school, and we had to spend a day on the job, so I wrote a letter to the Police Department. Back then, which would have been in the 70s, they sent me a letter back that said I could not spend a day on the job with them, but if there were any male students that wanted to spend a day on the job, they were welcome. It was very frustrating. So I decided I didn't want to be a part of an organization that didn't welcome females. I was always an athlete, so that paid for my college. I went in thinking I would be a high school business teacher. Some of the classes I took, I thought, I don't want to learn it, let alone teach it to others, so then I settled in on math, because I knew people struggled with it, and it was something that always came so easily to me. I knew I also wanted to be a mom and that I could have my summers with my kids, and I could coach them and we could be on the same schedule, and those things fit into place.”

“I guess that leaves me,” Diana shares after Gloria is finished. “I was also in the gifted program growing up,” she says, looking at Diana. “I spent my first three semesters of college as a chemical engineering major, and then I took chemical analysis. It was the first time I'd ever failed at anything, and I was like, well, fuck, I don't want to do this. Usually if I can't figure something out the first time it's not a big deal and I figure out how to do it, but this one, it didn't matter what I did. I could not pass the class. So I withdrew and said, well, I've never experienced failure before, so let's just change everything! I gotta go some different direction. I was in differential equations at the time and loved it, so I thought, okay I'll be a math major. Then I was a math major for about a semester and realized I wasn't going to do much with that outside of college. Both of my parents are teachers, and my father's dad was a teacher, and his brother and his sister are both teachers, so it just seemed like, well, that's what everybody else does. And that's a pretty easy thing to do with math, so I'll try it. I spent one day with seventh graders and said, oh, these are my people. I have found my place. And I knew that I wanted to teach middle school from that moment on. My first job I got into teaching eighth grade, and it was amazing. I taught in a few different schools and now teach middle school science, which I am loving. The middle schoolers are my people-” Diana pauses, chuckles, and smiles as she plans how she's going to wrap up this question. “The middle schoolers are my people, and some of my absolute best friends at school are autistic boys. I've been telling my husband for probably 15/20 years now that I think maybe I am an autistic boy, but a 13-year-old autistic boy, because my God, we have some of the same thought processes.”

Seth points out, “I am amazed at how often the response when people find out I teach middle school is not ‘wow, that's so cool,’ but is instead ‘oh bless you heart you must have so much patience.’ I used to joke that they couldn't pay me enough to teach middle school, but now that I'm here, it's an absolute blast. But only those that teach middle school understand.” Looking around the table, you see the five middle school teachers nodding their heads in agreement.

Scene 2 Discussion

This scene creates an avenue for characterization as the readers begin to get to know the participants, their personalities, and their backgrounds. This characterization develops a feeling and an understanding that the people speaking here are real people with real experiences. It also

begins to answer RQ1, as it relates to Queer educator experiences throughout their lives. These experiences are generally described positively within this scene, though future scenes will demonstrate that this is not always the case.

The participants also have a wide range of reasons for becoming teachers. The reasons provided for becoming teachers affirm existing research, which has found that Queer educators go into the field for the same reasons as their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts, which has been described by Endo et al (2010) and Kissen (1996). Some participants' descriptions produce a feeling of education being their calling, others explain that it was the logical decision for their lives, and others describe what feels like an accidental transition into education due to life events.

The purpose for maintaining what some might describe as crude, inappropriate, or unprofessional language in this scene (and in future scenes) should be explained. Cheney (2001) covers this topic in the following way:

Until fairly recently... most newspaper and magazine writers would never quote someone swearing or blaspheming – their words would either be shown with censoring dashes or dots, and only the more “civilized” words would be quoted. If the writer wanted, nevertheless, to write truthfully, eh or she would be limited to saying that the man swore and blasphemed outrageously (now, that’s writing in the abstract!)... This is not being realistic... The creative nonfiction writer should report the concrete details of the realities of group life (pp. 59-60)

Due to the prioritization of authenticity and using the words that participants shared during interviews, the words and phrases have been maintained in order to provide concrete details for readers and to maintain the emphatic or explicative messages conveyed by participants.

Scene 3 Narrative

“Moving on!” Seth announces. “We’re going to start getting a little more personal. The next question is: *how would you describe “being out,” and what was coming out like for you?*”

“From day one I was out, and mostly that was for my children,” Gloria begins. “I mean, I had no inkling growing up that I had lesbian tendencies, so I just went through with, you know, you’re raised that you’re gonna grow up and go to college and get married and have kids and so that’s what I did. I dated guys like you’re supposed to date guys. I got married and had two wonderful children. That relationship ended, and then I started a relationship with a woman a couple of years later and I came out the minute I went into a relationship with a woman. I decided from the beginning that I would never ask my children to hide or lie or whatever. So I simply told the partner that I chose that this is all or nothing, because we are not going to hide and we are not going to in any way try to lie to people or make this something that’s not, and she agreed. I don’t think I’ve ever cared what people thought about me, but at that point I truly was like, okay, I cannot care what people think about me because I cannot base my life on what others are going to tell me I need to be doing. I just started living my life. Mostly that was for my children. I never wanted them to have to lie about anything or hide anything, and I wanted to make their lives as easy as I could. And I know, it wasn’t easy for them at times. I know that my daughters took verbal abuse from some of the boys in their class. I mean, that was something we always talked about, but they’ve been out of school for... 10 years now? Almost 10 years. And as far as the students go, unless the kids know me outside of school, or- well, I’ve taught most of their parents by now, so they all know, but it’s really just not a topic of conversation. It’s not something that ever comes up. And then sometimes they don’t know, and something will be said, or I’ll throw out the phrase, ‘my wife’ and you see the sideways glances when they look at other kids like, ‘what did she just say?’ It’s kind of like, here we go all over again, they’re figuring out things. They never question it anymore, it’s just, it is what it is. And they move on.”

“I have times, like, someone will say ‘Mr. Banks is gay’ and then another kid would be like, ‘no he’s not,’ thinking that they’re making fun of me, so then I would add ‘well, I am.’ Then it clicks and they add something like ‘oh, okay.’ But it’s never like (he makes gagging noises to show disgust).” Eric pauses a moment to think, then adds, “As far as coming out though, I always struggle with coming out. I just don’t get why it’s a big deal, but I wish it didn’t have to be a big deal. I wish I could just simply be, and it would be fine, you know?” Several participants are nodding in understanding at this point. “It’s very much, like, when I first came out, I came out to friends, and it was just always such a production and it’s really not that big of a deal. There were times I never wanted to do it because I was more concerned about, I mean I didn’t want anyone to see me differently. Like, it’s- I’m still the same Eric, you just know a little bit more.”

Will raises his hand slightly to add to this, “I get what you’re saying. I don’t detest coming out, I detest it for myself. I don’t like having to put myself on display like that. I don’t like having to explain myself, after so long of just being questioned about why I don’t like having to explain myself. There’s some irony in having to explain why you don’t like explaining yourself. I am who I am, get over it. If you don’t like it- it’s just, I don’t like the process of coming out for myself. But it’s, you know, I can understand it being very therapeutic to other people. One of my kids, has come out to me, and it was the best thing for them. For me, I just live my life. And if it comes up in conversation, then absolutely, I’ll tell you, but it’s one of those things, too, that my family just doesn’t talk about. And if we need to talk about it, we’ll talk about

it, but right now we are fine. I don't feel like I need or want extra attention just because I'm gay. As much as it is a huge part of me and I do celebrate it and I love that about myself and being gay means everything to me, it's not all of me, you know? My thing is I don't want people to start sympathizing with me when they never did before."

"I'm assuming most of this group has seen the movie or read the book, 'Love, Simon?'" Seth looks around, asking the group as several heads nod. "These comments are reminding me about the scene where Simon is annoyed that only Queer people have to come out and is questioning why straight is the default."

Eric and Will both answer, "Yeah," in unison.

"It's like, part of who I am, but it's not all of who I am," Eric adds. "And I can almost pinpoint realizing I was Queer and coming out to, I don't know, roughly like 2007-ish, or whenever Camp Rock came out. Like, Joe Jonas, there was something about Mr. Jonas. And growing up, I watched a lot of teen dramas, and the male characters never really resonated with me at all, unless they were like, Queer. It was mostly like the queen bee types, and I was like, that's who I want to be. Like, sports? Eh. Shopping? Yes. And then I would post selfies on Tumblr and get attention, and I was like, 'ohhh, I like this... Oh! This is coming from guys.' But when you're a teenager, all attention is good attention. I was also really into One Direction and just, like, yeah girls are pretty, but that's as far as it went. That was it, you know? So it was really through like, TV shows. And then I got to college, and nobody had any preconceived notions of me or could tell me no, so I just thought 'we'll see how it is.' And now here I am."

"And as far as what being out means to me," Will shares, "as of now, it means everything to me. And that sounds kind of weird, but I denied it for so long. As hard as I tried, I could never really hide it, and now I celebrate it. I lived in in darkness and everything for so long. I was trying to hide it and be someone I wasn't and, and being ridiculed for it. So I don't think it should be hidden anymore. It's part of me, and if someone can't handle it, then, like, sorry. I just want to be allowed to be me."

"You mentioned living in darkness," Dillan begins, "and I definitely was never able to truly accept my true self until I was an adult. Growing up, I always knew I was different in whatever kind of way. I always kind of felt like I just stuck out and I wasn't the same as others, and like part of me was okay with being different, but I always wanted to be a little bit more like everybody else. I was just Dillan running around wild and the girls are just more fun to hang out with than the boys because I didn't want to play sports. I always felt like I didn't quite get along with the boys in my class, and I think it's because I was different. It's not like they ridiculed me or treated me poorly, but I just didn't enjoy spending time with them. In high school, I really started to realize, like, I kind of I think I like guys. And I just wasn't okay with it. It wasn't necessarily something that was super accepted in my community because I come from a very conservative community and was involved in 4H, FFA, and the Catholic church. So everything told me that if I felt any different or have these desires and stuff, that it wasn't okay and I need to nip it in the bud. As I was starting to figure this stuff out, I started to show some unfortunate tendencies, struggling with depression and just kind of go into darker places. I mean, I was in high school, so I just stayed busy and was involved in everything. I think I was trying to distract myself from having to spend any time alone or just with my own thoughts by keeping busy. So it was sad. But I mean, I enjoyed high school, too. I was prom king, so I joke that I won high school. It wasn't like it was a bad experience - I enjoyed it. But I definitely was never able to truly accept my true self. And a lot of that turned to me turning towards faith, and I think that drove me to be deeper in my faith. I felt fulfilled going to church and being involved in youth

groups, stuff like that. Honestly, if anything, I think with that I was just searching for community, hoping to find people that loved me regardless. And that's what I found, so I was able to be more comfortable with myself."

"I've found that one of the biggest purposes church serves for a lot of people I've talked with, especially those that grew up in the church, is to meet the human need of connection and community. I think this is the part of why several support groups tend to be connected to churches, especially when people are in recovery for drug or alcohol use, or in recovery for mental illness – those things also require community. And that's why the LGBTQ+ community is a community, or we seek out ways to build community together, especially for those of us who have left the church and are trying to replace that source of community," Seth shares.

"Yeah, but then I went to college. I was in denial for a very long time about who I was and in conflict with my feelings about this. I ended up coming out to my friend at a Spangles when I was 19 or 20, and that was the first time I had said the words to another person, and that really helped me to be like, okay, like, this is true. This is me. And it's been a journey ever since. Like, I stepped away from the Catholic Church, and it was everything I knew. I had a few people who I really idolized that did me dirty and drove me away. I wasn't the same person after that. I wasn't happy and I struggled a lot. My depression worsened and I had to repeat a semester because I was so depressed and couldn't do anything, including schoolwork. I was a zombie going through life and I had lost any sense of community that I thought I had. But I was turned off from Catholicism because a few people made it very clear that being gay was wrong, and they found out I was gay, and they just kind of cut me out and it really messed me up. Thankfully, I'm cool now." Dillan pauses, thinking, and then breaks the somber tone when he begins to laugh at a memory that he absolutely had to share.

"I almost forgot. When I was in college, I had a class where we had to do a mini lesson on a topic, and my group was about working with LGBTQ+ students. I came out to my small group before that, and we decided that, as part of the process, I would come out to the whole class. That was a really big moment for me and that really helped me a lot. It was great to have people like the professor, who would, like joke that, 'yeah, when you walked into my class, and I first met you, I was like, oh, he doesn't know. Okay, we're gonna get through this together.' And she pegged me right away. She knew, and she was right. I hadn't- again, I knew I was different, but I didn't want to say the word. And didn't want to accept that was part of who I was. After that, I went home and came out to my family, so I just went in and ripped the Band-Aid off big time. Every year, though, I think I've been able to slowly become more and more myself. I know, too, that I'm in a very big growing period of figuring out, like, 'I know who I am, but, like, who do I want to be?' kind of thing right now. As a middle school teacher, it's surprising when a kid doesn't know that I'm gay. It's not something I necessarily hide, but it's not something that I go out of my way to tell the world. It's not something that is my entire identity. It's really a very small fraction of who I am."

"For me also, I just knew I was different," Jayden says. "A lot of people are like, the moment I knew, or they had this lightbulb moment, or, you know, they kissed a guy at a party or something like that. Nothing like that for me. I didn't say that I was gay out loud or to myself for the first time until I was, I want to say I was 18 or 19, so after I graduated high school. I had to say it to myself a lot, and I just kind of took it from there. When I was 20, going on 21, I decided I should tell my childhood best friend. There were moments I could feel her just wanting to ask me about it while we were hanging out. It's so weird, maybe some of you have a shared experience, where there's moments where I could feel them wanting to ask me, and I'm

screaming for them to ask me, or just to say ‘I know, and it's okay.’ But a different part of me is also screaming, like ‘don't ask me! I'm not ready to make this real yet. If I say it out loud. It's real.’ You know, saying it out loud to her for the first time was really hard, it was hard saying it to quite a few people. But to me, being out just means you're in a comfortable enough space, to just walk in your truth. And that looks different for everybody,” he clarifies with a pause. “It's different for everyone because, you know, people might just be out to everybody but their parents, but then somebody's like, ‘oh, they're not fully out yet.’ I don't like the term fully out. Out to me is being comfortable to where friends, family, and close friends know, and you control the narrative. The people who you want to know, know. At work, some coworkers know, but that’s really hard, because you feel like you’ve got to come out every time you start a new job, or you have to decide who you’re going to let in. Who's going to be weird about this? Who is going to run their mouth? And that is just something that I just don't think other people take into consideration every time you start somewhere new, or meet new people. And just really, it can be exhausting.”

“Those extra mental calculations that minoritized people have to do is taken for granted by so many. People don’t think about the extra questions Queer people have to ask or the extra care Queer people have to have in certain situations, similarly to the extra mental calculations women, or people of color have to do,” Seth shares, empathizing with how exhausting jumping through the extra hoops can be.

Scene 3 Discussion

Scene 3 begins to not only provide insight into the background of Queer educators, but also highlights the hard times that some members of this study have gone through. These experiences are also faced by other Queer educators outside of this study, though those who are not Queer may not think about how Queer educators have to navigate their personal and professional lives. This highlights one of the themes and categories present in this study, how Queer educator identities and experiences create extra work by doing (requiring) extra mental calculations.

Cisgender and heterosexual educators do not have to make the same decisions as Queer educators, and they most certainly do not have to think twice about the same decisions that Queer educators do. As Jayden helps to demonstrate, he must take extra time, energy, and consideration into deciding who he can come out to, if it’s safe to come out, and who can be trusted. He even describes it as “exhausting.”

Eric and Will both help to highlight the extra work required simply to come out as Queer. This is an experience that non-Queer people don't have to think about, because it is assumed that they are straight and cisgender unless they share otherwise. Queer people do not have this luxury, which is poignantly described in the "Love, Simon" reference.

Scene 4 Narrative

After a brief pause, Gloria speaks to Jayden, "You mentioned that a lot of people have a lightning bolt moment or a specific moment they can point to. My lightning bolt moment was one day when I walked out on the playground, and I saw this woman. It was not like there was a slow start. It was like, oh my gosh, I am completely and overly attracted to this female. And I had never had any kind of feelings like that before, or none that I had acknowledged... So it wasn't like anything slowly crept up on me. But now looking back, I can see moments where it might have been present. Like, in middle school on the basketball team, I had one friend/teammate that, I mean, we played well together, we clicked well on the court together, but I always felt like she was one of my best friends. And when she was getting ready to move away, like their family was moving somewhere we had a big going away bash for her. At that time, I was not a partying, drinking, or whatever person and got really drunk that night. Now I think it was because I didn't know how to express emotion to her about her leaving. I think that was probably my first crush, so to speak."

"As someone who came out in her 30s," Dani begins, "and now looking back, I'm like, okay, I definitely had crushes on women. I can sit here and go yes, the next-door neighbor was not just a very strong, close friendship. There was definitely something there, and I'm pretty sure it was mutual. I think she later came out as bi. I had some really close female friendships in high school where, if I'd known, would have been situations I wanted to pursue. But, silly me. I remember one of my good friends, we'd hang out with boys and you know, and play spin the bottle and I would always be like, oh, I wanted to land on her because, you know, men like it when women kiss. That's why, right? Like, you justify these things in your head. We kissed each other, because we wanted to know what it would be like when we kissed a boy. Right? And then you're like, no, actually, we really just wanted to kiss each other. But even wanting to cuddle my female friends, just wanting to be like, close with women instead of men. Those weren't just friendships. I had a crush. We have all these things, all this messaging happening in our life, and, you know, you're assumed, straight until proven otherwise, and I wasn't paying attention, I guess. Looking back, all the signs were there, I just was not paying attention."

"You said you came out in your 30s," Seth prompts after a brief pause. "Do you mind sharing more of your story?"

"Sure. This is a fairly new identity. It's been about a year and a half since I figured all of this out. I guess my journey was that I thought I was straight up until I was in my mid-to-late 20s. I got married to man when I was 23 and we were married for seven years. I had a few of those moments where it makes sense looking back, and like in the 90s, there was the whole, like, what is it? Bi until out of college? Or something. So, in my brain I was just like, 'oh, women just find other women- that's just how we relate as women, right? So I didn't think much of it until I was married and had something happen where I started to become really attracted to someone in

my life, where it was like, ‘oh, I think this is more than something like I want to be your friend.’ At that point, there were people I wanted to be friends with, but like I really wanted to get close to this person specifically. And I was like, I think I’m actually attracted to her. But sexuality is fluid, and that’s cool. You know, like the whole ‘everyone’s a little bi’ narrative? That was the deal with this, and I just happened to be attracted to her. Except I am straight, and I’m happily married, but maybe I’m not as straight as I think I am? So all of a sudden I realized that what I was experiencing was not just really strong ‘oh hey, that woman’s cool, I want to be friends.’ There was also another person, where it hit all of a sudden, and I told myself ‘yeah, I feel- I’m attracted to women. Okay, so like, this is not just like a one-person kind of deal.’”

“I didn’t let thinking I might be bi change anything, because I was married to this man, and he was pretty cool. Like, I liked him. But then these feelings just became more of a constant thought, and I started wondering what I would do if they reciprocated those feelings. I needed to talk to someone about it and put it out into the universe, and then it would all go away. So I talked to my sister’s friend who is Queer and always treated me like a younger sibling. He was very supportive. And then it really, really started eating at me, just constantly bothering me. We talked for a bit and I just felt this very overwhelming need to process this, so he’s the one who suggested I start therapy. Originally, I just needed to accept this part of me and tell my husband, because he doesn’t know this part of my identity, I’m not truly aloud to be me. That was my original therapy approach, and after I got into therapy, I started connecting a lot of the dots about things in my personal life that I’ve always had struggles with that never really made sense, and issues in the marriage. And so one day, a pandemic gave us all this lovely time to just be by ourselves. I have a horse and so I spent a lot of time in the barn during the pandemic. It gave me a lot of time for self-exploration. Calling myself bi still didn’t fit right.”

“So one day, I was out on a trail ride, and all of a sudden, it was like a lightning bolt, like what Gloria was describing. It hit me, and I was just like, ‘Fuck, I’m a lesbian. Like, this makes perfect sense. How did I never put this together before?’ And so, I went to therapy the next session and told my therapist, ‘I figured it out! I got it.’ The funny thing was, with the whole bisexual thing, having to accept that label was a challenge, but as soon as I realized I was a lesbian, I was like, ‘oh, this makes sense. This makes perfect sense. Like, I don’t have to accept anything because this makes sense.’ And that’s when I figured out my actual identity and I’m happy to be here!” The group smiles and nods their heads, as if they are in agreement that they’re glad to be here.

After a few moments of silence, Dillan poses a question to the group, “When you’re thinking about hindsight, do you ever come out to friends and their responses is something about them already knowing?”

There are several variations of “yes,” “mmhm,” and “of course” shared out by the group. Dillan continues, “I was in denial for a very long time about who I was and my feelings about this and that, and my best friends from high school will still tell me to this day, ‘Dillan, by about sophomore year, we knew you were gay. We just waited on you to figure it out. But we were cool with it.’ And it was great to have people like my professor.”

“Or, ‘we were waiting for you to figure it out?’” Gloria asks, with head nods in response. Some of the girls that I played sports with, when they finally saw me out in clubs, years later, they were like, ‘we were waiting for you to figure it out.’ It’s kind of funny. I’m like, you guys could have told me back then!”

“When I came out to my friends that I work with, they were like, Will, you didn’t have to say anything. Like, we totally knew. So, yes.”

"Is it endearing when people say we knew? Or is it kind of offensive?" Seth asks Will.

"I don't take it as offensive for me because, I mean, I've grown to love who I am. So if my friends saw that, if they saw who I really was, to me, that's kind of like, well, you're a treasure because you saw that when I couldn't, or you could embrace that part of me when I could not. So I don't take it at all as an insult or anything, because being gay isn't an insult." The group starts to nod, agreeing that being gay shouldn't be seen as an insult.

Diana looks to the person sitting next to her, and says, "You know, Dillan, I get the experience of feeling different. When I was starting to figure out myself as an adult, I was also starting to really figure out that the feeling like I was weird as a kid was not actually going away. And like, during this time, I want to say I was 28... Well, I guess I had my 'big gay awakening' when I was 14. But didn't figure out that there was an actual label for it until I was 28. I started to be able to look at my school career through a different lens and go, oh my God, no wonder some of the things that I felt and thought and experienced, they were obviously affected by that. Like, when my friend Brittany came out, I got- and I didn't realize that was jealousy that I was experiencing until I looked back at it several years later in hindsight. This happened when I was a 19-year-old freshman in college, so I think that's probably when I really actually- No, wait, I take that back, because when I was 14, I went to Mexico with the Girl Scouts for two weeks. I got the absolute worst crush on one of the leaders. Oh my God, it was bad. But at the time, I didn't realize that's what it was, but it definitely was. So it's kind of always been there, I've just not been very aware of the fact that there were options. And like, I sometimes have a little bit of jealousy of the kids now with the fact that they do have all of the resources and all of the information, but at the same time, they have so much information that I can't imagine how it's sometimes sort of confusing."

She continues, "And looking back, like I said it's always been there, but this generation is more bold about just sharing it, because they're more bold about just sharing everything, and they're just generally more accepting, because they see it. I didn't see it. When I was a kid, I didn't realize that there was anything between gay and straight, because it was the 80s. And George Michael was my example of what it meant. I knew I liked boys, so I never worried about it. Ellen was the first example. Like, I remember that- that was a huge deal when she came out. And so I didn't figure out that it wasn't just gay and straight until I was in high school. I've always known my first celebrity crush was Linda Carter, and I have loved Wonder Woman since I was two years old, but I didn't realize that it was like an actual thing until later. And I don't think I actually had any sort of self-labeling experience until after my kid was born, and that would have been almost 17 years ago, but the accepting and labeling myself was after I got married to my husband." She pauses to look at her husband, who works for the district and is sitting across the cafeteria at another table.

"And even coming out to students, it's very easy for me to not be visible, because I'm in a cisheterosexual relationship, and have been for 26 years now, with 21 of those married. But I'm not afraid to talk about it with them, just usually after class or at our GSA club meetings. There's not a single kid in that building who doesn't know that they can come and talk to me about anything that they want to talk about. I think I am actually much less Queer at home than what I put forth at school, because I definitely feel like there are two versions of me: there's the at home me and there's the at school me, just because I like putting that out in people's faces and being visible. So it's also well-known at school."

"It's interesting to think about coming out in terms of coming out to students, too," Dillan begins, making eye contact with Diana, "you mentioned that you are very openly Queer at school

and talk to students when they have questions. And Gloria,” he turns to look at her, “earlier you mentioned how students would pick up on you casually saying ‘my wife’ in conversation, and that made me think about how my students found out that I am gay. I was seeing someone at the time, and the kids asked what I was doing over the weekend. I said, ‘well I have a date this weekend,’ and they were like ‘what?!’ And you know kids, they’re very interested in your personal life, and it just became a whole thing. So they wanted to know who it was, and they were so funny. I hadn’t ever said that I was gay, and they were like, so who are THEY? Who are THEY- like they would not specify male, female, it was who are THEY? And they were curious, so I basically gave them a riddle. I scrambled the name together on the board and they figured it out. And then once they figured it out, they were- they didn’t even care that it was a guy, they were more excited like ‘oh my gosh, our teacher has a date!’ Like, wow, they didn’t care that it was a dude. They really weren’t bothered.”

“Our students are genuinely interested in getting to know us and our lives, even when they use that to try to get us sidetracked while teaching,” Seth shares with a chuckle. “This makes me think about the time that I had a student who was asking if I was seeing anyone, if I had a girlfriend, etc. He was distracted from what he needed to finish so I told him when he finished doing the task at hand that I would show him a picture of my fiancé. When I showed him the picture of me and my future husband, his response was simply ‘oh, that’s a dude.’ Like, he wasn’t being malicious or judgmental, just didn’t realize that I was Queer, which like, I don’t know how they don’t realize it, because I don’t really tone myself down in front of them, like you both mentioned,” he shares as he looks at Diana and Will.”

Scene 4 Discussion

This scene highlights two aspects of this study: hindsight and coming out to students. The hindsight aspect was referenced previously as influencing the identities and experiences of Queer educators. When the educators looked back on their lives, even if they did not have the language to describe themselves or their attractions, they could see where those behaviors or feelings were present earlier in their lives. Their experiences and identities both influence and are influenced by hindsight. In the form of a narrative, they are able to revisit their experiences and give new meaning to those based on their present perspective and knowledge. How they interpreted a situation earlier in their lives may not be the same as they have interpreted it at this point in their lives.

Additionally, the educators began to describe experiences where they have come out to students. Coming out has been identified as a form of solidarity in this study that Queer

educators can show within their role, which can allow for Queer educators to live authentically, be role models to students, etc. This action of coming out constituted a portion of the identified theme of solidarity. The participants reflected positively on coming out to students in this scene, but future scenes will demonstrate that this is not always the case.

Scene 5 Narrative

After a pause, Seth adds, “I want to keep us moving along with the questions, and I think we talked a bit about some of these so I will change the question a bit. ***Do you have any additional experiences as a student, K-12 and/ or college, that you think would be beneficial to share about being Queer prior to becoming an educator?***”

After thinking for a few moments, Dillan starts the conversation. “I just know that I always knew I was different. I was super involved in different things but struggled a lot with my mental health and accepting these things about myself.”

Dani builds on this. “I had a lot of different experiences growing up. Some of them were great, like some teachers who really made a positive impact on my life, but also some negative experiences, where I had an emotionally abusive teacher who eventually called me, I think, when I was in ninth grade as part of her 12-step program. But because of that teacher, I spent a year going to Catholic school, which was bad, like really bad. I think that was my first experience of really, truly knowing what it felt like to be an outsider. And then Middle School sucked. I think I've blocked most of it out. But that was like another wakeup call of like, I was a different kid. I think that's kind of when I started really just shutting down. Like, I'll just be quiet, and I just won't make any noise. I think now the term that they would use is selective mutism, because I didn't talk to anybody for most of my seventh grade year of school, unless there was a teacher directly calling on me. Ninth grade really sucked too. I look back on this and I'm like, I was probably pretty clinically depressed at the time, and we just didn't know it. But like 10th grade was when I finally started coming out of that a little bit. And at that point, I had learned how to assimilate. Like, alright, this is how people expect me to act, and if I act like this, and if I dress like this, then people will like me. So yeah, I think I spent a lot of time just trying to be who other people wanted me to be.”

“Kids can be really mean,” Will adds. “Like, I would try to push my Queerness away, because in my little community, it was, you know, sinful and horrible. I was not religious by any means, but there were all these other people telling you that it's not right and that you're going straight to Hell, and all this horrible stuff that kids should never have to hear about who they are. Within my first weeks of being at a new school in a more conservative community, I was called a fag, and I didn't know what that meant. I had no idea I was called Queer. I was called faggot and all kinds of horrible names, and I didn't know what that meant. It wasn't in the time of Google where you could just go look it up, so I kind of asked around and heard from other people what it meant, and I was like, no, no, I'm not. I didn't even know that about myself. I knew I was different, but I didn't know how or why.”

“Yes!” Jayden interjects. “I knew something was different, and I was clocked more for being Queer in middle school, but I really tried to, I don't know if this is appropriate, but like, I

tried to butch it up in high school, and in high school, I got clocked less, but I felt I was very oppressed. I was just probably silently talked about, which that's kind of hurtful too.

"Kids can be mean, but teachers can also be mean," Eric quietly adds, and then pauses. With the group's attention focused on him, they are silently urging him to share if he wants to. He continues. "Like, we used to play music in gym class, but it was like whatever was on the radio in like 2007. Well, Unwritten, by Natasha Bedingfield came on, which was like a total banger. The gym teacher asked if anyone knew what show this was the theme song for, and of course, I was the one who said 'it's The Hills.' Like, that was my show. Then he asked me 'what are you a faggot?' And I was just stunned, you know, because I was like the confused math lady meme, because he asked the question, and he knew the answer. So I was more stunned at the audacity and confused in his logic more than I was like, traumatized."

The group is silent, as there's a feeling of shock that a teacher would do or say something like this.

"Like, I've always been a little flamboyant and dramatic, so kids could pick up on that. Like I started getting bullied for being gay, probably around second grade. But it didn't really bother me and I didn't really care until middle school. In middle school I was pushed into a locker, and of course it was in gym class, with that same gym teacher actually. The most mortifying part was the gym teacher seeing it happen and laughing at me being pushed into a locker." The group is silent as they take in this information. Eric continues, "His name was Mr. Astol, and I called him Mr. Asshole, because he was an asshole."

After some time has passed for the group to sit with this, Seth breaks the silence. "That's a pretty heavy story, and well, a series of heavy stories and experiences. I think it's safe to assume that many of us share in some type of targeted bullying experiences, but to varying degrees. So thank you for sharing your stories with this group. It is hard, but they are very real experiences faced by so many folks, and they need to be talked about. I think that this would be a good moment to transition into the next question, which is, *"how would you describe your experiences as an educator who now identifies as Queer?"*

Scene 5 Discussion

This scene provides a glimpse into a specific set of experiences and feelings that participants had growing up, specifically as they relate to homophobia and intolerance, which had a lasting impact on participants. These experiences with bullying and the mental calculations described previously make up the reality faced by many, even with acceptance of Queer rights and identities on the rise. They also help to address RQ1 as it relates to the experiences of Queer educators throughout their lives and careers. A few participants provide rich description regarding feeling different, struggling with mental health, and the meanness experienced at the hands of not only their peers, but also at the hands of adults, as was the case with Eric's story.

These experiences fall within the category of empathy and awareness, which falls under the theme of solidarity. These experiences, as the participants describe in future scenes, lay the foundation for more empathetic approaches and a heightened awareness of students who may also feel different for a variety of reasons.

Scene 6 Narrative

“Well, this is the first building where I felt completely comfortable being myself,” Diana begins. “Like here, I can let my freak flag fly and we have an excellent principal who is very supportive. For example, he signs his emails and stuff with he/him in his signature. Like, that’s a little thing to acknowledge the fact that, yeah, he’s a cisgender, heterosexual man, but he acknowledges that not everybody is. And so he chose to do this little thing to make it apparent. It’s very small, but it’s very appreciated. And since he started doing that, our superintendent and the other three principals in our district have started doing that. They’re all cisgender, and that’s fine, but I’ve been really pleased because they’ve acknowledged that it’s a thing. It’s very comfortable to be in an environment where I don’t feel like I have to ignore part of myself.”

“My principal has also built a strong school culture,” Dillan starts. “Honestly, we all credit him with that. He’s done a very good job of selecting individuals that work cohesively together and building a strong positive community at our building. And for people like me, that makes it more comfortable and easier for us to just come and be a part of it and not feel ostracized or like you have to hide a part of you or anything like that. I’ve been very fortunate in that. I know that’s not the case for everybody, so I’m very blessed that I’ve had the experience I’ve had as far as working with this school.”

“Do you have other Queer staff at your school?” Seth probes.

“Well, our principal is openly gay, and we have another openly gay teacher in another grade.”

“What about the rest of the group? Do you have other Queer educators you know about in your schools?”

Eric jumps in, “I am a one of two, which is new to me this year, being not the only LGBT person like staff member in the building.”

“We have a gay male teacher, but knowing him, he will never come out and will continue to date women,” Gloria adds.

After a moment, Jayden joins the conversation. “Last year we had a para that identified as a lesbian and this year, we had a secretary who identified as a lesbian. Which was nice, because just having somebody else who identifies leads you to feel less alone and a little bit more comfortable. I told her, I was like, ‘you know what, when I met you, I just instantly felt comfortable. You didn’t even come out to me you were just talking about your girlfriend, and I just felt like oh, that’s fam.’” After pausing, he asks the group, “Do you guys use that term? Like, oh, that’s fam and it’s like, oh, LGBTQ+, but it’s like, other people wouldn’t know the code, but they’re like, that’s fam. But like, Oh, he’s cool... Is he, you know, you know, a friend of Dorothy?”

“Community is a powerful experience,” Seth begins. “Like we talked about earlier with Dillan’s search for community, we all crave that. It’s a big deal. For example, when I was

deciding to attend a Christian college several years ago, the biggest selling points on the tour were not academics, rigor, opportunities, or long-term success of graduates, it was the ‘community’ and the people that you got to know, which helps meet the community need, but doesn’t meet the safety, rigor, or achievement needs. That’s how important community is for many people, and I see that for myself wanting to be around people who are Queer or allies, because it feels safe, affirming, and there are some shared understandings.”

Jayden responds, “Definitely. I think because, you know, it’s the LGBTQ+ community for a reason, and there’s this community there. There’s a very tender trust, and I just can’t even tell you how many times I felt more at ease, just knowing somebody else identifies that way. And it’s almost like you just feel seen, or not so alone, just having one- just like they say, for kids, having one trusted adult can really turn them around, I think it goes for us as adults too. Having one other LGBTQ+ identifying person really makes you feel a little bit safer, even if you don’t come out to them. It’s a very tender understanding, and we share that as LGBTQ+ people in general.”

“Along with feeling safer,” Dillan adds, “it can also be inspiring to have that role model. My current administrator has been really phenomenal to work with, and it’s been really great and a positive experience. Like he’s a gay man, who’s successful in his element and good at what he does. It helped me to realize that I want to finish my master’s in administration. If anything, it was inspiring to me to be like, yeah, I would love nothing more than to be a principal and be open about my sexuality. Whether that’s at an elementary school or middle school, either way I think it’d be really positive to have that because it’s such a more open and common thing that occurs throughout our world. But I think that played a big factor for me of just being more comfortable.”

“I imagine we can also be role models for our students, in that same way,” Seth adds.

Gloria agrees, “Yes. I’ve had students come through that, you know, I could guess that they were Queer in middle school, and by the time they got to high school, and they figured out where they were headed, I would get like, thank you notes from some of them. But one time, one of the moms was mortified that her son, I think the phrase used was ‘normalized,’ because for him to be able to come out to his parents, he used me as an example. Like, ‘she has a normal life. I can be normal. It’ll be okay.’ I’ve gotten letters or notes or whatever, from kids through the years on opening doors for them. In the high school, when I worked with those kids, I always told them, ‘there are causes I will lose my job for, you just let me know when you need me.’ And, you know, we’ve battled a couple of things. And outside of the teaching math relationship with my kids, they all know my door is open and I will fight to my death for them.”

Dillan responds, “And knowing that I’m different, like certain kids pick up on it, and they know it, without necessarily saying it or verbalizing anything, they just know I’m a safe person, because they too, are maybe Queer or figuring things out, or they’re just different themselves. And so it’s funny to me that the ‘cool’ kids are ones I have to work harder to connect with than the weirdos. I have to make more of an effort with them, you know, like with sports stuff, and to connect with things that they enjoy, but that’s just as a teacher, you got to do that. I think that if I really thought back to my time in school, I was a weirdo. So it makes sense.”

“And there are so many different ways we can support our students – being visible and coming up to bat for them, to name a couple, or working with the GSA like Diana mentioned,” Seth adds.

“At both schools I’ve worked at I’ve somehow found myself in charge of the LGBTQ+ clubs” says Eric.

“For a while, I was known as the fairy godmother of my school’s alphabet mafia,” Diana begins, laughing. “I cut my hair off really super short at the beginning of the year, and when I came back to school that next week with the really short hair, several kids said ‘well now you look like it! It’s easier to see.’ I was like, ‘I’m sorry, what are you talking about?’ And they would tell me ‘you pinged my gaydar!’ and so the kids at my school know I’m someone they can talk to. There’s also an elective class I teach, and when I started to teach it, I changed the format of the class. From first semester to second semester, enrollment increased by like 300%. I think I have about 15 Kids this semester, who were also in my class first semester, and then a bunch of kids who heard about the class and decided to enroll. But like, I have one class where almost every single kid in that class, except for one boy and one girl, is part of the alphabet mafia in one way or another. And they all talked to me about it at some point, and like, it’s amazing how much fun that class is. But it’s interesting, because I don’t see them behave that way anywhere else in the building. When I run into them in other places, it’s a totally different kind of kid, but in here, we just we make rainbows all over the projects, and we sit around and talk a lot. They’ll sit, glaze their pots, and we’ll just talk. But one of them, the boy, who was not necessarily the most aware at the beginning of the semester, has discovered that this is a really interesting topic. And he’s definitely not part of that group - he still likes to assure us on a fairly regular basis that he likes girls. We’re like, that’s cool, dude, and there’s one of the other girls that adds like ‘yeah, me too.’ But it’s been interesting to watch him go from being very uncomfortable at the beginning of the semester, looking around the room and noticing what class was like, not knowing all the people in this class, to now he’s just part of the group. Even though he does feel the need to remind us on a regular basis that he’s heterosexual. Which I think is hilarious.” She pauses to laugh and is joined by others in the group.

“Like, he came in the first day and they’re all kind of sitting there because it’s the first day, and they don’t know for sure what to expect. We did the syllabus things the first day and I talked about the projects we did first semester, and these are some of the things that I thought about for second semester, but I told them I really wanted them to help me with figuring out what kinds of things we would explore, because they were going to be in charge of a the directions we go. So as they’re all sitting there very quiet on the first day of class, he’s sitting in like the second row, and as I watched him, I don’t think he made eye contact with me the whole time, because he was like, looking around, and frowning, and he was really quiet the second day too. And then by the end of the week, because we only met every other day, he had started to talk to one of the boys that he was kind of familiar with. They weren’t necessarily friends or anything, but that boy is very subtle and reserved and shy and stuff. I knew that he’s gay, but the other kid didn’t, and they just started talking. That little group of three boys became the group that he hung out with. It was probably three or four weeks into class when the girls on the other side of the room were talking about something and those boys had joined the conversation, that he suddenly this kiddo was like, ‘what you too?! This whole room? Everybody but me, are you kidding me?!’ and then, and that was it. That was the one and only time that it was ever an issue, and he was never, like, upset. It was just this blow up of- ‘you’re everywhere!’ And then we continued on, and everything was fine.”

The group starts to laugh again at this student’s reaction. “Yes, we are everywhere,” Seth agrees. “And that’s why I think these conversations are so important. Like, we need to have a better understanding of Queer experiences, positive and negative, in order to advocate for ourselves and share our stories.”

Scene 6 Discussion

Scene 6 provides additional insight into answers for RQ1, regarding the experiences of Queer educators, and RQ3, regarding how Queer educator identities and practice influence their professional interactions. In Chapter One, it was noted that Woog (1995) argues that Queer educators can be found in almost every school in America. The participants highlight in this scene the number of Queer educators that work at their school buildings: Dillan explained that his principal is openly gay, and that there is another gay teacher in his 3A rural middle school, Eric is one of two Queer educators, Gloria is the only lesbian, and believes there is a second Queer educator that she noted “will never come out,” and Jayden described several Queer staff members, not just educators, that he has worked with over the years. Diana, Will, and Dani did not express if there were other Queer educators in their buildings. If I, as the author and facilitator, think about the school that I work at, we have a fairly large Queer presence within our staff, though I am the only certified staff member that I know is Queer and is out at this time. The limited number of Queer educators often creates a situation where the educators in this study lacked community or have been asked to act as a spokesperson for Queer topics and issues.

Thriving in positive community is a powerful tool for overcoming barriers. This can be seen in how recovery groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, structure their programs around being in community with others. This can also be seen in the use of community centered therapeutic approaches for those dealing with severe emotional disturbances or severe and persistent mental illnesses. Additionally, the power of positive community is evident in the stories shared by participants.

For example, Jayden shared that simply having others like him around made him “feel less alone and a little bit more comfortable.” That community and presentness is felt by those

who may be singled out and cannot be achieved if they are the only Queer person at the school. It also can allow for Queer educators to feel safer in their various contexts to have someone similar to them around. The fears described throughout the various scenes of this narrative are alleviated, or even reduced, by having other Queer people around. This is the power of being in community with others. Feelings of fear, perceptions of loneliness, and experiences with extra mental calculations required due to being Queer impact Queer educators in their day-to-day and produce heightened affective states, which were discussed in Chapter Two and impact Queer educators in the schoolhouse and beyond.

Jayden also pointed out that having just one trusted adult, or those that help us to feel safer, can really make a difference in the same way that having just one trusted adult can make a lasting impact in the lives of our students. Once, I was talking with a previous student who explained to me that me being an out Queer educator at their school simply made them feel safer and less alone. This parallel exists not only in the relationships that Queer educators make with each other, but also those that they make with their students, and how they can act as role models.

Queer educators can act as role models for each other and for their students. Acting as a role model helps to describe both overarching themes of solidarity and extra work. By being a role model, the Queer educators are able to demonstrate solidarity with Queer students and provide that person they can look up to, such as in Gloria's experience. By being role models, Queer educators can also provide each other with people to look up to, which was Dillan's experience with his administrator. However, there are extra pressures, tasks, and expectations when one becomes that role model for others, which constitute the extra work that is created due to the identities and experiences of Queer educators.

As a role model, Diana described herself as “the fairy godmother of my school’s alphabet mafia.” She described connections with students across all three grade levels at her middle school, and that many of the Queer students wanted to take her class and spend time with her. She even described a story where the vast majority of one of her class periods consists of Queer students, and another student’s reaction to learning that he was one of two non-Queer students in there. This demonstrates the impact that Diana has on her Queer students and how she steps up as a role model. Being a role model, while it constitutes extra work, also is a show of solidarity.

Scene 7 Narrative

“One thing I’d like to circle back to is how our experiences with administrators have been. Administrators, like Dillan and Buckley shared, can make a huge difference in school culture and how we feel at work. Does anyone else want to share about experiences with administrators?”

Gloria jumps in, “I did have an experience with a principal at one point, shortly after I came out. We had a pretty good relationship and one day she called me into her office, laughing. She said, ‘I had prepared a speech for the day a parent came through my door to say, I don’t want this lesbian teaching my kids, I don’t want her near my kids or whatever. I had it all prepared.’ Then she went on to tell me that, ironically, the parent that came in to complain was complaining about one of the elementary teachers – the same one that is gay but will never come out. The parent came in and said, ‘I don’t want that gay man teaching my kids!’ Again, he’s not out and never will be. But it was just hilarious to me that my administrator had prepared for someone to complain about me, but the first parent complaint that came was against him and not against me. But I’ve been through a lot of admin, none of them have ever questioned anything.”

“I know we’ve come a long way,” Jayden begins, “but I am not naive to the fact that a parent or a guardian could pull their kid from my class if they knew that I was gay. And I don’t want to risk that happening or seeing what my admin response would be to that. I just wouldn’t want a kid to be pulled from my class. And like, it does feel like a part of me is a little bit ashamed, and that’s just not it. It’s just I recognize my role, I recognize my potential impact, and I’ve got to protect both of those and myself.”

Several group members mumble, “mmhm,” recognizing this fear and understanding where it comes from. Will speaks directly to Jayden, “When I very first started teaching, I had a dad that wanted his daughter out of my class because I hugged her. I know it was because of more than me hugging. I know he saw right through me, like what happens when you’re gay and people figure it out. I mean, I didn’t hide myself in front of my kids. All I was ever known as to my kids as Mr. Grace, and they saw the real me all the time. I never told them I was gay or anything, but that was just Mr. Grace, there was nothing different. They were probably the only ones at the beginning that knew who I really was, you know? And so he requested for his

daughter to get out of my class, and I remember how crushed I felt. And I remember one thing that really helped shape me, honestly, and helped me with accepting who I was, was how my principal responded to that dad. My principal told that dad, 'you need to understand some things really quick: number one, I can definitely move your daughter out of his class, but I will not be doing it.' She was like 'you should know that there is not a single, more loving, caring teacher in this building, and that there are people fighting to get their kid into that class, so that would be a really big mistake on your part. I can do it, but it will not be what you want it to be.' And so the kid ended up staying in my class. And that helped build my confidence, just her telling me that she believed in me that way regardless of whether I was gay or straight, because I presented as straight back then. She saw right through it too, but knowing that she believed in me, and I had such high respect for me allowed me to develop and be the best teacher this kid could ever have."

"So again, I'm hearing that administrators can make a huge difference. When they're advocating for staff, when they're building a positive school culture, when they do small little shows of solidarity, like putting pronouns in their email signatures, and so much more," Seth adds. "Does anyone else want to share?"

Diana raises her hand and begins her story. "A couple of years ago, I had a dad come in and like get up in my face and yell about 'are you gay?! Should you be talking about this?! Those kinds of- Don't you think those kinds of topics should be talked about at home and not school?!' I was like, 'the existence of gay people? You want me to not talk about the existence of gay people at school?' Because he was mad because his daughter was in my homeroom, and every other week I was gone from homeroom one day because that was when our GSA club met. The girl had asked, 'so where's it you go every other week?' And I was like, 'well, I go to GSA.' And they wanted to know what it was, so I explained to them what it was and dad showed up just over 24 hours later - didn't ask for an appointment, didn't tell anybody what he was coming for. He just told the secretary he needed to talk to me, and she walked him down and I still don't- that part still bothers me. But she walked him down and then he yelled at me for half an hour. Then he left and then went down to the office and yelled at the principal for probably half an hour. How this connects to admin though, is at the end of that year, the principal and the superintendent found reasons unrelated to write me up, which none of them actually made any sense. So I wrote all over the form about how what they said wasn't a thing or that statement is not true, how this is barely connected, and this is an example of bigotry. And then nothing ever happened after that. But it was, I can't imagine, I cannot imagine that those things are not connected because of the timeline, and the way they happened, and the personality of the principal at the time. But yeah, that's probably my only, my one negative. Which I think that's pretty good for a 20 year career to have one experience like that."

"I don't have a ton of specific incidences, really," Eric begins, but it's always that like, underlying anxiety that I am going to say something or word something wrong, and somebody's just going to be mad and make my sexuality like, a big deal. But like one experience I had my first year working as a para, I had this student who was on the autism spectrum and learning to properly handle emotions and feelings of interest, and he always wanted me to walk with him from his seventh hour class since it was another adult in the hall. One time we were walking, and I asked him something like, about how his day was going, and he told me, 'it would be better if we were in bed together.' And I was like 'okay, bye,' and I ran to the office, like, 'I promise you can pull the camera like, he's been weird to me in this class, and this is what he said, and this is what happened.' I was really worried that like, the parents were gonna, like, flip it on me. I was

like, 'I can't be in class with him, I can't be around him. I have to do this for me.' And it was not handled very well. One admin I told was dismissive and like, laughed at me to my face. Then I went to another principal, who was also dismissive and didn't really think anything of it. It wasn't until I went to like, the one female principal that shit got done. I had to be like, 'this changes or I quit.'"

"And it's not really admin, I guess," he continues, "but we also have our school psych who very much doesn't like me because of my sexuality. She doesn't explicitly say it, but she doesn't need to. Like there's an interesting family situation where there's a family where the entire family is trans, and she was like, making fun of the parent and the student, really just being a bigot about that. And then she like, told me a story about how she still doesn't understand why, in the mid-90s, she got in trouble for telling a teacher that someone had AIDS and she didn't get why it was a big deal. She was like, saying this to me, who is someone who identifies with a community that lost most of its history from that."

"And like, this isn't about admin, but is about experiences as a Queer educator. I was greeting for a drama production I was part of at the school, and just holding the door. This student, who's like very calculated and malicious, came walking in with a smirk. As they were walking in, she was like, Dad, that's what I was telling you about, and I was like, 'hello!'. Then she was like, 'hi, Mr. Banks. Will you tell my dad what you teach again?' And so I said 'Yep, I'm a seventh grade special education teacher.' And she was like, 'okay,' and after they walked by I heard him go, 'oh, he is a faggot.'" Eric pauses for a moment. "Luckily, I have positive people as well. Like, I have this feisty coworker who I love, and I told my boyfriend at the show, and she wanted to know what happened. I had to tell her 'I'll tell you tomorrow,' because I knew if I told her she would get up and say something, and I didn't want her to risk getting in trouble for something that was, like in that moment, I was like, that's rude, but I don't let that word hold power over me anymore."

Eric continues, "And there are other positive experiences as well. I have student who is trans, and they were terrified to come to school because of the bills being passed by the legislature. But my admin was like, understanding of the concerns but being clear that like, no, we're not taking him out of men's choir, and PE classes don't change because they're coed already. So my admin asked me to reassure the student that yes, these bills passed, and they're stupid, but we are not changing how we do things here. Unless we get some drastic message from the district, we are going to keep along how we have been keeping along. We're still going to be affirming those identities." There are some head nods around the table, proud to hear of admin supporting trans youth.

Gloria contributes to the question, saying, "Probably the only one I've ever had was when one of our administrators way back didn't like that the juniors and seniors for prom would just invite any freshmen or sophomore, like girls inviting their female friends and guys inviting their male friends, just because they all wanted to go to prom together and be there with friends. So he wanted to get something in writing that wouldn't allow that, he was trying to somehow control that. He started to make the wording something about opposite sex date, or something, I don't know how he was going to word it. But I had a young man come to me and say, 'it's my senior year and I was finally gonna get to bring my boyfriend to prom and he goes to a different school' And I'm like, 'ah, hell no. Let's go. Let's go talk to him.' I said, 'yes, this is one of the hills I will die on. If we need to, I will go to him.' And the minute I walked through his door with this young man, the administrator immediately threw up his hands and said, 'I know I messed up, I've already tossed it out. It's not happening.' Like, he knew right then what we were there about,

and he knew he was in the wrong and he didn't even attempt it. But outside of that, my admin has never questioned my lifestyle. I just had one that questioned my attire, but that's another story."

Dillan adds, "The only issue I've really run into is with my principal at my previous school. He is a very religious person, and he didn't directly say he had a problem with me being gay, but I think that caused a big rift between us, and he's the reason why I left my last building. I will never teach under him again, ever. I wanted to leave teaching entirely because of him. As an administrator, he was not what I was looking for, and he didn't make me feel great about myself or my teaching abilities and stuff. It was hard, because he I was the only other male in the building, and I think that also caused a power struggle with him. So I think there might have been some issues with just me also being a male, and then on top of it, being a gay man, because of the church's teachings and him struggling with that. Like growing up very Catholic, I understand it, but at the same time, love is love. God doesn't throw shame on us because we're gay, but also, He made us this way. I didn't choose to be gay. That's not something I would have chosen for myself, because if I could choose not to be gay, I would be married to a woman, and we'd have like 10 children right now."

After some chuckling dies down, Seth says, "It sounds like we all have a wide range of experiences as Queer educators, and I'm thankful that we can have this chance to hear each other's stories. I think it's interesting that there are generally positive experiences overall, but those negative experiences are there as well. When I was previewing these questions, I expected a lot more negative experiences. But it's encouraging to hear that the negative experiences are fewer and farther between. I want to go ahead and move into the next question, which is *"how do you see your Queer identity/ identities impacting your practice as an educator?"*

Scene 7 Discussion

Scene 7 begins with addressing RQ3, regarding the professional interactions of Queer educators. Dillan and Diana highlighted the strong positive impact that their administrators have made at their schools, particularly regarding the school culture. Chapter Two described many ways that school culture can impact Queer educators, including if they decide to come out or not, how that culture can assist with dismantling systems of oppression, and the difference that a positive, affirming, and accepting school culture can make.

Participants also shared negative experiences within their professional interactions, particularly as they relate to administrators. Gloria explained a situation where an administrator wanted to create a policy that targeted Queer students, and she was prepared to stand in solidarity with that student by addressing that issue with her administrator. Diana also described a situation where a parent was upset that she mentioned going to her school's GSA club and how

administration responded in unfavorable ways to this situation. Eric described situations with administration not addressing concerns and were “dismissive.” Dillan provided a contrast between his current administrator, who is also gay, and his previous administrator, who he described having a “rift” with due to the administrators’ personal beliefs.

Many of the experiences described in this scene highlight the homophobia and intolerance experienced by Queer educators, which help to understand why Queer educators must do so many extra mental calculations compared to their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts. Eric described an experience where a student’s parent referred to him as a “faggot.” Jayden described his very (very) real fear that a parent may try to have a student pulled from his class because he is gay, and Will was able to explain how that situation almost happened to him. However, in Will’s situation, the support from his administrator made a difference in how that played out along with having a profound impact on his own self efficacy.

This scene in particular also shows how one could answer RQ2, regarding how Queer educator identities and experiences impact their practice. Their experiences and identities foster the theme of solidarity, which is demonstrated through the category of standing up for the underdog. Standing up for the underdog, however, creates extra work for the Queer educator. This can be seen in Gloria’s willingness to march to “one of the hills [she] will die on” and how she was ready to stand up for that student’s right to bring his date to prom.

Scene 8 Narrative

“Something I would like to speak about at some point today, is the intersectionality between being Black and Queer. Is now a good time to share about that? Because that’s a perspective that I’d like to share.”

“Yeah, I think now is a great time to hear your thoughts on this, because that is a unique perspective in this group and both of those things, I imagine, likely influence how you go about your job and could be intertwined,” says Seth.

“I think that, probably what I carry a lot with me is how I had like a really loving family and great friends, and still felt really alone most of the time. And it sometimes shows up in in

funky ways in my adult life, where I feel like I can't ask for help, or I just don't know how, because from age five, which is when I probably knew to age 21, so for like 16 years, just carrying something all alone, it's really heavy, which again, I go back to how I feel like I can get people out of their shell. Not saying I'm trying to get kids to come out or anything like that, but I just want them to be their authentic selves and just want them to feel comfortable in their skin, and I feel like I can do that because I felt really alone for a lot of my adolescent years into my young adult years."

"I grew up in, you know, the Black church, which is it's still a really big part of me, but has led to a lot of conflicting feelings growing up. I'm not ashamed of how I was brought up, but just acknowledging some added struggles. Like to feel really strongly about your faith, but then to feel really nasty and like something's wrong with you in the same breath, it causes for a lot of confusion about where I fit, being gay and going to the church. Like, am I manly enough? Am I a good Christian? Am I being the best version of myself that I can be? It creates a lot of just questioning yourself and some self-doubt, and negative self-talk, too. Kind of like what Dillan was describing. I know a lot of LGBTQ+ people get turned away or are turned off from church. And I am not here to judge them, and I am sorry that the church hurt them so badly. But I am still involved in it. But I have also gotten looks from other LGBTQ+ identifying people for still being involved in the church. So it's like, gosh, you just can't please everybody! It's like, I'm not manly enough. I'm not Christian enough. But then people learn I'm a gay Christian, and they're like, 'why? Why are you there? They hate us.' So I've gotten it from all sides. It is really hurtful, you know, when Black people are not accepted for being Queer, which has not been the experience in my case, and I just feel so blessed for that a lot of my family who knows, has been really, really supportive, and then all my friends. I always say that it is not lost on me that my coming out journey has been so much when compared to other Black men in their 20s, who had similar upbringings."

"But as a Black educator, I don't speak for all Black people, but we might have similar experiences. Being the only male in the building is speaking for a men's perspective, too. It's like, I'm the spokesperson for all of man and for all Black people at the school. Like one experience I have is where a lot of the times, coworkers might ask me if I have hair products for Black boys. And I absolutely have those resources. I've got this hair, so I've got some stuff they can lay down. I've also got some deodorant for the older boys, but that's just anybody. I do have different hair products, and that actually was coming from my last district, where a lot of those kids went without, and so I just knew I had to have that stuff on deck. And it just carried on because it's always I tell the kids, I always want you to have what you need."

"There have been times where I've been asked to proof an email or something, maybe to a Black parent, and there's some stuff that I've kind of helped correct. So it's not all heavy times, but sometimes it's just like, jeez. You want to make sure that you're trying to support your colleague, that you're also setting up these kids and families for success. So I just say that too much is given, much is required. And I just tell them as best as I can, like I'm not the expert on this, but this is what I would do, especially dealing with a certain type of demographic of parents. But again, it's not one size fits all. All parents are different, regardless of backgrounds. So again, I do what I can. I answer from a place of experience if I have it and then I answer from a place of what would be the best-case scenario if I haven't dealt with it before."

"And like as a Queer Black person, you know, I feel like both are important parts of my identity, but like I cannot take the Black skin off. People wouldn't know I was a teacher, unless I had my badge on. They wouldn't necessarily know how I identify sexuality wise, but first and

foremost, what people think of me automatically is Black and male. And I'm kind of always wondering what they would think if they found out I am gay. But it's gotten better with time and growing and finding your people and getting comfortable with who you are. But it's like always looking over your shoulder, especially in my experience because there's so much homophobia in the Black community. Like I've always struggled with if I'm enough of a man. But I felt like a lot of people look at me as less than when we tack on that 'G' for being gay onto it. You know what I mean? It's like looking over your shoulder, thinking about what people within your community will think about you, and you don't want people to think lowly of you."

"What is your experience with homophobia in the Black community?" Seth asks.

"You know, like with the Black Lives Matter stuff going on, like obviously I'm all for valuing and highlighting Black lives. But I saw a post from another Black Queer individual, and it went viral. I didn't know him, but it really kind of summed up kind of how, how I think Black, Queer people can feel sometimes. Where it was like- actually, can I look for it real quick? I might have it. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, we would love to see it."

"Thank you, I just didn't want to be rude." Jayden takes a minute trying to find the post he's referencing, and the rest of the group takes a moment to stretch, stand up, and move. Once he finds the picture, he shows it to the whole group. "This is in response to the George Floyd killing, during the summer of 2020 when the marches and the riots were going on" (Figure 17).

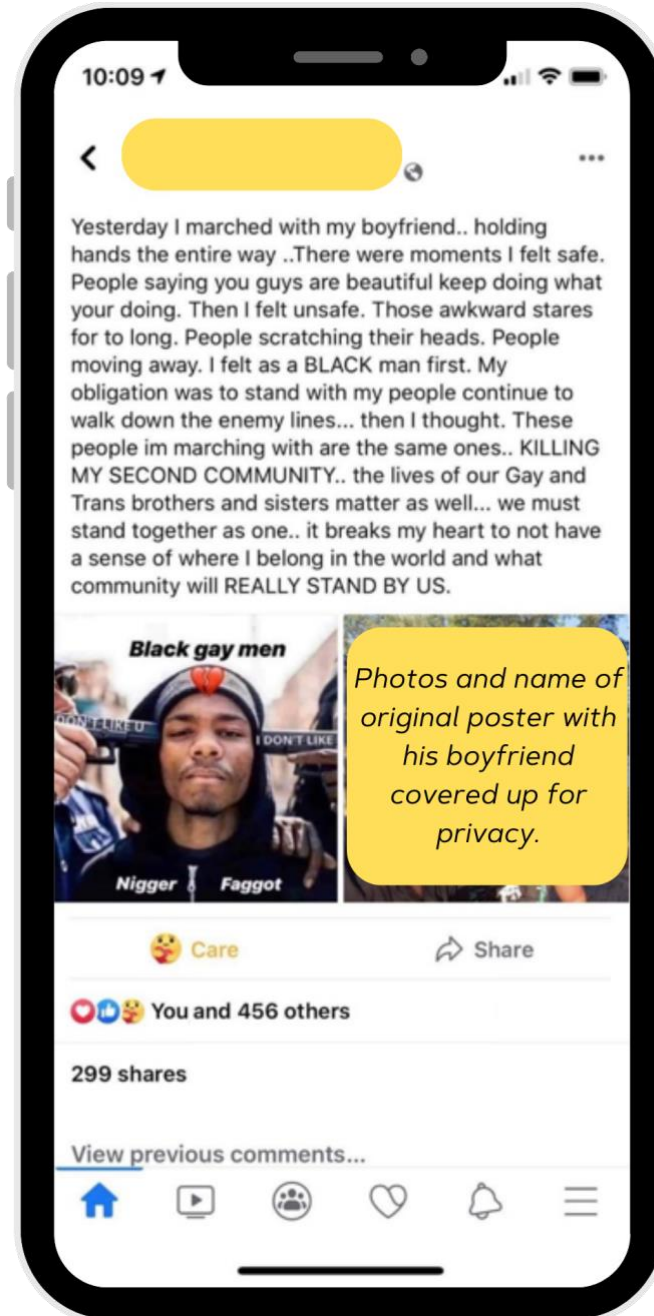


Figure 17: Black and Queer Social Media Post Reference

“And I just thought that this was so poignantly put, that guy’s thoughts as a Black man first, how I feel a lot of the time, where there’s so much homophobia in the Black community. And being a Christian, going to church, being a teacher, being Black, and being gay, all of these are different pieces of me, but it’s me. It is.”

Scene 8 Discussion

This scene was dedicated to Jayden's discussion of the intersection of Queerness and Blackness. During the first interview session, Jayden, in the same way he explained he wanted to discuss this topic within this scene, expressed that he wanted to talk about how these identities and experiences tie together for him. He went on to explain that he has been involved in other projects that look at the experiences of Black educators, but that he does not ever get to talk about how being gay ties into these experiences. He shared a powerful narrative about how his experiences differ from those of white participants, and as those experiences address RQ1, he is also able to describe how his identities and experiences impact his practice in order to address RQ2.

Jayden described a heightened sense of empathy for others because of his experiences, which allows for a show of solidarity along with deeper connection with others, which can be observed in Jayden's ability to get people out of their metaphorical shell, or to act as their "authentic selves." Jayden described his connection with students and coworkers in previous scenes, and it will remain evident throughout future scenes that connection is a key value for him. However, this solidarity and simply being Queer and Black also generates extra work for him, like when he described having products for Black hair or proofreading emails to Black families.

When considering the extra work that identities and experiences create for Queer educators, Jayden has even more work that he is faced with, particularly as it relates to answering questions from others (acting as a spokesperson) and the mental calculations that he has to make navigating the day-to-day. He provided a powerful example when he shared the internet post he referenced and points out the intensity of homophobia in the Black community. This is

something that white people are not subject to and reflects the need to “take up the torch” and the extra work placed on minoritized populations as described in Chapter Two, which creates additional pressure in Jayden’s life.

Scene 9 Narrative

“Thank you for sharing. You’re right, those are things that those of us who are white don’t have to think about. And I’m hearing that there’s a conflict between being Christian and Queer, and pushback from both sides. I’m also hearing that there are those extra things, almost like requirements or expectations, that you deal with, proofing emails, or having product for Black hair. I wonder, does anyone else have experiences about where they are the ‘go to’ representative for Queer voices, or ways they see their Queerness impacting their practice?” Seth asks.

“Yeah,” Eric begins, “I feel like I’m more cognizant of it. I mean, I do become like the spokesperson for it, too, because I am one of two openly Queer teachers at our school, and I’m the only one that’s full time. So like, kids ask me all the time questions about sexuality. And if we have a student who we know is Queer, has different pronouns, or that they might be experimenting with their identities, for our SPED kids, I’m like, I’ll just take them because I know I’ll be respectful and stuff like that. If the other teacher were returning, then I don’t feel like I’d have to bear hug around kids like that as much, but since I don’t know who’s coming in, I’m definitely like, alright, you’re with me.”

“It almost sounds like you’re taking on this protectiveness for the Queer kids that need a case manager next year” Seth explains. “Kind of like how Gloria was willing to go to bat for that student she was talking about with the prom situation, or how Buckley has become this alphabet mafia fairy godmother. Does anyone else have any stories about this protectiveness?”

“There was a student in another grade who painted his nails, and the teacher, who was a good friend, came up to me and she’s like, ‘Will, how do we navigate this? The other kids are making fun of him.’ And I’m like, ‘I will paint my tonight, I’ll walk into your classroom tomorrow, and I’ll hand you some papers right in front of everybody to make sure that everyone sees my pretty sparkly nails.’”

“It almost sounds like a form of solidarity in that instance, and in others. What are some other ways that we are protective of or supportive of our Queer students?”

Dani jumps in to answer the question, “So last year, part of me trying to subtly hint to my kiddos that I’m a safe person, I added a progressive pride flag on my lanyard.” She then starts to show the table her lanyard (Figure 18). “And then I found this ‘you are safe with me’ progressive pride flag pin on Etsy, and I was like, yes, that is exactly what I want my kids to know. And I got my pronouns pin to normalize the sharing of pronouns. Like, for the most part, I mean, I look like what I identify as, but that doesn’t matter, right? Go ahead and share my pronouns with others, because if I share, then someone can feel comfortable sharing. So, just trying to normalize that. And I also have an inclusive, we welcome, just all types of students, by my door in English and in Spanish.”



Figure 18: Lanyard Example from Participant

Diana adds, “I also have rainbows all over my room. And parents have complained, but I don’t take them down, because I have an extraordinarily supportive principal. I just have everything in rainbows. The first time I did it was with my CHAMPS poster, because it has six sections, and so it just made sense to do it rainbow. Then one of the kids asked about it, and I said, ‘well, of course I did it - I like rainbows,’ and then that was like a tool that started a conversation. That first time, it was just because I like when they’re in order. It makes my soul feel happy when the colors are in the order the way they’re supposed to be. But then after that it was deliberate. Everything shall be rainbows! My signs about what scientists do became rainbow. when I put up posters about the weather, or volcanos, or what have you, I will intentionally put them up so that they make a rainbow. So like, there’s nothing necessarily overt, they’re just everywhere. And the kids that know, they know that’s what I’m doing. Some kids don’t notice it, and some do. And the ones who notice it a lot of times, ask ‘are the rainbows on purpose?’ And I’m like ‘of course they’re on purpose.’ And they’re like, ‘Oh, that’s really cool.’ And then they want to talk about things. But other than that, it’s mostly just, pretty much anytime I have the opportunity to make something rainbow-ish, it’s a rainbow.”

Diana has opened her laptop and shows it to the group. “I also have one on my laptop by the keyboard” she says, pointing to the sticker. “And I’ve had multiple kids while I’m doing whatever, come up, and they touch the sticker.” Diana pauses and touches the sticker herself to show what students do. “Then they ask me a question. And I don’t know what it is about that sticker on the computer, I don’t know why they all feel the need to touch it, but they do, and then they will ask me something like, ‘is that there because...?’ And I’m like, ‘yes’. They don’t even have to finish the question, the answer is yes. And then they follow up with ‘can I talk to you after class?’ and my response is ‘absolutely, yes.’”

“It sounds like there’s some use of signs and symbols that cue that this is a safe space, or that you are a safe person. And I’m thinking that there’s also just some solidarity through just being open or coming out to students, like what Gloria, Eric, Buckley, and Dillan have mentioned, like just being there and being open.

“Well, I try not to mix the two,” Gloria begins. “It’s not an issue and I go in there to teach my math. But it’s not a secret. I will openly reference my wife, like I said. But kids will often

come back to me when they're in high school and, like, they have to come back to come out to me for some reason. But I just try not to mix the two. It's not an issue. I don't make it an issue. And so as far as that goes, I don't know, maybe I'm the poster child for them? I don't know how to say that other than it gives them something to reference, like she's kind of normal, so they think they can have a normal life and live this lifestyle."

Diana jumps back into the conversation, "As a mostly cis female in a heterosexual relationship, like, I could very easily not have any kind of Queer image at all. But I do it on purpose so that middle school kids know that just that there are other people around, and that they're not by themselves. Now with the number of students who are openly Queer at my school, I don't think they would think that they were by themselves just because the community at the school is so big. But most of the ones that were really visible are in high school now."

Seth inquires, "Kind of like how Dillan was talking about having an administrator to look up to, the students have Queer role models to look up to?" Several heads are nodding at the table in response. He continues, "And this all ties back to the original question about how you see your Queerness impacting your practice as educators. Are there other ways that you can see this in action?"

"I just remembered a couple of other things," Dani interjects. "I have some pride flags up in my room and like, I had a kid who came up to me in the hallway and was like 'I like the flags behind your desk!' and I'm like 'thanks, kid!' They haven't said anything since, but I am cool about it. It was a good interaction. They noticed the flags and if they ever needed to talk, they can come talk to me. I was really excited when that happened. I also had another student who was working on a name tag at their desk, and on it they put like, the pride flag, and love is love, and they were hiding it under their desk. When I walked by, I saw it. I don't know if they were trying to get me to see it, but when I walked by later, they had taken a piece of paper and glued it over the rainbow and phrase. Then I thought to myself 'okay, I think even if you did not intend for me to notice, my room made you feel safe. And now I'm going to be keeping an eye on you,' type of thing. Those signs and symbols are being noticed by students."

Jayden adds, "I really do like some of the rainbow stuff. It's subtle. I don't want anyone to think I'm indoctrinating students or anything like that, but it's like, I am more than an ally, if you're catching my drift. But my students are in second grade. And me, working with such young kiddos, I never want to project that onto them. But I do want to be a safe space, should they feel different. But at second grade, they're just learning. Now fourth and fifth? That's a different conversation. But I also want all my students to know that everyone is welcome here in this classroom. And in class, we do books for certain times of the year. Like August is back to school, then we have Hispanic Heritage Month, Native Heritage Month, and winter holidays, not just Christmas. January is MLK, followed by Black History Month, then Women's History, and Earth Day/ Month. I am trying to be very intentional and align it up to the real world with you know, what we're highlighting too as well. But like during Hispanic Heritage Month, there was a book about Frida Kahlo that I believe mentioned her sexuality in it, and then during Native Heritage Month, we read about the congresswoman who was the first lesbian native woman elected, and I do know we talked about it with her too. So we have touched on Queer people lightly, and I probably would highlight it more if we were in school in June, since that's Pride Month."

After a pause, Dillan jumps in, "Thinking back to being role models, we have a trans student who is struggling to get to school because of some concerns, and like we have two gay teachers at the school, but that grade doesn't have a Queer person on their team. And I'm not

saying that it's their fault or problem, but I do almost wonder if it would be helpful for the student to have a Queer teacher that they work with, just as somebody to connect with a little bit more, and if that could help the situation."

"That is a good question, Dillan. Overall, I'm hearing that Queerness can impact practice by being a role model, by representing Queer themes or creating safe spaces, by practicing solidarity, and by including Queer voices and experiences in the curriculum," Seth Summarizes. "Does anyone else have examples of their Queerness impacting their curriculum?"

"Well, nature has almost no binaries," Diana begins, "and being outside the binary has influenced the way I teach that. And I also struggle with the idea that there are topics that are off limits. There may be topics that I'm not going to talk about with the whole class, but if a kid asks me a direct question, and I have answers for it, I will share my information. I have kids come up to me to ask where babies come from, or I have some that ask about the origin of the universe, and I am very careful to talk about how this perspective is the scientific, evidence-based perspective. When we talk about genetics and the X and Y chromosomes, and the different ways that those combine, I talk about the fact that nature has almost no binaries. Almost everything in nature is on a spectrum, and I make sure to emphasize those kinds of things, even if I never say anything about people's orientation at all. I always make sure to emphasize the fact that we don't know all the answers, science is always changing as we keep learning more. But that's definitely one of the biggest things that I know that being outside of the binary has influenced the way I teach that, how it's not either/or, but that it can be all of them, all at once."

Eric joins the conversation. "Last year at my other school when I was a para, we did a project on famous people from Kansas. We did it during Black History Month, so I did a part on Janelle Monae because I love her. That was really cool, because it was about an out Queer woman, and that was really cool, because I never got a chance to learn about any of that stuff when I was growing up. Then we expanded it to the whole United States, and so like kids got to learn about Marsha P. Johnson, and we got to explore more than just the typical history characters." He pauses for a moment. "And I think that my Queerness helps because I tend to explain things using references that the kids know. Like, sports references, I'm like sure, cool. But if it's pop culture, then I'm like, 'yes! I've got this.' I always tell my kids, here's how you remember how to write your argumentative essay: you want to back it up with three body paragraphs. So think Megan, Thee Stallion - body -ody -ody." Eric holds up one finger for each part. "Three body paragraphs. And I don't think a straight person would do that." He makes the last comment with a chuckle.

Will adds, "Well, I taught kindergarten so we didn't talk about Queer stuff specifically, but like, we talked about families all the time, and that's one of our social studies concepts that we teach. I always made it very much a point that family is anyone who cares about you. You know, it can be two moms, two dads, it could be grandma, grandpa, it does not have to just be the family that we see on TV. And I would find literature that supported that, you know, like the children's book 'Families, Families, Families,' which specifically says two moms, two dads. And I use the picture from Modern Family as a big extended family, because we talked about how families are mommies and daddies, and they're also mommies and mommies, and daddies and daddies, grandmas, and grandpas. That's just being more inclusive of those kinds of things. When it comes to people, there is no set specific way you should be."

Scene 9 Discussion

RQ 2 is put on display in this scene as it relates to how Queer identities and experiences impact the participants' practice as educators. Primarily, the demonstration of the theme of solidarity through the use of signs and symbols was described by the participants, who showed this solidarity through the presence of rainbows, but also within the curriculum itself. Dani, Diana, Jayden, and I all recognized the use of rainbows as a tool to signify safety and solidarity. Diana determined that "everything shall be rainbows!" This is ever-present in her classroom as a tool to communicate to Queer students and demonstrate that she is a supportive person in their lives. Jayden and Dani described their use of rainbows in terms which express subtlety.

With regard to researcher subjectivity and perspective, I tend to joke that "a Queer person can see a rainbow from a mile away." Years ago, when I was presenting to teachers on working with Queer youth, I got distracted in the middle of the presentation by a small 1" by 1" rainbow that was drawn on a paper at the back of the room. This provides a quick reference for a Queer person trying to quickly assess a situation or person for safety. Even the use of colored thematic models within this chapter was an application of the use of signs and symbols, as the items represented were designed with rainbow gradients.

Not every participant chooses to use what some might argue are "in your face" symbols. Gloria, for instance, tries not to "mix the two." She comes to work to teach her math, and that is the job she must do. However, she did demonstrate a different form of solidarity through simply being out, which is also demonstrated by Will, Dillan, and Eric (though Eric does not comment on this during this scene. This provides an opportunity for educators to act as role models for their students, much like Gloria mentioned about being a reference point for someone who can be successful and have a normal life.

Additionally, as role models and as a form of solidarity, Queer educators may act in spokesperson roles as previously discussed. This also is demonstrated through instances where Queer educators may become protective of those who may feel or be a little bit different. Eric demonstrated this through his desire to be the special education case manager for students who are Queer or who might be Queer, since he did not know who the other case manager would be, and he knew that he would be able to take care of them. Will also demonstrated this protectiveness and willingness to stand in solidarity with Queer students through his idea to paint his nails and then show them off in front of a class of students who were making fun of another student that had his nails painted by handing a stack of papers to their teacher during class.

This solidarity is not limited to Queer identities, but simply those who may be different. Dani made it a point when she was showing me her classroom to point out the signs that she has by her door, which are shown in Figure 19. These are the “we welcome” signs that were discussed in this scene and highlight that her classroom is an accepting and affirming space for all students, not just students in dominant social groups. This applies not just to Queer students, but to all of her learners. Jayden also demonstrated the breadth of inclusiveness through his comments about the curriculum and his use of thematic readings throughout the year to highlight important peoples, events, and concepts.

In terms of curriculum, Diana provided insight into how her Queerness influences her providing instruction to students. She discussed that she intentionally teaches that very few binaries exist in nature, and that most natural phenomena are on a spectrum. This is because of her personal gender apathy, bisexuality, and experience existing outside of gender and sexual binaries. Additionally, Will explained how he has provided Queer inclusive learning opportunities at the kindergarten level when discussing different families. In Kansas, at the time

of the study, it was a kindergarten social studies standard to discuss families. He utilized literature and images that describe a range of family types and, at the level a 5-year-old understands, explained the existence of Queer people and that their different family types are valid. Eric discussed the different historical figures that were options to learn about during different projects at his previous school.



Figure 19: This School Welcomes Signs

Scene 10 Narrative

After a pause, Jayden joins in. “As far as how being Queer impacts how I do things, I think being Queer makes me more empathetic to any kid who might feel a little bit different. It helps me to be a better teacher... the empathy, the connection, the relationships... all of it has to do with my Queerness. Like, there's one boy who just reminds me so much of me. He's in third grade now, but I had him last year, and there was one time where some boys were calling him names. They were calling him ‘sus,’ which started out as a shortened version of suspicious, right? But now, sus is often used as a euphemism for ‘acting gay,’ or like the three-letter f-word. Which, I'm glad they're not saying the f word anymore, oh, thank goodness they're not. But I know that they were using it as a euphemism for he's acting gay. And I don't want to project Queerness onto him, but he doesn't like traditional boyish things, and that's okay. He's a very clean guy, and very much doesn't like physical labor, which is also me.”

He pauses for a second and takes a deep breath. “Sorry, I was getting a little teary-eyed sharing this. So there was one time last year I was talking to those boys, and they weren't mine. They were just with me because my other teacher was doing something, so I had both classes for a little while, and I was like ‘stop using that word as a way to hurt somebody else or to say that they're acting what you don't see as traditionally boyish.’ And I felt, in that moment, I was sticking up for that student but also for like, my childhood self. It might sound cheesy, but I felt in that moment like I was defending him and my second grade self for when I was called names, or clocked, or people asked point blank if I was Queer, when I was still trying to figure it out. And that was a moment where I can be a voice and help others. And it helps that I'm younger, because older teachers would just think it means suspicious, but I know that it's a euphemism for he's acting like a girl, or he's acting gay. And I'm so glad that the f-word has gone away, but I know these euphemisms can still be hurtful to the kiddos.”

Seth responds to Jayden, “Yeah, my blood just boils when I see students targeting Queer students or calling each other gay as an insult. I had one student who would not stop, and I was ripping into them for the behavior, probably a little bit much. But no one stood up for younger me, so I make sure to stand up for the students when I see it happen.” Looking at Eric, Seth says, “Kind of like how I wish someone would have stood up for you in PE, Eric.”

Responding to Seth, Eric shares, “Well, this year, we had a few trans students, but the one I'm thinking about transferred in, and there were some students who started to call the student ‘it,’ and I like, raged at them in the hallway, probably a little too hard. But I was like, ‘no, you will just say ‘he,’ it's not that hard to do. I don't care what you have to say. It is wrong to call him ‘it.’”

“It sounds like a few of us have been in the situation where we are standing up for Queer students who are being bullied. Although, I hope that's something that any teacher would do, not just those that are Queer.” Seth adds, “What are some other ways that you see Queerness impacting your practice?”

Jayden begins, “Well, when I was thinking about being out, and what that looks like for me, I would rather, at least at this stage of my career, and where I'm at in my journey, that students and parents do not know. So, I'm cautious with that. And I think the right word for this is fear. Not that you want to live your life in fear, but you've got to be realistic. Like the fear that I could have a student who really have a connection with, whose parents might want them pulled from my class is there, like we talked about. It's the fear that the kids will suffer. And that's what I'm here for is the kids. But like I've also been thinking that, as far as students or parents

knowing, if I felt I needed to connect with a kid or I really felt a kid needed it, I would come out to the kid in that situation. Not the whole school, but to said kid, I absolutely would if I truly felt it would make their situation better, or if it would make them feel less alone, then that is when I would come out to a certain student.”

“It’s also difficult,” Seth begins, “because there’s some distrust of men working in elementary schools already, and then add in that some people try to make links between homosexuality and pedophilia, which are not connected at all.”

“That connection is there, and I just want to say, ‘oh my goodness! How I identify is not linked to pedophilia.’ Gosh, I was even hesitant to say that word. It’s not linked, but some people have it in their minds that it is. I’m glad you brought that up, Seth. I was wondering, are we gonna go there? If he goes there, I’ll go there. But men in elementary education already gets an eyebrow raise from some people, but in the same breath, it’s like we need male teachers. And if you add Queer into that, people lean on this imaginary link and question motives. Like, I know my intentions and my reasons for being a teacher, and I’ve got to protect myself and my students, and I think that’s why I’m so private about it, because I know there could be negative interactions. Being aware of that assumption just adds another obstacle or another barrier, which is why I have to be careful in this role. It is a privilege to be able to work with youth and they’re the best part of this job, but at the same time, if you say that to the wrong person, it can get taken and misused out of context. So that link people may try to make between homosexuality and pedophilia makes the intersection of Queer and educator identities pretty difficult. I’m very careful, and it’s a fine line to walk, because I am not ashamed. I just feel like I’m in such a unique position as a Black man to influence a lot of children and to really be there for them. I would hate to have that hindered, and I hope one day it wouldn’t hinder it. I just understand the larger cultural context.” He pauses, and the group waits for another member to contribute.

“If I think really hard about it, I think that becoming a teacher was really deeply engrained and that it’s what I needed to do,” Will begins. “I think that if I would have known and accepted that I was gay when I started out though, it would have been harder for me. I wouldn’t have had the guise of a family protecting me. At the time I started teaching, it was very hard, especially on post, for some men – some of the soldiers – to accept that their kid had a male kindergarten teacher. And then if I didn’t have that guise of a family, then add in ‘oh, there’s a single gay teacher teaching my five year old.’ You know, I have a higher pitched voice and an effeminate way about me, and I’m very loving and would hug the kiddos and stuff, but like having the straightness to fall back on was something that helped get me through that.”

Gloria begins, “Well, the only thing that I’ve always tried to be really careful about is locker rooms. I don’t ever want anyone to say I did anything inappropriate. I’ve coached all the sports and I just made sure I didn’t go in a locker room when girls are changing. I never made it a big deal, I just told the girls, ‘I won’t come in here while you’re changing, because I don’t ever want to put you in a position to have to defend me. That is not your job.’ And they all completely understood that. And when I am alone with students in my classroom, I leave the door propped open.”

Seth adds, “So tying back to the mental calculations we talked about earlier, we can add in about the fear or worries that Queer educators face that others don’t have to think about or experience. There seem to be quite a few ways that Queerness influences how we choose to do things, such as how we manage locker rooms, navigate coming out, decorate our physical space, use signs and symbols to show support, interact with students, design curriculum, and more.”

Scene 10 Discussion

Being Queer creates extra work for Queer educators. This scene in particular highlights the extra mental calculations that are required of Queer educators and addresses RQ1, looking at their experiences, and RQ2, looking at how those experiences influence their practice. The scene opens with examples of four of the characters describing instances where they were standing up for Queer students, and the impact that witnessing this bullying had on them. Jayden went so far as to say he felt like he was defending the student and Jayden's second grade self. Eric described his reaction by saying he "raged at them," meaning that he would have yelled and chastised them in a very intense manner. The emotions that trigger this kind of reaction are rooted in a level of empathy and trying to create justice in a bullying situation, fueled by personal experiences with bullying when the educator was in the bullied student's metaphorical shoes. Thematically, these concepts represent both the theme of solidarity and the theme of extra work; solidarity is demonstrated through standing up for the underdog, and extra work is created by having to stand up for the underdog.

Another critical observation regarding the mental calculations that Queer educators must do is rooted in fear and self-preservation. When talking with Jayden during interviews, he began alluding to his choices to not be out at the school and to students because of false narratives linking pedophilia and homosexuality. I chose during the interview to name this allusion and Jayden was grateful that I spoke the words he wasn't sure he wanted to speak, and then shared his thoughts while speaking freely. Cisgender and heterosexual educators do not have to worry about if caregivers or community members will meet them and automatically think that they are a pedophile or grooming their students, yet this is a reality faced by Queer educators. This results

in a fear-driven need to protect themselves from potential harm, and constitutes extra work required of Queer educators.

Gloria also commented on the extra care she would take when coaching sports. In most sports leagues and teams, if the coach needed to be in the locker room, it is a nonissue. However, because Gloria is a lesbian and she was coaching female sports, she took it upon herself to avoid locker rooms when the girls were changing. This acted as a form of self-preservation, but also as a way to protect the students from having to defend her should a false accusation arise.

Scene 11 Narrative

Seth continues, “What other ways do you see your Queerness impacting your practice as an educator?”

Jayden decides to go first. “Really, like I said I think it just makes me more empathetic, and not just to kids who may be Queer or identify that way down the line, but to any kid who just feels a little bit different. So I think the Queerness as an educator absolutely just makes me more empathetic to those who might feel a little bit off.”

“For me,” Dani starts, “I think the biggest thing is that I’ve tried to be more intentional about having those conversations, making room for those conversations, and even like, fostering situations where we have those conversations, because I think that’s a very important role that I can play as a teacher is just, knowing that there are people at home where kids are getting different messages and not being celebrated, trying to find those little things to celebrate about them, so that hopefully they can have that happy sense of self, no matter if they are part of a minority group or not. Having that good, strong sense of self is important. I feel like it is those kids who end up being in minority groups that don’t get that celebration as much as the kids who are in the majority.”

There is a brief pause as Seth looks around the group to see if anyone else wants to answer this question. Dillan adds, “I think just the biggest part of it is just the ability to be my authentic self helps me in those relationships and working with my kids.”

After another pause, Diana adds “I’m not entirely sure that it’s just Queerness that impacts my practice, but some of the neuro-spicy-ness and being a female in general, but I feel like I am very aware of the kids who might feel isolated for one reason or another, keeping track of their general demeanor and body language and their aura, if you will. I know that there are other teachers who are good at this, and I don’t know what their reasoning is for doing it, but it’s always been something that I’m aware of, to the point I’ve had to have difficult conversations with counselors about overstepping my bounds. But like, the kids are willing to talk to me, but the counselors see that intervention as their job, so finding a balance needs to happen as well. But like, my personal experience of feeling like an odd one out has definitely influenced my keeping track of those kids who feel like they might be the odd one out. I know that the awareness of marginalized or potentially marginalized kids comes from being Queer, at least in part.”

Scene 11 Discussion

There are many difficult experiences that the participants in this study shared, including those that were written about and those that were not included in this dissertation. When considering RQ2, how the experiences and identities of Queer educators influence their practice, there are a range of positive and negative outcomes. Negative outcomes previously described include extra caution and care due to false narratives linking Queerness and pedophilia, extra mental calculations that are taken to protect themselves and their students, and the extra work asked or required of Queer educators, such as being a spokesperson, dealing with homophobia and intolerance, standing up for the underdog, and acting as a role model.

However, there are also positive outcomes that participants described, such as Jayden's observations in scene 10 that "being Queer makes me more empathetic to any kid who might feel a little bit different." He explained that he is a better teacher because of it, and that "the empathy, the connection, the relationships" all have to do with his Queerness. Dani highlighted how her understanding of herself, and her recent discovery of her Queerness leads to more intentionality in her practice. Dillan recognized how his Queerness and authenticity helps him within his relationships with students. Diana highlighted her intersectional consideration of empathy and awareness that is influenced not only by her Queerness, but also by being female and neurodivergent (neurospicy).

Scene 12 Narrative

As Diana is finishing up her thoughts, Gloria and Dillan are trying to pay attention to what is being said but seem distracted as they smile and wave at students who are passing by. The students see them, and some can be seen jumping and waving at their teachers. Others start to come over toward the group, and Seth moves the "LGBTQIA..." tent under his notebook as the session is about to be interrupted by students. Dillan looks at the group and shares, "A bunch of my kids are coming over because they're goobers, looks like they just got out of an athletics practice." He turns to the group of students. "Do you want to say hi, Jason?" Jason, one of the students, shyly waves at the group of teachers. "Hi, Jess. Hi guys. Can you go ahead and head on

your way? I'm in a meeting right now." The students oblige, but not without continuing to wave and jump in the air as they're walking away or walking by the table. "My gosh, I'm literally Mother Goose to some of these kids. Like, when they go to lunch, they'll drop their stuff off in my room so they don't have to go to their lockers because apparently it's too much stress."

Another student runs up to the group and exclaims, "Mr. Bender, I got a 92% on my test!" "Congrats, Hailey!" Dillan responds enthusiastically as he waves at her.

At the same time this is happening, some students have also come up to Gloria. Several are handing her papers after coming to school to access homework support. "You guys are so funny, coming over here trying to be sneaky," she says to the students as they're turning in papers and waving goodbye. "Sorry, everyone," she says to the group.

A student comes up, shows Gloria his paper, and tells her, "I'm confused."

Gloria responds, "You know what you did? You didn't put the headings on top of anything, so I won't know what you did when I go to grade it."

"Oh," the student says, and takes the paper back to put on the required headings.

"Good thing I love ya!" Gloria tells him before he walks away.

After the middle schoolers have gone on their way, Gloria looks at the group and apologizes again for the interruption.

Dillan turns to the group, and with a laugh says, "I'm sorry as well. I love these kids so much, and the feelings are mutual, but damnit kids!" Group members chuckle because they also understand being interrupted at inopportune times by enthusiastic students.

The facilitator smiles, "I can tell that these students really have a positive relationship with you both, which prompts a good question for the group, ***how would you describe your relationships with your students?***"

Dillan begins, "I'm so much more than an educator for them, and being able to be my authentic self helps with those relationships. I love them very, very much. I don't always like them, but I do love them dearly. And I've come to the realization that if I want to keep doing my job at the level that I'm doing it, and the amount of care and love that goes into it, then it's possible that it would be in my best interest to not have kids of my own. Just because I don't know that I would be able to commit to my students and my kids to the degree that I want to and that both deserve from me. And I say this just to highlight how I feel about my students. Like I truly love them as if they're my own. It's a labor of love, and I don't say that in a negative way. I love what I do, and I love working with these kids and being that person for them. But it definitely takes a toll and it's a sacrifice. But my students feel comfortable enough to come to me with questions, no matter how awkward they are. Like, I've had the sex ed talk with students, or I'll have students ask to eat lunch in my room and then open up about their struggles, or even my kiddos point out when they don't see me at sporting events. The relationships and the love are the most important things to me, because my most impactful teachers have always been those that I knew truly cared, not just about what they did, but about me as a human. And that always made a big difference, and so that's my deal. I do this job for the kids, because I love the kids, and I want to be there for them as long as they'll let me."

Jayden joins in, "The relationship piece is where I really thrive. I don't know them perfectly, because they're their own people, but I just take time to get to know all 22 of my second graders. I know what makes them tic, and I know about their interests and their hobbies. I know who can respond to tough love, and who needs a more gentle approach. I know who I can joke around with, and I know who will have their feelings hurt by a joke. So I'm just a big relationship guy, but that's also me in general with my family, and my colleagues. It's just

natural to be a relationship guy with my students, and I feel like I am really proud of the relationships I have with students across the school. Like I have a preschooler, some kindergartners, some fourth graders, and some fifth graders that do check ins or eat lunch with me sometimes.”

“The thing that I was taught when I was student teaching,” Will begins, “was that we all have to be here, in the same room every single day. It’s required. So why not make it fun? And I really took that to heart and I try to make class as fun as possible. Everything had an element of play to it, everything had a sense of wonder, and everything deserves to be discovered. And I wanted to instill those types of things in kids, and I’m now at the point in my career where the kids I first started teaching are grownups and they have their own kids, and they look me up and send me messages on Facebook, saying, like, ‘you changed my life.’ And that’s a big form of validation and it takes a long time when you teach little kids because they have to grow up to realize that, but it’s huge.”

“At my school, we do a co-teaching model where I join the classroom teacher,” Eric begins. “There’s the core teacher, and I’m like the less intimidating one, kind of like an older brother teacher. Out of the two of us, I’m the one who gets all the question, and I have a bit more of, like, a camaraderie with the students since I’m not the lecturer. Except they don’t always see me as an authority figure, and I’m not as strict as some of the other teachers, so they are more relaxed with me since I’m more relaxed on some things.”

Seth adds, “Well I can tell just listening to this group and talking with everyone that we all value positive relationships with our students and being positive role models. We all clearly care about the work we are doing and the students we are honored to work with.”

Scene 12 Discussion

It is necessary to note that in terms of the development of this scene for the use of the CNF narrative, these exchanges did actually occur during individual interviews with Dillan and Gloria while interviewing via video conference after school. The care and compassion they demonstrated for their students during these exchanges was evident and how their students respect and care for them as educators is clear. Therefore, this exchange, while it did not actually occur, occurred in various parts and was compressed together to form this narrative, and highlight these educators’ interactions with students.

It is also important to note the reason that Seth would move the LGBTQIA+ tent under his notebook. This is representative of the mental calculations that cisgender and heterosexual individuals would not have to do in this situation. If a group of students came over to a table of teachers, they may cover up students works, or move to an internet tab that does not have a

gradebook open on their computer, but they would not have to be concerned about negative ramifications from students figuring out that they are straight or cisgender.

That would not be the case for a group of educators who are Queer. While most of the educators in this study are out to their students, not every educator was. Jayden explained multiple times during interviews that he does not want to be out to students and parents at the school. Dani recently discovered her newfound identity and did not indicate during interviews that she had intentions of coming out to students. If I would have been sitting at that table my first two or three years of teaching, I would not have wanted my students to see that table tent. This is why, in the facilitator role, I chose to move it under my fictional notebook.

The relationships that these educators have with their students have been evident across the scenes of this narrative and were evident within the interviews as well. From the reasons these educators went into teaching, to the way that they interact with students and how they describe the relationships they have with students, it is clear that these educators value positive relationships with the youth they are afforded the opportunity to teach. How they describe these relationships and how they describe their experiences with students addresses RQ1.

Scene 13 Narrative

“It’s amazing to me to see that the kids aren’t necessarily bothered with Queer things either. Like, they just accept it usually,” Dillan adds.

Diana joins the conversation. “When I run into issues, my issues aren’t with students. Most of those kids are either completely accepting or don’t know what I’m talking about. And parents complain about rainbows, or things I say, or whatever, but with all of the parents that I had run ins with, their kids go home and want to talk about things, and then their parents freak out about it. It’s not because the kids have any particular problem with anything. And my administrator is great because he pops into my room about once a week so that when parents complain, he can respond ‘no, I’ve been in there, and it’s not like that.’ And the kids are generally more accepting, because they see it. Like, Queerness always been there, but this generation is more bold about just sharing it, because they’re more bold about just sharing everything. And when I was a kid, I didn’t realize there was anything between gay and straight because it was the 80s. And even with the parents who are mad at me, I still get along well with their kids. And I also just want my kids to always feel like they as individuals matter.”

Eric joins in, “And like, the mild middle school homophobia and transphobia seems to stem more from a lack of experience or knowledge, rather than hate.”

“When I first got into a lesbian relationship,” Gloria begins, “students were a little different back then. You could tell what their parents thought, and the relationship was based more on their home life. Like, I had one mom approached me at an athletic event with her uppity little attitude on not knowing how to talk to her children about my lifestyle, and I just looked her right in the eye and said, ‘I feel really badly for you if you can’t explain love to your children.’ And I just continued to look at her until she walked away.”

“A parent being upset about me being Queer did come up recently for me,” Dillan adds. “Like they brought up something from six months ago, like when my students found out I was seeing a guy. Like that class is different from my other classes, we have a different dynamic. And they found out I was seeing someone at the time and they were really excited about it. They were genuinely invested, and like, it’s not like I went into explicit detail or anything. I just answered, yes, I’m going to see this guy from another state. And it was a whole big deal, and like they didn’t even care that it was a guy, they were just so excited that Mr. Bender has a personal life, and Mr. Bender is going to see someone. Like, these kids know that a female teacher they have has a long term boyfriend, and they ask her all the time about him. And so my admin just talked with me about making sure that the conversation is professional. Like, mentioning a date is not the end of the world, and it’s not a bad thing.” Dillan pauses to chuckle. “Like, it’s kind of funny, he told me that ‘if THEY,’ and he really emphasized they, so like if the straights can do it, ‘if THEY can put up pictures of their perfect white picket fence family, we can talk about ours.’ And I don’t think I really crossed any lines. But that was something that was brought up and I was like, are you freaking kidding me? Dude, that was literally six months ago. Like, what??”

After a brief pause, Seth restarts the conversation. “Gloria, earlier you mentioned that when your middle schoolers become high schoolers, they feel like they have to come back to you to come out for some reason. It sounds like that’s a testament of how much of a role model you were and how much they trusted and respected you.”

“In my classroom, I try to keep things as routine as possible. I always worry about my kids who are being harmed at home, so I try to keep things calm and routine so that when they come there, they know this is how it’s going to be today in this environment. They know that it’s not going to be crazy. It’s going to be very quiet and calm. So I just try to keep my class mellow, I guess. Kids need to feel like they can come there and be themselves.”

She continues, “My students know that I care and that I support them. Like, one time my high school boys came into class one day, and they had new football hoodies on, and I told them ‘dang, those are nice, where do I get one?’ So they were telling me and I said ‘how do I know what size to order?’ and one of them took his hoodie right off, handed it to me, and said ‘try mine on.’ And, remember, these are high school boys, so I’m thinking ‘when was the last time you washed this?’ But I sized it, they all told me what size to get, and I gave it back to him. You know, that’s just me hanging out with my class, and so I bought a hoodie to support them, and I wore it to support my boys.”

“And generally, I have positive relationships with students. I did have one student in the special education program that was in my class. We had great rapport in middle school, a solid connection. When he got to high school, he found out I was a lesbian. I don’t know how he didn’t know through middle school that I was gay, because I’ve never hidden anything, but I also don’t, you know, fly flags in my room or anything. Anyways, he found out at the high school and would not come into my classroom. His case manager had to come and talk with me. So that was

kind of weird.” She pauses. “And it was rough, because I felt like I let that kid down. And we had a really good relationship when he was in middle school, so that was hard. But eventually we finally coaxed him back into my classroom. It’s just, in his world, he didn’t understand what it meant.”

“Wow,” Seth begins, “that does sound so hard. And it shows that there are people who think differently of us when they find out that we are Queer. Like, the fears earlier are valid, and we have to face many hard situations because of our Queerness. Even though those experiences are fewer and further between, they’re still very real and very possible. But on the positive side, we seem to be in, like, these very special roles and have an opportunity to develop really strong relationships with students and support them with their development. The positive relationships are evident.”

“I think that one thing that helps me,” Dani begins, “is that I’ve stuck around when a lot of the other teachers that these kids have worked with haven’t, you know? Like the teachers in second grade are not the teachers they had when they were in second grade. So I think being a constant in these kids’ lives helps with that relationship. They think ‘she’s cool, she’s staying,’ and so getting to have them year after year helps with that relationship. Like, I saw you in kindergarten, I’ve seen you in first grade, and now it’s like ‘oh my gosh, you’re all grown up and you’re in fifth grade now, and this is crazy!’ kind of deal. Like in some of the harder cases, the kids just think ‘oh, everybody gives up or leaves’ and I’m just like, ‘no, I’m still here.’ But with that, I’m still setting boundaries, but also loving them at the same time. I think I have a pretty good relationship with my kids. I feel like they are willing to come and talk to me and they know I’m there for them. It’s tough love sometimes, but it’s still love and boundary setting.”

Dillan joins in, “Yeah, with being a Queer educator, and being out to my students, and just showing them love and building them up, it’s the little seeds that I’m planting. It’s like I’m planting, but I’ll never see the fruits of that labor, and that’s okay, I think. It’s just something that I hope they can positively reflect on later in life.”

Scene 13 Discussion

This final scene demonstrates the homophobia and intolerance faced by Queer educators and highlights the risks associated with being out. Every educator in the study described some level of fear or harassment that they experienced, not only when they were students themselves, but also as educators. These are the risks that are faced by Queer educators that many in the majority groups have the privilege to be unaware of.

Diana began with an observation that the issues she has are with the adults instead of the youth. The acceptance of Queerness is on the rise, and Chapter One provided insight into the rising prevalence of Queerness in the United States. Most concerns represented throughout the various scenes have been with adults, rather than students. This is not to say that issues with

students are no longer occurring, but that issues with adults were present across all participants and were emphasized more than issues with students.

However, Gloria does explain how a previously strong relationship can be broken down when a person finds out that the other is Queer. She took on the weight of this, explaining that she felt like she let the student down. The potential for pushback is ever-present and can appear when it is least expected.

This scene ends with hope. Dillan described this hope as “little seeds.” The work of these participants is ongoing. The struggles that they described do not go away overnight, and they are still required to do a range of mental calculations in order to preserve themselves and their careers. Acceptance is on the rise, and these educators have provided many examples of positive leadership in their schools and in their districts. They have planted the seeds and acted as role models for their students and will continue to show up for their students in ways they might not even thought of yet.

Conclusion

As the group is reflecting on Dillan’s comments, the school’s bell rings, and an administrator begins to make an announcement over the intercom, “Teachers, thank you for participating in our breakout groups. I hope that you were able to learn together, have meaningful conversations, and develop relationships with your colleagues. Please make sure that you log your PD hours on Frontline/ My Learning Plan and have a great rest of your day!”

The sound of a phone receiver hanging up is heard, and the announcement ends. Seth looks around the table with a smile and tells the group, “Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for your time today. Thank you for being vulnerable and sharing your stories with the group. There’s always more to the story, and our stories aren’t finished yet, but unfortunately, our time is up for now. Please keep in mind our agreement earlier about keeping what was said here within this group. In addition, if this was difficult emotionally, or you feel you are struggling, or begin to struggle, with your mental health, please let me know and I can connect you with a range of mental health resources, or you can access the Employee Assistance Program. Thank you again for being here today, and I wish you all the best.”

Summary of Findings

Two overarching themes were present in the findings of this study: solidarity and extra work, though like many concepts, they can also be interconnected. Educators within the study demonstrated solidarity that was influenced by their Queer identities and their experiences, which they were also able to reflect upon in hindsight. The solidarity was present through five key categories:

- **Empathy & Awareness:** Participants described feeling different or experiences where they were bullied. They explained that their feelings of being different fostered a deeper level of empathy in their professional practice that allowed for them to be more in tune with the needs of Queer students, along with the needs of others. Will even stated during one of our interviews that “being gay has helped me become more aware of the world.”
- **Relationships with Students:** Participants described their relationships with their students and how they demonstrate solidarity in their classrooms, schools, and in their day-to-day actions that support their students through the positive relationships they have with them. This does not only apply to Queer students, but also allows for the educators to be more attuned to the needs of a wide range of students and work to develop positive relationships with them.
- **Signs & Symbols:** Participants described the use of signs and symbols in order to communicate that their room is a safe space, or that they are a safe person to talk to. This includes the “everything shall be rainbows” mindset that Diana described, along with the more subtle representation of multiple family types that Will described. I chose to include in this the concept of coming out/ being out, which is both a visual representation of solidarity, and also fits within the category of acting as a role model. This is represented

through simple, casual references to a same-sex partner, like Gloria described, or answering students directly when they ask the educator if they are Queer, like Diana or Eric described.

- **Standing up for the Underdog:** This category is fueled by the empathy and awareness that was described by the Queer educators, but also serves as a category of its own full of rich stories, where educators may feel like they stood up for their younger self, such was the case with Jayden, or where educators are willing to put their job on the line to fight for the rights of their students, as was the case with Gloria.
- **Acting as a Role Model:** Queer educators simply existing fulfil the category of acting as role models, which in and of itself constitutes a form of solidarity and representation. Gloria even described that a student let her know that when they were coming out, they used her as an example of someone who can lead a normal and successful life.

The experiences and identities described by the participants also created extra work for them within their roles. This extra work is demonstrated by two overlapping categories and three additional categories:

- **Standing up for the Underdog (*overlapping*):** In instances where participants stood up for those students who may feel a little different, it should be noted that this created extra work and extra emotional labor for the Queer educator. When Eric described how he “raged” on students for their treatment of a transgender peer, he was standing up for the underdog, but was also required to manage his own emotions and experiences.
- **Acting as a Role Model (*overlapping*):** This category acknowledges how participants show solidarity with their Queer students, but, similar to the category of standing up for the underdog, also generates extra work for them. The Queer educator must become

cognizant that they are not just a role model on how to be a good person, how to treat others, how to work hard, etc., they are also a role model for how to deal with homophobia and transphobia. They are also a role model for how to find success and joy, even when legislation or policy sets them back. They are role models for how to navigate a world as a minoritized person.

- **Doing Extra Mental Calculations:** Extra mental calculations constitute the decisions and considerations made by Queer educators that cisgender and heterosexual educators may not even be aware of. Many of the mental calculations are due to fear regarding how someone might react to the identity of the educator or how one might create false narratives in order to further oppress the educator. McIntosh (1990) highlights 26 privileges that she can attribute to being white. In a similar tone, the following are examples of privileges that non-Queer individuals have, based upon what participants mentioned during their interviews:
 - I can put up a picture of my partner, without concern for how it will be perceived or what backlash I might face.
 - I can openly discuss my leadership with school clubs without the risk of a parent coming in to yell at me over sharing about a particular club with their student.
 - I know that the curriculum I teach will inherently represent families and experiences that look and sound like mine.
 - I know that when I go to work, I will have access to a community of similar individuals and will not have to worry about being the only member of my group present.

- Because straight and cisgender is considered the default, people will assume that I am straight and cisgender, and I will not have to argue or prove otherwise.
- I do not have to tone down or reduce myself or my personality in order to protect myself from backlash.
- **Acting as a Spokesperson:** When a Queer educator was the only person at the school who was Queer, then there were times where information, knowledge, or perspective was asked of them along with needing to stand up and provide voice for Queer people. Gloria provided an example where she spoke up in defense of a Queer student wanting to take his date to prom. Eric explained that he had become the spokesperson as the only full time Queer educator at his school, which resulted in students asking questions of him, along with his protectiveness demonstrated by taking Queer students on his caseload. In addition, Jayden explained how, at the intersection of being Black and Queer, he was often the spokesperson for both communities.
- **Dealing with Homophobia & Intolerance:** There were an abundance of situations described by participants where they dealt directly with homophobia and intolerance. These include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - A parent yelling at Diana for sharing with their child about the GSA club and what it means.
 - A student-teacher relationship shifting majorly for Gloria after the student found out she is a lesbian, which resulted in the student refusing to come into her classroom.
 - Will's description of a parent trying to pull a student from his class because the parent did not like that Will was Queer.

- Eric’s descriptions of the school psychologist openly discussing her unawareness of why she was reprimanded for sharing that an individual had AIDS in the 90s, and how the parent of a student walked away from him greeting at the door for the school play referring to him as a “faggot.”
- Jayden’s conflict between his Black and Queer identities, where people will be able to see first that he is a Black man, but would not know that he was Queer unless he shared it, and the inner turmoil due to rampant homophobia in the Black community, as was represented with the photo he shared on his phone.
- Dillan’s experience with his previous administrator and the “rift” that they had along with the parent who brought up a situation from several months earlier, and being upset that he shared that he is Queer with students.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented findings in the form of a creative nonfiction (CNF) narrative that demonstrated the findings of this study as they related to the overarching themes that were produced through analysis of the various interview transcripts. Two key themes emerged: Queer educator identities and experiences fostering solidarity and Queer educator identities and experiences creating extra work. The narrative was broken down into 13 scenes and centered around various discussion questions and topics. The dialogue was formed by the language that was used by participants during interviews, with the intent to stay as true to the original message as possible, even when compression, additions, or removals were necessary. Eight educators came together in this fictional scenario to share their experiences with others, and while these eight educators have never met in real life (to the best of my knowledge), they had many similar

experiences, ideas, and perspectives that helped to inform the themes and the key findings of this study. Further discussion points and implications are discussed in Chapter Five.

Chapter 5 - Discussion and Implications

Summary of Study

Research Purpose and Questions

This study aimed to explore the experiences of Kansas K-12 public educators who self-identify as Queer prior to, leading up to, and in their roles as Queer educators and to understand how those experience inform practice and professional interactions by answering the following research questions:

- **Research Question 1:** How do Queer educator participants describe their experiences prior to, leading up to, and as Queer educators? (RQ1)
- **Research Question 2:** How do Queer educator experiences and identities impact their practices? (RQ2)
- **Research Question 3:** How do participants describe the ways their Queer identities influence their professional interactions? (RQ3)

Theoretical Frameworks

Chapter Two described the use of Queer Standpoint Theory (QST) as a combination of Queer Theory (QT) and Standpoint Theory (ST) in order to frame the perspective of this study. While the use of QST seems limited in research, it has been utilized to keep in focus the Queer identities of the participants as they are situated in a specific social, cultural, and temporal context. The stories that were collected include a focus on the lived experiences of seven different Kansas educators, who carry multiple overlapping and diverging identities. The perspectival lens that was used for analysis was that of a critical, Queer perspective to look at the multiple, shifting, and fluid identities, and the narratives told by participants, as they are locked within a particular context. While the participants carry many different identities, labels, and

“wear many different hats,” so to say, their Queerness has been centered within this project, while acknowledging the various other identities at play.

Methodological Framework

Chapter Three described the use of Narrative Inquiry (NI) as the framework in order to set the participants’ stories and lived experiences as the focal point of this research. NI as a form considers the participants’ narratives and seeks to produce a depth of understanding as opposed to generalizable findings, as is typical of qualitative methodologies. The use of NI allowed for the exploration of grand narratives, narrative threads, contradicting stories,

These stories formed the basic unit of analysis, which appeals to the storied lives we live and the meaning making that occurs through stories. When brought together, the range of narratives collected were broken down for thematic analysis in order to identify narrative strands, counter narratives, nuances, similarities, and parallels. When these factors were considered across the data corpus, the findings of this research were produced. This chapter demonstrates the culmination of these processes and describes the findings that are (re)constructed and (re)told from the participants’ stories.

Methods/ Data Collection

Chapter Three also described the data collection methods utilized for this research. Semi-structured responsive interviews were utilized to gather the narratives shared by participants. Each interview was anticipated to last between 30 and 60 minutes, and there were three interviews scheduled and completed with each participant, except in the case of one participant, who only completed two of the three interviews. The interviews were then transcribed using a transcription software and verified for accuracy. During interviews and transcription, a research

journal was maintained. The transcriptions and research journal entries were uploaded to NVivo (Version 14) for data management and analysis.

Photo elicitation and artifact review were also used across several interviews. Some participants were unable to produce photos of their workspaces for various reasons, and some elected for a video tour of their workspaces. Participants were asked to describe their artifacts/ photos/ videos to understand how they designed their classroom and why they made those choices. This allowed for consideration of how the design of the space or decisions about the classroom setup could assist with answering the research questions. These items were also uploaded to NVivo for data management and analysis.

Data analysis employed multiple “cycles” of coding the data (Saldaña, 2021), and was accomplished through an eclectic approach using multiple coding methods, including a priori, emotions and values, and in vivo methods. This holistic and multiperspective approach allowed for the consideration of several different viewpoints, which were able to be connected through code mapping in order to produce the (re)construction and (re)telling of participants’ lived experiences.

After analysis and interpretation were completed, and findings were constructed and presented, member checks were completed. In this instance, the narrative provided in Chapter 4 was shared with participants and an overview of the identified themes was provided. The quotes that were shared by their “character” within the narrative were listed separately and were made available, along with the entire narrative, for review. Not every participant responded to this, but the feedback from those who responded noted that the findings were accurate and representative of what they said or would say (in the instances that comments were adjusted for readability or compression). There was one piece of feedback where a participant asked to further deidentify a

person they referenced in their narrative, which was adjusted in the narrative and the new reference was verified with the participant.

Interpretation of Findings and Discussion

Elie Wiesle, a holocaust survivor, states that “we must not see any person as an abstraction. Instead, we must see in every person a universe with its own secrets, with its own treasures, with its own sources of anguish and with some measure of triumph” (Freitag, 2013, p. 144; Skloot, 2010, p. xvii). The stories told within this dissertation move the Queer educator from an abstract idea which, to some, only seems a remote possibility, to a concrete set of experiences, personalities, and perspectives which constitute the universe found within each participant as they shared their personal joys, anguishes, and triumphs.

These people, these characters, are not abstractions. They are real people with real experiences that can be learned from. The secrets, the anguish, and the triumph that participants shared in interviews and through this experience have been described, and it seems as though these educators, themselves, are the real treasure. That these treasurers can be found in almost every school building in America and are valuable assets to their school communities cannot be ignored, and by understanding their stories, their needs, and their unique strengths, scholarship can provide an avenue for understanding and empathy to develop systems and structures to empower and support Queer educators within their various roles.

The goal of Chapter Five is to provide an overview of the findings associated with this study and to make connections across the concepts discussed. However, Chapter Four also provides various discussions between the scenes that were presented in order to highlight the findings of this study and, in an effort to avoid unnecessary duplication of information, some of those items have been omitted from this chapter but can be found in the previous chapter.

Existing Research

Existing research indicated an increasing prevalence of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals, with the overall prevalence of those within the US population who self-identify as Queer remains steady at just over 7%. r. When considering these numbers by generation, almost 20% of Generation Z self-identify as Queer. With prevalence in mind, the assertions made by Mayo (2020) and Woog (1995) that Queer students and staff are embedded in our school systems are more believable. This study represented eight Queer educators across the state of Kansas, and the call for participants yielded many more across the nation. Those eight educators are employed in a variety of suburban, city, and rural communities, working at a variety of school sizes. These educators are present across the state and nation and are embedded across school systems.

Findings align with existing research in several areas, including research that demonstrates that Queer educators go into the profession for the same reasons as their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts (Endo et al., 2010; Kissen, 1996). However, these educators continue to be faced with discrimination, homophobia, intolerance, and outdated false narratives that they must work to address and overcome. These heightened feelings, emotions, and attitudes that occur because of situations inside and outside of the school impact their decision making, comfort, regulation, and overall wellbeing in the form of increased affect in the face of these situations. Examples of situations that can produce a heightened affect in Queer educators include bullying, targeted acts of intolerance, perpetuation of negative stereotypes and false narratives, such as those that link Queerness and pedophilia, and more.

This research affirms previous findings regarding how Queer identities and experience impact the practice of Queer educators. Jackson (2007) describes that “creating safety, relating to students, incorporating social justice, and building understandings” (p. 167) were among the

outcomes the Queerness of participants in that study had on their practice. Additionally, Jackson highlights how Queer educators can “seek ways to make learning available to all” (p. 170) because of their experiences feeling different or marginalized, and that Queer educators have a stronger understanding of other minoritized groups and their experiences, although those abilities, while stronger due to their Queerness, can still be limited.

There are additional areas where the narratives presented by participants connect with existing research that was described in Chapter Two. This includes the ways that Queer educators can disrupt and challenge norms (such as by including Queer voices and experiences in the curriculum), how Queer educators choose to be out to their colleagues and students, and how their presence can simply create safe spaces and feelings of safety for students. The unique ways that Queer educators can serve their students, schools, and communities have also been highlighted.

Additionally, Chapter Two described a court case in which it was decided that one cannot make students “leave their rights at the schoolhouse door” (Johnson, 2011, p. 206). In that same vein, I argue that Queer educators cannot be made to leave their rights and identities at the schoolhouse door. The educators in this study approached their interactions based on the background knowledge and experiences created by their different social positions. This demonstrates that their Queerness and their experiences impact how they teach. For several participants, they explained that they felt like they were better teachers because of their Queerness. Their identities and their roles must be considered distinct, yet interconnected, even when one is chosen to be centered over the other for the purpose of a specific research project.

Existing research described in Chapter Two was affirmed by the theme that arose regarding the extra work placed upon Queer educators. The extra work includes making a

decision whether or not to “come out” (C. G. Gregory, 2022), witnessing discrimination (which resulted in many of the examples where participants stood up for the underdog) (Endo et al., 2010; Kissen, 1996), acting as a spokesperson (S. Davis, 2022), or acting as a role model (Nixon, 2006). In addition to this, the way that participants described concerns that were adult-centered rather than student centered echo the concerns described by participants in Mayo (2020).

Woog (1995) summarizes results from his study, which highlights the impact that Queer educators can have on their school buildings, culture, and students, and ways that Queer educators can demonstrate solidarity, even when extra work is created for them:

By being more open about their own lives, past and present, [teachers who come out of the closet] positively impact the lives of all those around them. They counsel gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning students, as well as raise the consciousness of straight ones; they act as sounding boards at faculty meetings and confidants for colleagues in private sessions; they have a daily influence, great or small, on every corner of their school building, from the types of books stacked on their library’s shelves to the type of language heard in their locker rooms (p. 23).

Thematic Analysis

The theme of the pilot study that was used to inform this dissertation was “solidarity through understanding of self.” Queer educators in the initial study demonstrated how their backgrounds and experiences influenced their lives, and how that led to them demonstrating solidarity with their Queer and minoritized students. This theme was present within the full study as well, and an additional theme of extra work was identified. Both themes were influenced by eight categories, and these categories, in various ways, are interconnected.

The thematic graphic presented in Chapter Four (see Figure 14) highlights the ways that Queer educator identities and experiences impact the themes of solidarity and extra work. Solidarity was present through the empathy and awareness that Queer educators demonstrated and described during interviews, which was developed through feeling different and being bullied. Solidarity was also present through the relationships the Queer educators had with their students. One participant even described themselves as “the fairy godmother of the school’s alphabet mafia.” Participants also demonstrated solidarity through the use of signs and symbols, which can include coming out.

The second theme was identified as extra work, referencing the extra duties and responsibilities that are created because of the educator’s identities and experiences. The extra work is demonstrated by doing extra mental calculations, which are most often driven by fear (of persecution, judgement, homophobia, false accusations, etc.). This fear is exemplified by one participant’s fear that a parent will remove a student from his class if they find out he is gay. Another participant avoided locker rooms when she was a coach as an act of self-preservation and protecting the students from having to defend her, should a false accusation arise. Extra work is also present when Queer educators must act as a spokesperson for Queer issues, topics, and experiences. Stepping into this role is not something they can share if they are the only Queer educator at the school. Finally, extra work is created for Queer educators by having to deal with homophobia and intolerance, which can come from a variety of sources, such as stakeholders, administrators, colleagues, students, faith groups, race groups, and larger communities in general. It has been noted that most issues surrounding homophobia and intolerance were adult-centered rather than student-centered.

There are two categories that are impacted by both themes, and those are the concepts of standing up for the underdog and acting as a role model. Both actions constitute a demonstration of solidarity as well as represent the extra work that is asked or required of Queer educators. Acting as a role model can also connect, specifically, with the concepts of coming out/ being out and acting as a spokesperson. All these categories are influenced by the themes and come as a result of the Queer educator identities and experiences, which are influenced by the Queer educator's perspective when looking back with hindsight.

Analysis and Findings Organized by Research Question

Three key research questions were identified prior to initiating this study. Those research questions relate to the experiences of Queer educators before and during their time as educators along with how their identities and experiences impact their practice and professional interactions. This section provides brief answers to the research questions based upon the narratives shared during interviews with the participants.

How do Queer educator participants describe their experiences prior to, leading up to, and as Queer educators? (RQ1).

The participants described a range of experiences in their lives from their childhood, their time as K-12 students, their time in college, and their time as educators. These various experiences are described in many different ways, so it is difficult to summarize them as generally positive or generally negative. However, there are four sub-categories that can help to address this question: feeling different, being bullied (or being the underdog), dealing with homophobia and intolerance, and experiencing fear.

Multiple participants emphasized how they felt different growing up, or felt weird, and one even describes how she is currently able to let her “freak flag fly” because she embraces

being different now. Being different created situations where they were subject to bullying from peers and even from their own teachers growing up, and required them to deal with homophobia and intolerance. Homophobia and intolerance are still experienced as Queer educators, be it from colleagues, students, parents, administrators, community members, etc. These experiences are embedded in the lives of many and only a fraction of those were described in Chapter Four. The ideologies and beliefs that cause others to act in homophobic or intolerant ways foster a sense of fear within the Queer educators, which fuels many of their decisions.

How do Queer educator experiences and identities impact their practices? (RQ2).

This question yielded several findings within the literature review in Chapter Two, along with findings based upon the experiences of the participants in this study. There are many ways that Queer educators' experiences and identities impact their practices, which can be described by the following categories and sub-categories: by fostering solidarity, through the educators' relationships with their students, by standing up for the underdog, by creating extra work, by acting as a role model, by impacting curriculum and books, by requiring extra mental calculations, by having deeper empathy and awareness, by coming out/ being out, by using signs and symbols , and by acting as a spokesperson.

Many of the categories and sub-categories identified can be applied to answer this question for a variety of reasons. Overall, though, the identities and experiences impact the participants' practices by fostering solidarity with Queer and minoritized students and by creating extra work, or additional responsibilities, for the Queer educator. This solidarity and extra work were evident throughout the stories that the participants described.

In addition, one concept that is not described within the model is that of intentionality. This constitutes both extra work and is a form of solidarity that participants demonstrate. For

example, Jayden described his intentionality about the use of books as forms of representation for various groups. Dani and Diana discussed the intentional use of signs and symbols to foster safe environments and cue to Queer students that they belong. However, Dani did not limit this to her Queer students, as is demonstrated by her use of the “this school accepts... you!” sign. Will discussed his intentional use of literature to be inclusive by using the book “Families, Families, Families” in his class, and Gloria described her intentional willingness to step up and advocate for students, describing those as causes she would lose her job for. Gloria’s statement here formed a portion of the title of this dissertation, as it shows how her experiences and identity both fostered a show of solidarity and created extra work for her.

How do participants describe the ways their Queer identities influence their professional interactions? (RQ3).

The Queer educators that participated in this study describe a range of experiences with their colleagues. One participant points to the value of community, citing the “tender trust” of having another Queer staff at the school and the safe feelings it can provide for Queer staff. Dillan described his administrator as a role model for him; one who is the reason he is thinking about going back to get a graduate degree in administration. Gloria described how her administrator was ready to fight for her the day that a parent came in upset that their child had a lesbian teacher. Diana explained how she feels considerably more supported once district principals began putting their pronouns in their email signatures.

However, not all professional interactions were positive. Eric, Gloria, Dillan, and Diana all described negative professional interactions (with administration and/or colleagues) around Queer topics and issues. There are examples provided of Queerness creating a “rift” between the teacher and the administrator, of dismissive responses from multiple administrators regarding a

Queer student and Queer staff's interaction, and of administration not being supportive of Queer students. These positive and negative interactions are representative of the breadth of experiences that Queer educators have that influence their professional interactions.

Thematically, Queer identities and experiences influence professional interactions by creating extra work for Queer educators through coming out/ being out, acting as a spokesperson, requiring extra mental calculations, and experiencing homophobia and intolerance. Queer educators must determine if their school is a safe place for them to be out at, if their administration will be supportive, or if they will face homophobia and intolerance because they come out. As described previously, school administration can have a major impact on the school culture, which impacts Queer educators and their professional interactions. In Dillan's case, he has a gay administrator, and that has made a big difference in his small, rural school.

Limitations

As with any study, there are several limitations that should be made explicit. The importance of this work cannot be underscored based upon the experiences shared by the participants; however, it would be unrealistic to expect that this work contains every voice, every perspective, every factor to consider, and can be applied equally across all contexts. Because of this, it is necessary to describe the limitations that come with this research.

Qualitative Limitations

Coker and Cain (2018) note that "lack of generalization may be seen as a limitation" but that "it was not [their] intention to be generalizable. Instead, [they] argue that [the participant's] story has transferability" (p. 7). The nature of qualitative research seeks to develop a deeper understanding of a phenomena as opposed to wide-reaching generalizable findings, and the findings present in this study arguably have transferability and crystallization, where the larger

themes can be found present across several narratives, even though the stories that formulate these themes may be unique to the various participants. This is not to say that the research becomes invalid; rather, it allows for a deeper understanding of the experiences of, identities of, and issues faced by Queer educators to formulate a learning opportunity for a variety of stakeholders.

Missing Voices

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) Voices.

It was noted in the unpublished pilot study that was used to inform this dissertation that BIPOC voices were missing from the narrative. Scholarship surrounding Queer educators has historically been limited to white educators (Blackburn & Parker, 2022b), and within this study, one of the seven participants was Black. Indigenous, Latinx, and other perspectives were not included in this study, as there were a limited number of participants that could be accommodated, and none of the individuals who answered the call for participants were identified in these groups.

Racial identities of Queer individuals has been found to be silenced or otherwise pushed to the background when addressing their Queer identities (Hawkman, 2022; S. King, 2009), meaning that their Queerness is centered and considered the standpoint in media, social narratives, etc. This contrasts Jayden's comments about how the first thing people will notice is that he is a Black man. Others would not know that he was a teacher if he did not have his badge on, and they would not know that he was gay without them being told. Jayden explicitly asked during the interview if he would be able to discuss the intersectionality of Blackness and Queerness in his life, as that is a perspective he felt has been missing in various narratives. His openness and willingness to share the additional considerations and struggles that he must

address as a Black man, that white participants do not have to consider was critical to including BIPOC voices within this study. However, that representation was still limited, and further research is needed to bring these voices and their experiences to print.

Trans* Voices.

Additionally, the voices that dominate this study are those of cisgender individuals. The two voices that deviated from this were from a participant who is gender apathetic and the researcher, who simply uses the term Queer. Suárez (2022) explains that “trans people continue to feel unsafe coming out in the workplace” and that “nearly half of trans people in the U.S. are not ‘out’ to their supervisors or coworkers” (p. 704). This would have limited any trans* individuals interested in participating in this study due to them not being out, as was described in the inclusionary criteria.

Trans* experiences are unique from lesbian, gay, and bisexual experiences. Though there are similarities that may be identified, there are additional considerations and hurdles that trans* individuals experience. Further research on the experiences of trans* educators is necessary to allow for an exploration of the similarities and differences between lesbian, gay, and bisexual educators and trans* educators.

Contextual Limits

Contextually speaking, this research was limited in scope to the state of Kansas in the United States. The study initially set out to explore the experiences of Queer educators in the Midwest, but enough participants joined the study within Kansas that the scope was able to be narrowed. This also assisted the researcher with understanding the state culture and context, which would have been a layer of added work if participants joined from other states.

This study was also contextualized within the United States education system and considered education, educational systems, and experiences through a Western/ American lens. This perspective is not representative of various educational systems or national cultures. It is further limited within this national context to one state.

This study was also limited to elementary and middle school representation. One of the participants did a short stint teaching high school, but her classroom was housed at the middle school. Therefore, the voices of educators working with older students were missing from this study's narrative.

This study is also limited in terms of its temporal context. The stories, as they have been printed, are locked within the time period they were told and synthesized. Therefore, this does not represent future (re)negotiations of experiences or the ongoing journeys of the participants, which may yield new, similar, and/ or contrasting narratives and results. The storied lives that are lived by the participants are ongoing in nature, and sexuality and gender is fluid, multiple, and shifting throughout their lives and experiences. These stories are locked within a particular temporal moment or moments but may be open for (re)interpretation in the future.

Life is an ongoing journey. Richardson and St. Pierre (2018) describe the focus on the present moment and various facts that are at play during that time. They state that 'like Zeno's arrow, I will never reach a destination (destiny?). But unlike Zeno, instead of focusing on the endpoint of a journey that never ends, I focus on how the arrowsmiths made the arrow, its place in the quiver, and the quiver's placement – displacement, replacement – in the world" (p. 1422). These stories are ongoing, negotiated, and renegotiated throughout the lives of the storyteller. They do not end, only develop. The goal is to consider where they are located now, and lean into the presentness that the stories provide.

Cyclical Model

A cyclical model was presented in Chapter Two that described the ongoing identity formation of a Queer educator that occurs within larger sociocultural and temporal contexts. This cyclical model (Figure 13) presents the Queer educators as students in the K-12 education system themselves, followed by their decision to study and become educators, which was followed by their decision to work as educators for a new group of students.

This cyclical model conveys a message that Queer students can become Queer educators, who in turn teach Queer students, who become Queer educators, in an ongoing form. This model was not represented by the narratives told within this study, but still provides some context into the development of Queer educators as it occurs throughout time and within particular contexts. Three critiques to this model are that (1) not every student in the classroom is Queer, (2) not every teacher is Queer, and (3) not every student will have a Queer educator. However, the Queer educator is represented at these various stages, and even though the cycle may not begin with a Queer student that was taught by the Queer educator in the previous frame, a new generation of Queer educators can begin at each stage of the cycle to move through the various stages of development within each generation's sociocultural and temporal contexts.

Implications and Future Research

This study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of Queer educators so that those who are not Queer, and even those who are not educators, may begin to understand these stories and use the information that has been presented in order to address sociocultural concerns and provide support, not only to Queer educators and Queer students, but to all educators and all students.

Administrative Implications

At the conclusion of our interviews, Dani shared that she hopes that readers would understand “why we need to... create these safe spaces... not just for your kids, but for your staff.” It was previously established that school culture is a strong factor in the experiences of Queer educators and that school administrators have a major impact on that school culture. Administrators should consider their current school culture and address gaps in diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging standards, and work to address any gaps or shortcomings their schools may have in order to provide the necessary safe spaces for Queer students and educators to thrive.

Administrators should be aware of the extra work that is often asked of or required of Queer educators, and they should work to design plans that help to support their staff when they take on this extra workload. They should also be aware that the extra work addressed includes dealing with homophobia and intolerance and should be prepared to address bullying and attacks from students, colleagues, parents, and community members. They should be aware that Queer educators often use signs and symbols to show support of Queer students, and that this is not always well received. They should be prepared to address those that are concerned about inclusion and representation through signs, symbols, and the curriculum.

Administrators should also be aware of the mental calculations that are part of the extra work that is placed upon Queer educators. There are additional considerations Queer educators must make as they navigate their professional context, and oftentimes these are rooted in fear or self-preservation. Administrators can help alleviate fears and reduce the load Queer educators carry by checking in with them and ensuring that policies and practices are protective of the Queer educators.

Implications on Practice

Queer educators bring a unique perspective and wealth of background knowledge to the schoolhouse. They are often valuable assets to the educational teams that they work with, and their ideas and practices result in positive relationships with students and acting as role models. They bring a heightened empathy and awareness to their practice and implement strategies to be inclusive and representative of their Queer students in order to stand in solidarity with them.

This inclusive approach allows for Queer educators to create classrooms that are open and accessible to all, and that “speak” to everyone. It has been argued in other literature that all students benefit from a classroom that challenges cisheteronormative structures and promotes safety for Queer students (Thomas-Reid, 2018). This approach can help to “broaden an individual’s perspective” without each student having to adopt the various identities and perspectives presented (Nemi Neto, 2018, p. 3). All students benefit from classrooms that are influenced by the empathy and awareness that Queer educators have developed along with the various practices of inclusion that they have developed and implemented over the years.

Implications for Future Research

Cyclical Model.

There are various critiques to be made regarding the cyclical model presented in Chapter Two. This cyclical model has helped to lay a foundation for understanding the larger factors that influence the development of Queer educators over time, but future research may help to indicate areas where this model can be updated or improved upon.

Representation of BIOC Voices.

It is necessary to highlight the voices of minoritized populations. This study was limited to one BIPOC voice, and Jayden’s willingness to share his experience and perspective allowed

for this contribution; however, there are many other BIPOC voices and perspectives that are currently left out of the narrative and should be lifted up and amplified. The white perspective is not the only perspective that deserves to be represented, and it is not the only voice that deserves to be heard. Jayden helped to describe the additional considerations that must be made because he is a Black man, that white participants do not have to address. An intentionally intersectional approach is needed to continue to deepen how various Queer experiences are understood.

Representation of trans* Voices.

Similar to the missing BIPOC voices, the voices of trans* educators must also be lifted up and amplified. These experiences carry a unique perspective that is often silenced and overshadowed by the voices of sexual minorities. In an intersectional perspective, the way that sociocultural messages impact trans* individuals, and is connected to misogyny and cissexism, should be explored and considered to develop a deeper understanding of the needs of trans* educators as they are similar to and different from those of lesbian, gay, and bisexual educators.

Addressing Contextual Gaps.

Additionally, this study was limited in terms of its context (Kansas, limited high school representation, etc.) and additional research is needed to address these contextual gaps. Different states hold different cultures, values, and structures, and the experiences of Queer educators in those states can contain similarities and differences when compared to the participants from this study. The voices of Queer educators working with high schoolers may provide additional insight and perspectives that were not part of this study.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 5 provided an overview of the research that was conducted as part of this study, including the research purpose, the research questions, the theoretical framework, the

methodological framework, the methods utilized, and a discussion on the findings. The findings yielded two key themes: that Queer educator experiences and identities foster solidarity and create extra work. Comprised of several subcategories, these themes have been represented by the stories participants shared in Chapter Four. This chapter provided a thematic analysis and an analysis as it related to the three research questions. Limitations of the study were explicitly named, and the implications of this study were explored, including implications for future research.

Concluding Remarks

Perhaps bell hooks, an American author, educator, and critic of social injustice sums it up best:

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994, p. 207)

The educational contexts in which we work as educators are full of possibility, where we are able to join together in the face of difficult and joyful realities, where we can challenge the status quo, cultural norms of oppression, and the boundaries that hold us and our students back. In our roles as Queer educators, and with the help of caring, supportive, and encouraging allies, we can create opportunities for freedom, to push back against boundaries, and to build a better and brighter future for all. We can “plant seeds,” as Dillan described.

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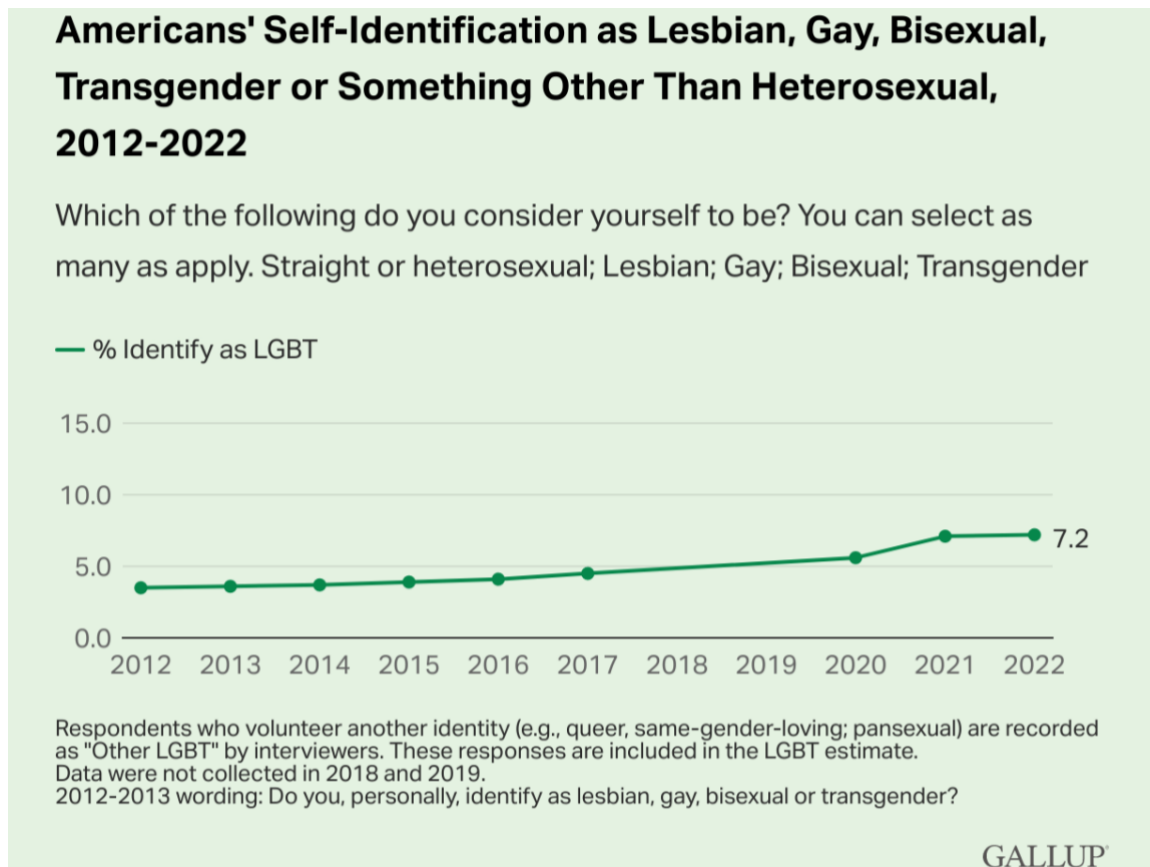
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Appendix A - Gallup Queer Prevalence Data

These statistics were reported in the two Jones articles (Jones, 2022, 2023) and are representative of the prevalence as has been reported for the past two years. Updated statistics and information are likely to be reported in coming years and may demonstrate a shift in prevalence data and updated data should be considered in future research.



Appendix Figure 1: American Self-Identification as LGBT (2023 Report)

	LGBT	Straight/Heterosexual	No response
	%	%	%
Generation Z (born 1997-2003)	20.8	75.7	3.5
Millennials (born 1981-1996)	10.5	82.5	7.1
Generation X (born 1965-1980)	4.2	89.3	6.5
Baby boomers (born 1946-1964)	2.6	90.7	6.8
Traditionalists (born before 1946)	0.8	92.2	7.1

GALLUP, 2021

Appendix Figure 2: American Self-Identification as LGBT by Generation (2022 Report)

Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity, by Generation, 2022

Which of the following do you consider yourself to be? You can select as many as apply. Straight or heterosexual; Lesbian; Gay; Bisexual; Transgender

	Generation Z	Millennials	Generation X	Baby boomers	Silent Generation
	%	%	%	%	%
Total LGBT	19.7	11.2	3.3	2.7	1.7
Lesbian	2.2	1.5	0.5	0.7	0.2
Gay	3.4	1.9	0.8	1.0	0.8
Bisexual	13.1	6.9	1.6	0.7	0.6
Transgender	1.9	1.0	0.3	0.2	<0.05
Other LGBT	1.5	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.2

Sum of categories may exceed the total because respondents can choose multiple identities.

Birth years for each generation: Generation Z (1997-2004), Millennials (1981-1996), Generation X (1965-1980), baby boomers (1946-1964), Silent Generation (1945 and earlier).

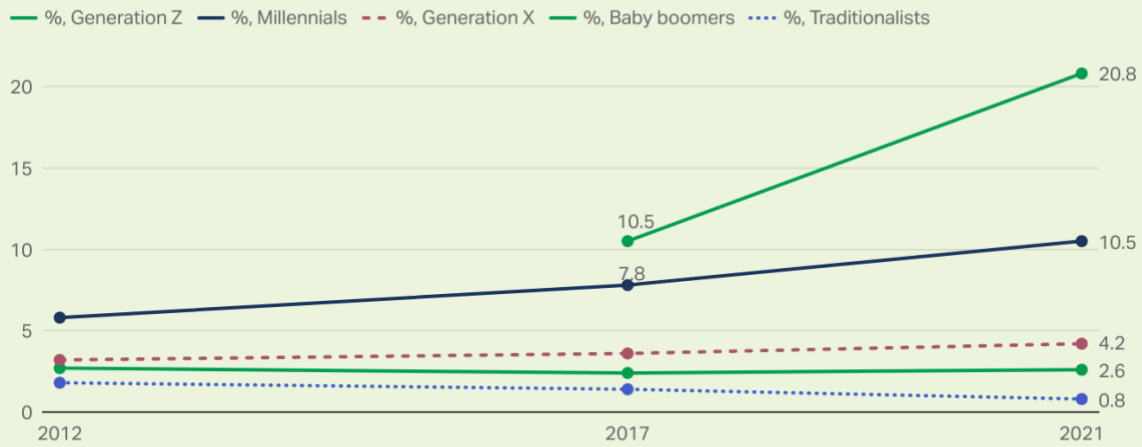
Based on aggregated data from 2022 Gallup telephone polls.

[Get the data](#) • [Download image](#)

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Appendix Figure 3: American Self-Identification as LGBT by Generation (2023 Report)

Trend in LGBT Identification by Generations of U.S. Adults, 2012, 2017 and 2021



--Generation Z are those born between 1997 and 2012. In 2017, only those born between 1997 and 1999 had reached adulthood. In 2021, only those born between 1997 and 2003 had reached adulthood.
 --Millennials are those born between 1981 and 1996. In 2012, only those born between 1981 and 1994 had reached adulthood.
 --Generation X are those born between 1965 and 1980.
 --Baby Boomers are those born between 1946 and 1964.
 --Traditionalists are those born before 1946.

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**Appendix Figure 4: Trendlines of LGBT Identification in U.S. Adults through 2021
(As Reported in 2022)**

Appendix B - Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Note: These questions are intended to act as a guide for the data collection sessions throughout the study. Due to the nature of qualitative research, interviews (particularly later sessions) may be adapted based on responses offered in prior interviews allowing new and unforeseen topics to be explored in the research process. What is listed below are the anticipated questions and intended lines of inquiry established at the beginning of the research process.

Research Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of Midwest K-12 public educators who self-identify as Queer prior to, leading up to, and in their roles as Queer educators and to understand how those experience inform practice and professional interactions.

Research Questions:

1. How do Queer educator participants describe their experiences prior to, leading up to, and as Queer educators?
2. How do Queer educator experiences and identities impact their practices?
3. How do participants describe the ways their Queer identities influence their professional interactions?

Casual/ Recruitment Conversation (Phone/ Zoom) (No data collected)

- Explain research to participant(s) and discuss informed consent. Confirm inclusion criteria is met. Collect signed informed consent.
- Discuss commitment to the project and what data collection sessions may look like. Discuss how the participants would like to meet and how confidentiality will be protected through those meeting modalities.
- Remind participants that participation is voluntary, and they may withdraw at any point without penalty.
- Offer to answer questions that the participant may have about the project.
- Share researcher contact information so that the participant may reach out with other questions or concerns.

Interview 1 (Background/ Experiences)

- Introductions:
 - Review informed consent, project purpose, and allow for questions regarding the project. Confirm informed consent signature is on file.
 - Remind participants of confidentiality procedures, that their participation is voluntary, and that they can withdraw at any time without penalty.
- Interview Questions
 - Tell me about your role as an educator.
 - What drove you to become a teacher?
 - What is your current role/ what roles have you held?
 - What do you teach?
 - Why are you a teacher?
 - How would you describe your relationships with your students?
 - Tell me about your K-12 experience as a student.
 - Tell me about your Queer identity and how you came to know/ understand this about yourself.
 - Describe what this means to you.
 - Could you describe the “coming out” process, as you’ve experienced it, for me?
- “Homework”:
 - Photos of classrooms
 - How does your Queerness impact your role as an educator?
- Post-Session Debriefing (Read to Participant) (See Below).

Interview 2 (Educator Practices)

- Introductions:
 - Ask if participants have had any questions or concerns come up that they would like addressed. Remind participants of confidentiality procedures, the informed consent signed, and that their participation is voluntary, and that they can withdraw at any time without penalty.
- Follow Up Questions
 - Last session you talked about _____, will you tell me a little bit more about...
 - During the last session, you mentioned _____, am I understanding this correctly?
- Interview Questions
 - Tell me about these photos that you brought of your classroom.
 - Would you tell me a little bit about your classroom environment?
 - How would you describe your teaching style?
 - Would you share with me about “being out”?
 - What does being out mean to you?
 - What does this look like for you?
 - To what degree are you “out”?
 - How does your Queerness impact your role as an educator?
 - Can you tell me about some positive experiences you’ve had where your Queerness and educator identity intersect?
 - Can you tell me about some negative experiences you’ve had where your Queerness and educator identity intersect?

Interview 3 (Intersections)

- Introductions:
 - Ask if participants have had any questions or concerns come up that they would like addressed. Remind participants of confidentiality procedures, the informed consent signed, and that their participation is voluntary, and that they can withdraw at any time without penalty.
- Follow Up Questions
 - Last session you talked about _____, will you tell me a little bit more about...
 - During the last session, you mentioned _____, am I understanding this correctly?
- Interview Questions
 - Tell me about your school community.
 - What is your relationship with your administration?
 - Do you feel supported? (Intentional yes/no question to follow up with “Why do you feel that way? Can you give examples?”)
 - Are you out to your admin? (Intentional yes/no question to follow up with “Why do you feel that way? Can you give examples?”)
 - How do your admin treat/ handle LGBTQ+ issues at the school, including those that may involve you?
 - Can you describe _____ in more depth?
 - How does your school community react to your Queerness?
 - Tell me about the community you live/ work in.
 - How does your community respond to LGBTQ+ individuals and issues?
 - How do you fit into your community?

Results (Corroborations/ Final Session)

- Note: These sessions may be done via Zoom or phone call and are meant to share findings and confirm discoveries with participants/ allow for clarifications. They are not meant to be recorded but notes will be taken from sessions on changes that may need noted or reviewed.
- Statement: Thank you for your participation in this study. You have been instrumental in helping to bring these experiences to light and share your valuable stories. I want to share my findings with you to ensure that I have represented you to the best of my abilities. If there is anything you disagree with or have questions about, please let me know.
 - ***Share findings with participant

Debriefing statement to be read aloud at the conclusion of the interviews:

(Read to all) Thank you for your time today and your participation in this study. I want to remind you that it is my goal to use this information to better understand experiences of Queer educators and to share those experiences to make sure that our stories are heard. I will continue to maintain confidentiality throughout this process and will keep your contributions anonymous by using pseudonyms to protect your identity in any publications that come from this research. You may withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty, and if you have any questions or concerns now or in the future, you are encouraged to reach out to me to discuss those.

(If early interviews) I will reach out to you in the near future to schedule our next interview session. In the meantime, if you have any ideas or revelations that you'd like to share with me, please note those and we can discuss them during our next session. I may reach out to you prior to our next interview if I have questions or clarifications related to some of the information shared through the interview today. If at any point you begin to feel mental distress due to the content of these sessions, I encourage you to contact your local mental health resources along with these free national resources. (This list will include local community mental health centers, crisis lines, Trevor Project, Trans* lifeline, and Suicide Prevention Lifeline contact numbers).

(If final interview) Again, I appreciate your time and engagement in the interview process and for providing input so that I may share these stories. I may contact you if I have questions for further clarification regarding the content of today's session. If at any point you begin to feel mental distress due to the content of these sessions, I encourage you to contact your local mental health resources along with these free national resources. (This list will include local community mental health centers, crisis lines, Trevor Project, Trans* lifeline, and Suicide Prevention Lifeline contact numbers).

(Read for all) Finally, how are you feeling? (Complete check in to determine if participant is feeling okay mentally, and if they are not researcher will provide resources, refer out, and/or check in again in a couple of days).

****Between interviews where emotional content was discussed, I will contact participants to complete an “aftercare” check in to ensure that participants' mental health is maintained, and they feel comfortable contacting resources as needed.**

Resources that will be shared with participants if experiencing mental health distress

Local Community Mental Health Center (CMHC) contact information.

- Participants in Jewell, Republic, Washington, Marshall, Mitchell, Cloud, Clay, Riley, Pottawatomie, and Geary counties can contact Pawnee Mental Health Services as 785.587.4300 to establish mental health services. They may also contact their crisis line at 1.800.609.2002 24/7/365 if they begin to experience a mental health crisis.
- Participants in other counties or states will be made aware of local CMHC contact information upon enrollment in the study.

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

- Call 800.273.8255 or dial 988.

The Trevor Project Crisis Intervention Services (for LGBTQ+ people under 25).

- Call 1.866.488.7386
- Text START to 687.687
- Message (Trevor Chat) at <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/about/programs-services/>

Trans LifeLine.

- Call 877.565.8860

***Others to be added as found or needed.

Appendix C - CNF Examples of Modifications

Table 3: Examples of Modifications from Transcripts to the CNF Narrative

Type of Change Made	Original Quote (s)	Published Quote
Removal of Fillers and Clarifications	Will: You know, teaching is relatively safe. Will: I wouldn't have the guise of a family, you know, all that stuff.	It was a relatively safe career choice I wouldn't have had the guise of a family protecting me.
Example of Compression	Jayden: I was 20 going on 21 I was getting ready to be 21. And I just told I told my best friend from childhood. We've known each other since sixth grade since we were 11. And so yeah, I was getting ready to transfer I hadn't even transferred yet because I was 21 when I transferred to K State. I Yep. So yeah, 21 When I transferred to K State, so I was 20 going on 21. It was like the end of February of 2016. And my birthday is in March. So that was the first person I came out to then didn't come out to another person till a year and a half later. So that was like late February of 2016, didn't tell my second person until September of 2017. Then 2018, it just kind of started flowing naturally telling more people kind of letting people assume but didn't really correct them. So it was very, I don't know, it was a I kept track of the first 10 People I told, and then it just kind of started flowing naturally. But a lot of them were very much thought out. So but I will say that was um, that is probably, I think still probably what I carry a lot with is how I had how I had like a really loving family and great friends, and still felt really alone. Most of the time. I think I still carry that with me. And it kind of shows up kind of in funky ways, sometimes in my adult life, where I feel like I can't ask for help, or I just don't know how, because from age five, which is when I probably knew, I	When I was 20, going on 21, I decided I should tell my childhood best friend. There were moments I could feel her just wanting to ask me about it while we were hanging out. It's so weird, maybe some of you have a shared experience, where there's moments where I could feel them wanting to ask me, and I'm screaming for them to ask me, or just to say 'I know, and it's okay.' But a different part of me is also screaming, like 'don't ask me! I'm not ready to make this real yet. If I say it out loud. It's real.' You know, saying it out loud to her for the first time was really hard, it was hard saying it to quite a few people

	don't want to say there's some light bulb moment, but from age five to six, and you feel like you're different. And then from age 21. So for what is that? About, what 16 years, but 15 to 16 years, just carrying something all alone, it's really heavy, which again, I go back to how I feel like I can get people out of their shell not saying I want I'm trying to get kids to come out or anything like that. But I just want them to be their authentic selves and just want them to feel comfortable in their skin. And I feel like I can do that because I felt really just like alone for a lot of my adolescent years into my teenage years or, that's part of adolescence... into my young adult years, so yeah, that kind of back to the student then Gloria: (Part 1) And then I had one student, and he was a special ed student that in middle school, we had a really solid connection. And when he got to high school and middle school kids, they just don't care. They love you, no matter what the high school kids are the ones that are going to start departmentalizing or compartmentalizing where humans fit in their life. And when he got to high school and found out that I was a lesbian, he would not come in my classroom. And I had a really good relationship with Him in middle school. And so that was hard. Gloria: (Part 2) did have one student that was special needs. And I had a great rapport with him in middle school, when he got to high school. And I don't know how he didn't know through middle school that I was gay, because I've never hidden anything. But I also don't, you know, fly flags in my room or anything. He found out somehow	I did have one student in the special education program that was in my class. We had great rapport in middle school, a solid connection. When he got to high school, he found out I was a lesbian. I don't know how he didn't know through middle school that I was gay, because I've never hidden anything, but I also don't, you know, fly flags in my room or anything. Anyways, he found out at the high school and would not come into my classroom. His case manager had to come and talk with me. So that was kind of weird." She pauses. "And it was rough, because I felt like I let that kid down. And we had a really good relationship when he was in middle school, so that was hard. But eventually we finally coaxed him back into my classroom. It's just, in his
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	at the high school and he wouldn't come to my class. And he- and his special ed teacher had to come and have a talk with me. And it was rough, because I felt like that I let that kid down. So that was kind of weird. But we finally you know, coaxed him back into my classroom. He just didn't. Just in his world, he didn't understand what it meant. Jayden: “So, another book. Also, there was one, oh, I cannot remember her name, but it was during native, it was during Native Heritage Month, and she is like a congressman or something. And I do know what talked about it with her too. She was like the first lesbian native woman elected to something. Oh, her name escapes me. But, but yeah, so that we have touched it lightly.”	world, he didn't understand what it meant.” “During Native Heritage Month, we read about the congresswoman who was the first lesbian native woman elected, and I do know we talked about it with her too. So we have touched on Queer people lightly”
Insertion of Transition Words and Phrases	N/A (Addition)	“I'd like to go next,” Dani says to jump into the conversation. “You know, I don't think I can top that one,” adds Gloria.
Changes or Additions	N/A (Addition) Dani: I introduced the connection to this participant's friend, including Queer identities about the friend. Upon member checks they asked that I further de-identify the individual they referenced. Eric described the experiences of being bullied by a teacher. In the interview, he provided the teacher's actual last name. The last name was changed, but his reference to the teacher stayed the same.	After a few moments of silence, Dillan poses a question to the group, “when you're thinking about hindsight, do you ever come out to friends and their responses is something about them already knowing?” “So I talked to my sister's friend who is Queer and always treated me like a younger sibling.” Eric continues, “His name was Mr. Astol, and I called him Mr. Asshole, because he was an asshole.”

	Some references to a GSA-type club were made using school-specific (and identifiable) club names.	All GSA-type clubs were referred to as “GSA” in the study.
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Appendix D - Kansas Map of Community Types

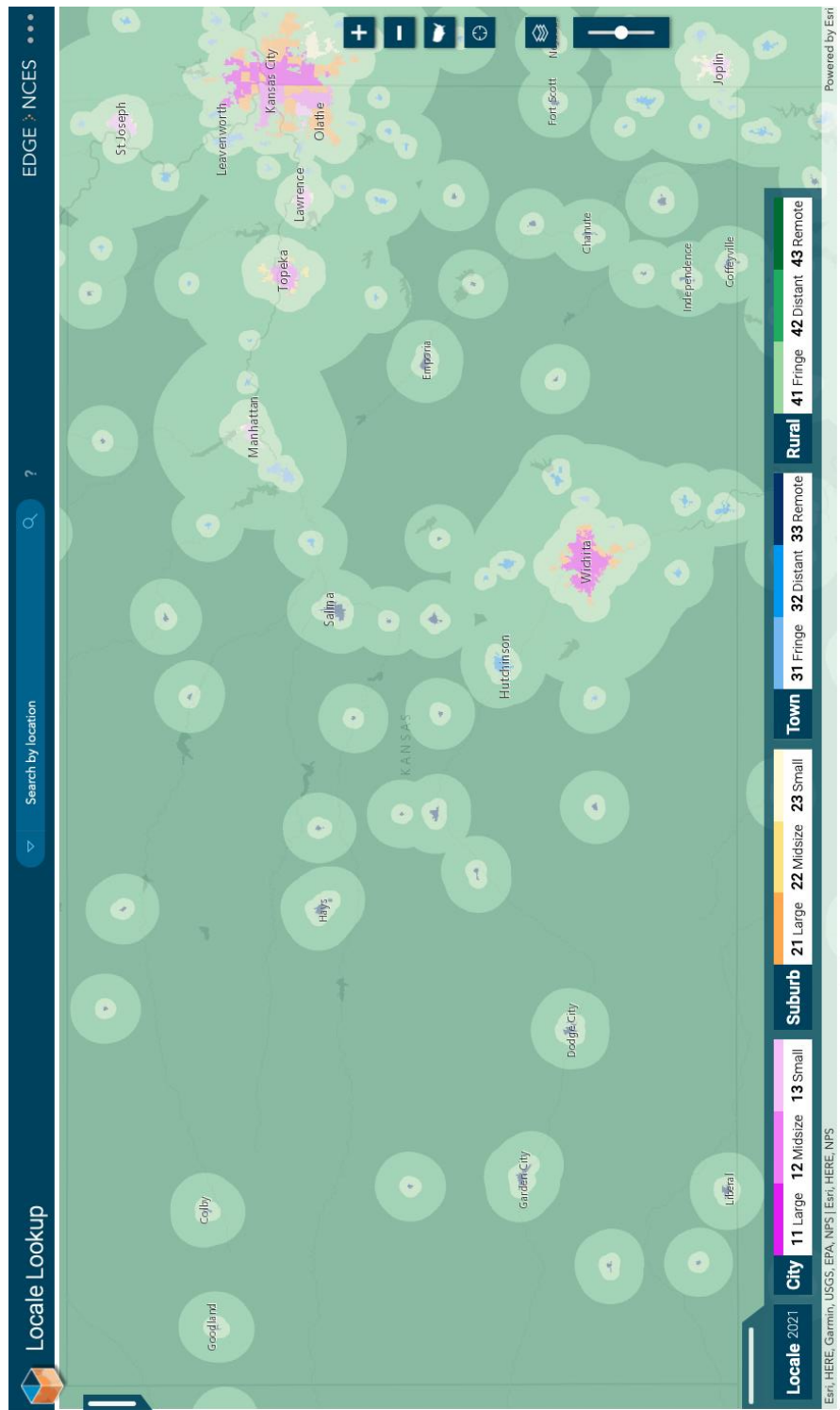


Figure 20: Kansas Map and Community Types (Rural, Suburban, etc.)

Appendix E - CNF Plot Diagram

This plot diagram follows a traditional Western plot format, beginning with the exposition, describing the rising action and the climax, which is followed by the denouement and resolution. This also represents the emplotment process used during analysis to develop the story and storyline that would be shared within the narrative inquiry framework. The scenes that comprise the climax or conflict are not necessarily representative of a central moment of heightened feeling; rather, they represent the scenes which contain some of the more emotional, or tense, components of the stories that were shared by participants.

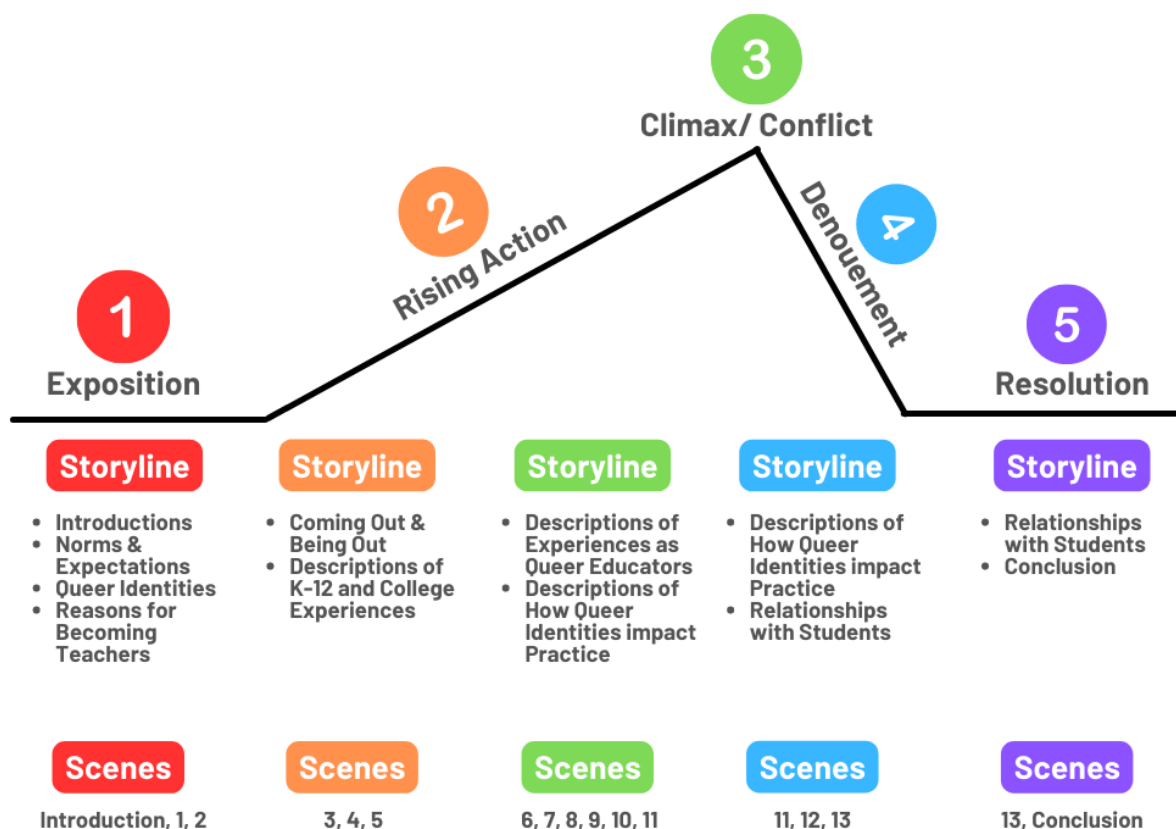


Figure 21: CNF Plot Diagram