

A Midwest district: Impact of preferred name policies and procedures on LGBTQIA2S+ educators

by

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B.S., Kansas State University, 1995
M.A., Kansas State University, 2001

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

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Abstract

During 2020-2021 the Midwest District joined many school districts across the United States (Eckes, S., 2020; Elassar, A., 2022; Kopels, S., 2023) in determining how to serve the needs of their transgender and nonbinary students with the use of preferred names and/or pronouns. The policies and procedures delivered to the Midwest District's staff members provided revealed some personal opinions regarding people within the LGBTQIA2S+ community [(L)esbian, (G)ay, (B)isexual, (T)ransgender, (Q)ueer/(Q)uestioning, (I)ntersexual, (A)sexual/(A)romantic/(A)gender, (2)Two-Spirited, (+) other genders/identities undefined] and the lack of protection provided by the Midwest District to those staff members. Despite some well-intentioned questioning regarding gender expression and identity, what was unintentionally revealed was a consistent bias towards the LGBTQIA2S+ community as a whole. This case study seeks to inform the existing body of research on how teachers within the LGBTQIA2S+ community working in the Midwest District perceive not only the effect of their policies and procedures, but whether they align of the Midwest District's values.

This research is a qualitative case study of six interviews that focused on five questions. The participants were employed at the Midwest District between 2020-2021 school year and identify LGBTQIA2S+. There were six participants: three teachers (1 elementary, 1 middle, 1 high school) and three administrators (2 primary and 1 secondary). After the interviews, analytic memo-ing, open coding, and magnitude coding revealed three concepts that are alike in both groups of participants: (sense of respect, training, policies) and that while both teachers and administrators feel supported and respected, there are elements within the Midwest District's that are discriminatory.

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Approved by:
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Dedication

A mi familia

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In January of 2025, President Donald Trump signed three Executive Orders that directly impacted the implications of this case study. President Trump's Executive Order (2025) "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government," defined gender within the binary of male and female, which in effect, ended schools systems' like the Midwest District, need to record, document, and inform parents of preferred names and pronouns since the United States would no longer acknowledge genders outside the binary as "real" or valid:

It is the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female.

These sexes are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality. Under my direction, the Executive Branch will enforce all sex-protective laws to promote this reality [. . .] "gender ideology" replaces the biological category of sex with an ever-shifting concept of self-assessed gender identity, permitting the false claim that males can identify as and thus become women and vice versa, and requiring all institutions of society to regard this false claim as true. (Title 3 – The President, 2025, p. 1)

The orders' impact on US society was felt in many arenas but in education it resulted in the rescinding of the "U.S. Department of Education Toolkit: Creating Inclusive and Nondiscriminatory School Environments for LGBTQI+ Students" (Bost, 2025). Some school responded immediately to the executive order, like Woodland Park school district in Colorado who finds themselves simultaneously following the state's new law in honoring preferred names and resolving to follow the President's order and "recognizing only two sexes and rejecting gender ideology" (Young, 2025, p. 1).

The following day, January 21, 2025, the President ended programs, trainings, celebrating, and hiring practices that acknowledged diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the executive order, “Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit Based Opportunity” (2025). In doing so, school systems no longer be compelled or driven to provide professional development discussing racial/social equity in school policies/procedures, grading, curriculum development/adoption, or in their hiring practices:

Other strategies to encourage the private sector to end illegal DEI discrimination and preferences and comply with all Federal civil-rights laws [. . .] the Attorney General and the Secretary of Education shall jointly issue guidance to all State and local educational agencies that receive Federal funds, as well as all institutions of higher education that receive Federal grants or participate in the Federal student loan assistance program under Title IV of the Higher Education Act [. . .] required to comply with Students for Fair Admissions. (Ending Illegal Discrimination, 2025)

For school systems across the nation who had started to include DEI trainings and began opening their diversity training to include topics of LGBTQIA2S+, the executive order foreshadows the end of these trainings and the closing of opportunities towards social justice.

The Executive Order signed on January 29, 2025, accused educators of indoctrinating students to become transgender/nonbinary and encouraging corrective surgeries. With the signing of “Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling” (2025), President Trump created trepidation within the educational community in having conversations regarding anything outside of curriculum let alone preferred names and pronouns:

[I]nnocent children are compelled to adopt identities as either victims or

oppressors solely based on their skin color and other immutable characteristics.

In other instances, young men and women are made to question whether they were born in the wrong body and whether to view their parents and their reality as enemies to be blamed [. . .] steering students toward surgical and chemical mutilation without parental consent or involvement or allowing males access to private spaces designated for females. (Ending Radical Indoctrination, 2025, p. 1)

The order gave Woodland Park School District in Colorado the impetus to adopt the President's sexual binary (Young, 2025) and would limit school systems, like the Midwest District, abilities to support students on their journey in self-discovery seeing how any educators participation in a minor's social transition would now be considered illegal and considered equivalent to "sexually exploiting a minor" (Ending Radical Indoctrination, 2025, p.3). Any desire for professional development is diminished with this executive order as any support towards providing a safe environment for students within the LGBTQIA2S+ community maybe considered "indoctrination" and illegal. Further, these executive orders decrease the sense of vulnerability that Lasky argues is needed in effective teachers who feel competent, valued, and have agency (Lasky, 2005), the lack of vulnerability only increases the sense of paranoia and sense of powerlessness of these teachers.

The case at the center of this study foreshadows this wave of conservative legislation introduced by President Trump. In 2021-2022, the Midwest School District enacted a preferred name/pronoun policy that required educators to document when a student informed them of a desire to go by a name or pronoun other than their given/"government" name or counter to their sex identified at birth. This form would then be submitted to the student's administrator who

would make parental contact to request permission of the name change and then proceed to changing the name in the learning management system allowing all faculty knowledge of the student's preferred name. There was some push back from teachers who felt like this policy would be "outing" students without ensuring safe environments and necessary resources; while other teachers felt that being expected to use preferred names/ pronouns violated their own religious beliefs. The discussions regarding preferred names/pronouns were not new or isolated to the Midwest District. These discussions were happening across the United States and were covered in the news as lawsuits debated the rights of transgender/nonbinary students against the rights of teachers and the power of the school districts; however, most of the public discourse centered on controversies occurring in states known for larger LGBTQIA2S+ communities such as California, Florida, New York (Simons, Hahn, Pope, Russell, 2021). The preferred name policy at the center of this case study occurred in the heartland of America, in a rural public school district in a conservative Midwestern state. It demonstrates that this conversation does not stop within larger cities but continues into smaller communities where resources may be limited and where the risks may be greater. LGBTQIA2S+ educators may find themselves with less of a community who understand and provide support when issues like the preferred name/pronoun policies are enacted leaving them to make choices between self-survival or fighting while facing possible consequences (Smith-Silverman, 2020; Ending Radical Indoctrination, 2025).

The moment captured in the Midwest District in 2021-2022 foreshadowed the events and discord that was to be addressed in January 2025. In the early 2020s, there were cases across the nation regarding preferred names and pronouns and teachers refusing to use them most citing conflicts with their own religious beliefs (Eckes, 2020; Kopels, 2023). The Midwest District itself faced the same type of controversy (Elassar, 2022) which most likely initiated executive

leaderships' belief that a standard procedure should be put in place. The conflict amongst teachers who understood the needs of LGBTQIA2S+ students and the teachers who could not step outside of their moral stance, mirrored the same conflict within the United States. Whose rights mattered more within a public school? The Midwest District's enacting of the preferred name/pronoun policy, eventual rescinding, and then quiet continuance, reflects public schools' wrestling with those "big ideas." It was not these sentiments regarding one's own religious rights helped fuel President Trump's push to sign the Executive Orders and reestablish heteronormative norms (white male, cisgender) in American society.

Introduction to the Problem

Context of the Study

In January 2025, President Trump signed three Executive Orders that ended programs that supported Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), accused public schools K-12 of indoctrinating students with LGBTQIA+ ideology, and defined gender as male/female (Ending Radical Indoctrination, 2025). Towards the end of my case study, the landscape of America and education changed, making school systems more precarious and dangerous for educators in that the parameters of equity and inclusion have been dismantled, the binary firmly established and any counter expression of gender viewed illegally, and public schools and its educators seen supporting students in any manner through their social transitions could be tried in court (Ending Radical Indoctrination, 2025). Despite these daunting realities, LGBTQIA2S+ educators will remain and continue to be vital parts of the United States public school systems. So, amid this evolving landscape, it is critical to identify and support the needs of LGBTQIA2S+ educators in public schools like the Midwest District, ensuring their safety and wellbeing in schools (Lasky, 2005; Smith-Silverman, 2020).

The Midwest District is in the heartland of the United States. The Midwest District is settled in a small town of about 25,000 and is considered rural. In the 2021-2022 school year, the Midwest District had 6,999 students enrolled K-12. Of those students, about 8% were English language learners and .1% are from migrant working families. Forty eight percent were considered economically disadvantaged and close to 20% of the students received support through an individualized education program (IEP). The Midwest District's teaching staff consisted of 83% of its elementary teachers being fully licensed, and 97% of its secondary teachers being fully licensed.

The Midwest District was known for its diverse student body and was proud of it. Despite that, before 2021, the district did not have any policy regarding diversity and inclusion. That changed on September 9, 2021, during the first faculty meeting at the Midwest High School (MHS), the staff was informed of an update to the Midwest District's "Diversity and Inclusion Policy" for both faculty and students. The change was an inclusion of the sentence, "Employees [students] will be called by their preferred name and pronouns." The verbal notice of the update was followed by a procedural change regarding a student's choice in using a preferred name. Instructors were informed that, if students wished to use a name other than their legal names, they would have to complete an application. This application would be completed by the student, and submitted to the student's administrator who would then communicate the information to the student's parent or guardian. After this process, the name change would be reflected on the learning management system (LMS). The change of procedure elicited a myriad of questions to which the head administrator was not prepared to answer, leaving the faculty in two camps – one in absolute compliance and one in absolute resistance.

The events on September 9, 2021, at MHS exposed three problems. The first problem is a complete misunderstanding of the complexities experienced by adolescent transgender/nonbinary students. Many of the high school instructors who stated in loud and soft whispers that they would not comply with the Midwest District's expectations understood that acquiesce would lead to "outing" students before they were ready, and that what seems like a "simple" informative conversation is quite a complex social and emotional journey. What the Midwest District leaders may not be acknowledging in its policies and that instructors have witnessed is documented in Gordon et al (2018) article researching the connection between gender expression and the victimization from bullying and violence. Their research reveals that 55% of the respondents experienced verbal harassment while 11% experienced physical assault while in school (Gordon et al, 2018). Their research also demonstrates that students who identify within the "sexual minority" will be more likely to identify as gender "nonconforming" demonstrating that the instructors' concerns for the students at MHS are real and genuine.

The second problem revealed is that while the change to the policy and one procedural step was given, it was obvious that the head administrator was not prepared to answer questions, and that clarification was not readily accessible. The high school was left in turmoil. Several of my peers vehemently refused to comply stating that they would "die on this hill." Other instructors readily complied. I was informed that one instructor made six copies of the form and distributed it to the six students in her classroom using other names rather than their legal names. Three of those students were distraught with the idea that their administrator was to inform their parents of their name usage and the potential "outing."

The third problem in the rush to protect the students that many overlooked was the impact the policy may have on faculty members within the LGBTQIA2S+¹ community. While

one of the openly gay faculty members spoke to the director of human resources about his anger and frustration pertaining to the new policy, there was no support. Furthermore, the district did not engage in reflection on how the overall discussion about bathroom use, gender identification, sexual orientation, markers of masculinity and femininity, and religious ideologies may impact the LGBTQIA2S+ members of the faculty and their sense of belonging – or solidifying their sense of “otherness.” The following timeline demonstrates the lack of forethought the Midwest District underwent before initiating the policy and explains the resulting confusion and frustration experienced by educators:

- September 9, 2021: Faculty Meeting. The updated policy was given with the procedural step of completing the form to use preferred name. The procedural steps were covered for the student form (student completes and submits, administrator calls parents). The procedural steps were not covered for the employee form, but the form includes space for the employee’s legal name and preferred name asking then for the form to be submitted to the employer’s supervising administrator.
- September 30, 2021: Department Meeting. The assistant administrator provided the Midwest District mandated training on Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity. The training reiterated the steps to take in completing the form and reminds faculty as to the importance of a name. There were several questions posed to administrator who was unable to answer the questions:

Q1: What if a student uses a nickname?

Q2: I have a male student whose nickname is male but is not connected to legal name.

Q3: So, if a student fills the form, but the parent says no they don’t support the

use of the name, are we not “allowed” to use the preferred name?

- October 4, 2021. A brief from ACLU State Chapter published in March 2021 titled “Know Your Rights: The Rights of Transgender Students” was found by a staff member. The last page has a section regarding privacy protections stating: “Teachers and administrators do not have an affirmative obligation under state or federal law to inform a parent that a student is transgender” (Stinson 2021). The ACLU argued that school’s disclosing a student’s status as transgender, or nonbinary, is a violation of his/hers/their constitutional right to privacy and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The document was forwarded to the president of the local NEA chapter.
- October 5, 2021. District received an email from the director of human resources stating the Midwest District will cease the use of the form and will not inform parents of students’ transgender or nonbinary status in compliance to FERPA.
- October 7, 2021. All parents within the Midwest District received an email stating that in accordance to FERPA and in support of the Diversity and Inclusion Policy parents will not be informed if a faculty members learns that their child wishes to use a name different from their legal name stating: “[the Midwest District] will not communicate this information to parents unless the student requests the administration or counselor to do so, per Federal FERPA Guidance.”

With continued questions and frustrations, faculty continued conversations outside of meetings unaware of who was listening and whether the opinions shared may offend or hurt their colleagues. It was this unintended consequence inspired the case study and to questions how the staff members were affected by the Midwest District’s policies and procedures regarding the

LGBTQIA2S+ community and how did they perceived the Midwest District's values aligning to its policies.

Overview of Issues

The Midwest District's response to transgender/nonbinary students and the resulting conversations had by the educators in the district was an extension of similar conversations occurring in the nation (Eckes, 2020; Elassar, 2022). School systems found themselves needing to support transgender/nonbinary students, but in their unyielding hegemonic, heteronormativity could not easily untie themselves from a binary understanding of gender. This lack of understanding can be traced to the gender inequities practiced in the Industrial Age (Kahn & Gorski, 2016) when schools first transitioned from male to mostly female teachers. This shift and discomfort in the power women had in educating American youth resulted in a patriarchal society affirming social morés by reestablishing the binary through exerting control through morality clauses and later by "hunting" out predators (those teachers within the LGBTQIA2S+ community) for breaking said clauses. The fight over understanding gender is not a new one and overcoming a binary expression of gender within society is not new either.

Historical Heteronormative Impact on LGBTQIA2S+ Educators

As the Industrial Age watched male educators leave the classroom, the binary standard of gender remained reinforced in public schools. Kahn and Gorski (2016), *The gendered and heterosexist evolution of the teacher exemplar in the United States*, examine how women entering the classroom reinforced the gender norm as the "teacher exemplar." While homosexual teachers existed within public schools, the expectation was that their gender expression was not to stray from the status quo.

LGBT Educators in the 20th Century

The twentieth century brought rise of public concern regarding the influence of LGBT educators upon curriculum and/or upon students themselves. In Blount's *Fit to Teach: Same-Sex Desire, Gender, and School Work in the Twentieth Century* (2005) documents how schools first reflected homosexual society as the role of teacher as the perception of the career became more nurturing in nature and feminized. The necessity to cohabit furthered the appeal for unmarried women, and school districts benefitted from their availability. The same-sex relationships remained unnoticed until some were perceived to step outside of gender-normed appearance.

In his *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948), Alfred Kinsey spoke to the behavior of homosexual men and their sexual behavior which seemed to respond to stimuli and a commentary on their behavior. His *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), however, suggested that female homosexuality stemmed from their higher education.

LGBTQIA2S+ Educators Seek Legal Protections

Examining the legal battles LGBTQIA2S+ educators have faced on their behalf and on behalf of their students, Eckes and McCarthy (2008) define the hostile environment and the real dangers of living outside of the "apartheid of the closet." Covering first generation cases like *Morrison v. Board of Education*, 1969; second generation cases like *Lawrence v. Texas*, 2003; and third generation cases like *Murray v. Oceanside Unified School District*, 2000, Eckes and McCarthy cover immorality cases, cases that provide due process and equal protection, and equal protection and antidiscrimination provisions for LGBTQIA2S+ educators.

Karen Graves (2018) continues the conversation by focusing on the history of cases in which schools are preoccupied with censoring gay bodies. Graves illustrates this by referencing the decriminalization of homosexuality, more explicit stance on the right to privacy, the removal

of homosexuality as a mental illness, and the passing of laws to stop discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations.

LGBTQIA2S+ Educators Current Exigence

In “Social Justice and LGBTQIA2S+ Issues in Schools,” Camicia focuses on the hidden curriculum experienced by LGBTQIA2S+ students and legitimizes the need to move beyond the binary nomenclature in order to provide a school culture that is safe and affirming. This type of environment, Camicia notes, benefits students and increases their health, safety, and learning. Mayo and Blackburn (2020) affirm Butler’s work by calling for a newer understanding of gender and a reshaping of all of school practices rather than marking transgender and nonbinary students and making the school environment unsafe and not conducive to learning. In Miller’s “Gender Identity Complexity is Transection Turn” (2020), Miller examines gender fluidity in school systems allowing for students’ redefinition and shifting on the journey of transitioning; Miller allows for gender to be destabilized. This idea is further supported in Kevin Moore’s “The Rainbow Knapsack Revisited: Being a Gay Teacher in a World of Heterosexual Privilege.” Moore also speaks to the privilege experienced by the heteronormative default of school systems not afforded to LGBTQIA2S+ counterparts (Miller 2020).

LGBTQIA2S+ Policies/Procedures Impacts on Educators and Students

Preferred name/pronoun policies and documentation refuses the destabilization of gender. The Midwest District is one of many who find themselves controlling a student’s journey to self-identify as a full person including their sexual orientation and gender expression. The contention based around parent notification and consent, and student right to medical privacy at a certain age.

Eckes speaks to these types of cases in her work “Pronouns and Preferred Names: When Public School Teachers’ Religious Beliefs Conflict with School Directive” (2020). She covers *Flaming v. West Point School Board*, 2019 and *Kluge v. Brownsburg County School Corp*, 2020 both cases in which teachers refused to use a preferred name due to religious beliefs (Eckes, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Across the United States, courtrooms were seeing cases regarding preferred names and pronouns. Cases like (*Grimm v. Gloucester County School Board*, 2019; *J.A.W. v. Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporate*, 2019; *Whitaker v. Kenosha Unified School District No. 1 Board of Education*, 2017) stemmed from students challenging schools for discriminatory practices, while in 2020 and 2022 cases from teachers citing religious freedom found their way into the courtroom in *Kluge v. Brownsburg Cmty. School Corporate*, 2020 (Eckes, 2021) and in a school district in the Midwest District (Sarnoff, 2022). The cases and resulting conversations showed that school systems were aware that there were students whose needs had to be addressed and that current school structures based on binary understandings of gender did not help support those needs. It was not surprising that the conversations would begin to extend into smaller, rural districts within the United States. This was seen in 2021-2022 in the Midwest District.

The study examined the Midwest District in the Midwest’s Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity policies and procedures and its impact on its faculty. After disclosing its first plan in December of 2020 and instituting the procedural step of completing the form, there seems to be a disconnect between understanding the theoretical needs of transgender/nonbinary students and the practice of giving support. Because of this disconnect, there was confusion on the part of the faculty, students experienced anxiety, and, in the end, the Midwest District backed down from its

procedure. However, the problem of how the Midwest District not only understands but supports diversity and inclusion for all students – including transgender and nonbinary students – is still pressing. In the end, the question becomes, how do these missteps and haphazard conversations which lead to no purpose or end goal, impact the work and learning experience for those within the LGBTQIA2S+ community?

Purpose of the Study

The study's purpose was to examine the unintended work/learning (culture) environment on the Midwest District's implementation of a program to support diversity and inclusion in the whole District. Considering Lasky's statement in her text, "Gay Teachers Fight Back!: Rank-and-File Gay and Lesbian Teachers' Activism against the Briggs Initiative, 1977-1978," LGBTQIA2S+ people face fear and are silenced at work (2020). While speaking to the need of unions, Lasky's words still speak to the climate facing LGBTQIA2S+ educators today. While those in the study are not closeted, they faced fear in retribution from the Midwest District in participating and sharing their experiences upon the preferred name/pronoun "roll-out." Another purpose was to allow space for the participants to have agency and voice.

Research Questions

The research questions posed for this study are:

- How were the participants affected by the Midwest District's policies and procedures regarding the LGBTQIA2S+ community?
- How did the participants perceive the Midwest District's espoused values as aligning to its policies?

Definition of Terms

The following terms were used and defined in the following manner in this study:

- **LGBTQIA2S+:** (L)esbian, (G)ay, (B)isexual, (T)ransgender, (Q)ueer/(Q)uestioning, (I)ntersexual, (A)sexual/(A)romantic/(A)gender, (2)Two-Spirited, (+) other genders/identities undefined
- **Policy/Procedure:** a set of rules or expectations that are to be followed when certain defined conditions occur; in this case study, both terms are used interchangeably
- **Values:** a set of beliefs that a person or institution states as its guiding principles; in this study, the Midwest District's nondiscrimination statement
- **Teacher:** the professional in the classroom
- **Educator:** both teachers and administrators
- **Administrator:** the leader that serves as principal of the building/school

Positionality

Given my background in English, I had studied cultural studies. My work as an educator has always focused on racial justice and feminism. In my actions and in the curriculum I taught, I've wanted to give students the opportunity to examine the world from new lenses and perspectives. In time racial justice included social justice as my friendships included friends who were gay/lesbian. When my daughter came out to me as nonbinary, my scope and understanding of LGBTQIA2S+ grew exponentially as her friends and my friends included me in open conversations about issues in the government that frightened, frustrated, and limited their futures. These limitations were no different than the infringement of civil liberties felt by people of color, specifically African Americans, during Jim Crow and Civil Rights Movement. If I wasn't an ally before, this moment of realization made me an ally.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) in her text *Borderlands – La Frontera: the New Mestiza* speaks to experiencing duality in the “white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 31); while not Mexican, the same sense of duality between the white/Catholic and the Puerto Rican/indigenous is grounded in my sense of being and influences my sense of intersectionality between race and gender. When considering the inequities experienced by my daughter, her friends, and my friends (some of whom were educators), that intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) allowed for my greater understanding and need to speak to their needs.

Recently there has been a call that the antiracist fight should not be carried by people of color. That to impact change, antiracism needs to be carried by white Americans. People of color have carried enough burdens. I would say the same is true to issues and topics regarding the LGBTQIA2S+ community. There is enough danger and high risk for members within the LGBTQIA2S+ community in their fighting for equality/equity. For change, those who will need to fight are their allies – cisgender, heterosexual allies who can enter the room safely.

Significance of the Study

As I have started my research, I have noticed that much of the research outside of special education (regarding inclusivity) is relatively new demonstrating how the LGBTQIA2S+ community and their needs have pushed into the educational field through racial/social justice advocacy (Eckes & McCarthy, 2008; Graves, 2018; Silverman-Smith, 2020; Simons et al., 2021). My research is relevant to the discourse regarding how to best support rural students who attend schools with limited understanding on how to support them.

In her text *Fit to Teach: Same-Sex Desire, Gender, and School Work in the Twentieth Century* (2005), Jackie Blount opened the conversation regarding homosexuality and public schools. The reality that LGBT educators had existed and supported public schools since the

early twentieth century should be no surprise, and the resulting fear and paranoia should not be either. In 2016, Steven Camicia added to conversation in discussing LGBTQ inclusive curriculum in his *Critical Democratic Education and LGBTQ-Inclusive Curriculum*, and May and Blackburn's collection of essays found in *Queer, Trans, and Intersectional Theory in Educational Practice: Student, Teacher, and Community Experiences* (2020) share stories of identity creation through and around education (Camicia, 2020). In 2020, Sara Smith-Silverman, in her text, argues how teaching is queer work and shares how LGBT teachers and the union AFT worked together for greater protections in schools in California (Smith-Silverman, 2020). These researchers as well as Eckes discussion of preferred name/pronoun policies in schools and teacher's own religious beliefs (2020) and lawsuits from Kansas to Illinois to Ohio (Eckes, 2020; Elassar, 2022) regarding teachers' use of pronouns and preferred names influenced the case study presented.

The case study is significant as it focuses on a particular district and its attempt to employ Camicia, May, and Blackburn's ideas regarding discourse around inclusive conversations around identity and education, and its adoption of a preferred name/pronoun policy. The Midwest District entered same arena with other school systems. The Midwest District's enactment of its policies lead to confusion and frustration for its educators and parents. Leading me to ask how the LGBTQIA2S+ educators perceived the district's policies aligning with its values and how they were affected by those policies and procedures. This study hopes to extend the conversation to include rural school systems and the voices/perspectives of LGBTQIA2S+ educators as the work in the buildings while these types of policies are enacted.

Methodology

The study was a critical case study using interviews as a means to give educators within the LGBTQIA2S+ community voice to their own lived experiences withing the Midwest High School; the study provided a thematic analysis, “focused on ‘what’ is said or the content of the narrative” (O’Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015) while analyzing for “common thematic elements” related to the research questions/problem. The study answered how the participants perceived the Midwest District’s values as aligning to its policies/procedures and how they were affected by them.

The case study focused on the Midwest District’s enactment of its preferred name/pronoun policy in 2021-2022. Six participants were selected to be interviewed; the participants were three teachers (1 elementary, 1 middle, 1 high school) and three administrators (2 primary and 1 secondary). One in-depth interview was taken per each participant from May – June 2024. I only conducted one interview per participant because they were hesitant and fearful of being part of the study, needing confirmation of anonymity and confidentiality. While they were willing to share their experiences, all six participants declined to recommend other participants. All data and analysis kept the participants separated into two groups – teachers and administrators.

Data collection started with open coding to establish bigger categories of ideas and specific responses within those categories. Magnitude coding weighed the responses into positive, neutral, and negative categories which helped determined themes for each group of participants attempting to answer the study’s research questions.

Assumptions and Delimitations

There are a few assumptions being made. One is that other school districts have policies regarding diversity and inclusion. Another assumption is that districts are instituting ways to address the needs of transgender/nonbinary students in a nondiscriminatory way. There is an assumption that many educators are advocates for all students no matter their sexual orientation or gender expression, but that may not be the case. The other assumption is that districts like the Midwest District in the Midwest is acting in good faith and not with ulterior or manipulative motives. That their interests are what is best for the students.

The delimitations for the study that I am focusing on the secondary level as it is the level I am most familiar with and the age group I best understand. I also believe that a secondary student's needs are different than an elementary student's needs and that parent involvement will look different. I am limiting the evaluation to the start of this year as the Midwest District in the Midwest has a new Human Resources director so all decisions starting August 2021 rests on his shoulders.

Another delimitation is my positionality as an outsider to the LGBTQIA2S+ community. Despite my best efforts, I am consistently fighting the biases that a heteronormative perspective has first instilled. As a researcher and ally, my goal is giving space to the voices of those who may not have the agency to be heard – to open the door so they may walk in.

Organization of Study

- *Chapter One* introduces the proposed study examining how the Midwest District's policies and procedures affected the educators within the LGBTQIA2S+ community and whether those educators perceived the Midwest Districts values aligning to its

policies. The chapter also includes purpose of the study, research questions, definition of terms, nature of study and the organization of study.

- **Chapter Two** provides a literature review examining how gender in education has been a point of contention during the Industrial Age when women began to outnumber men as teachers. As the field became more attractive to unmarried women, and, when these women began to step outside of the accepted norms of behavior in some of their appearance, in asking for more pay, and in becoming active in political movements like the suffrage movement, society found the need to affirm the social gender roles. The chapter covers the idea of the teacher exemplar, the treatment of LGBTQIA2S+ educators in the 20th century, the legal protections LGBTQIA2S+ educators sought, and the current exigence of LGBTQIA2S+ educators.
- **Chapter Three** outlines the case study's methodology including the research design, a review of the methodological literature, data collection, and data analysis procedures.
- **Chapter Four** presents the data collected from the teachers and administrators, how the data was coded for emerging concepts, and the determination of teacher/administrator themes.
- **Chapter Five** describes the findings in relation to theoretical analysis and covers the study's implications for practice, its limitations, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature Review

Using Judith Butler's as the foundation for the examination of both ideation of sex and gender, this evaluation focuses on the school district's policy and procedure's limitations due to its binary focus and inability to successfully define its own goal and purpose. The case study's purpose was to examine how the participants perceived the Midwest District's values aligned to its policies and how participants were affected by the policies/procedures.

This chapter is divided into six sections. The first, "Historical Heteronormative Impact on LGBTQIA2S+ Educators," discusses how the field of education changes during the Industrial Age with more women entering creating the resulting "teacher exemplar" (Kahn & Gorski, 2016). The second section, "LGBT Educators in the 20th Century," examines the growth of unmarried women in education and the treatment LGBT educators received by the US government. Section three, "LGBTQIA2S+ Educators Seek Legal Protections," details the waves of legal cases fought to secure rights and protections for LGBTQIA2S+ educators. Section four, "LGBTQIA2S+ Educators' Current Exigence," considers current educational practices of inclusion within school policies and curriculum. Section five, "LGBTQIA2S+ Policies/Procedures Impact on Educators and Students," provides an overview on preferred name/pronoun policies and the impact it had on school systems across the nation. The last section, "Examining the Binary/Heteronormative Foundation and Theoretical Framework," reflects upon the idea of womanhood and provides study's theoretical framework.

Historical Heteronormative Impact on LGBTQIA2S+ Educators

The inherent leaning towards the binary has been the foundation of public schools since the early 19th century as the burgeoning Industrial Age saw the exodus of men from the role of educator. In their publication, *The gendered and heterosexist evolution of the teacher exemplar in the United States*, Kahn and Gorski (2016) examine how the entrance of women into the role of educator solidified binary gender roles and created the image of “teacher exemplar” (Kahn and Gorski, 2016). As the role of education moved toward being more an extension of the domestic sphere, women fit the role of domesticity. Teachers’ behavior continued to be expected to be model and typical. Any atypical, nonheteronormative behavior, as G. Stanley Hall and Waller stated after studying men who were deemed to exhibit atypical male behavior: “‘Proper’ (hegemonic) gender role behavior, following dominant gendered norms, thus became paramount to teachers’ abilities to secure and maintain employment and to avoid the hostilities of heteronormativity and heterosexism” (Kahn & Gorski, 2016).

The “closeted” reality and the need for LGBTQIA2S+ to fulfill the heteronormative exemplar creates a lot of pressure juxtaposed in a reality where there are limited support systems for LGBTQIA2S+ citizens/educators who are not afforded the same protections under the law(s). Many states across the nation who had antibullying policies/programs in the early 21st century, ended up removing them due to language that some felt was either inflammatory or promoted a gay agenda. While the Employment NonDiscrimination Act (ENDA) shows some progress, and was stalled in Congress (Kahn and Gorski, 2016) and the EEOC’s (Equal Employment Opportunities Commission) ruling on June 12, 2012, extended protection to include gender identity or gender nonconforming individuals as protected, many LGBTQIA2S+

educators face state legislations known as “No Promo Homo” laws forcing the LGBTQIA2S+ to exist in what Eskridge (1997) called the “apartheid of the closet” stating:

a regime in which homosexuals were segregated from civilized society, not physically, but psychically and morally. So long as they confined their expressions and actions to a mutually protective closet, homosexuals were promised a regime of ‘separate but equal’ toleration from the liberals and legal protection from the witch hunters.” (Kahn & Gorski, 2016, 25-26).

These types of pressures to measure to a heteronormative exemplar and restrict one’s own authentic self to avoid the appearance of divergence from the status quo is too much for any educator and not an equitable expectation for a well-trained, proficient, and at times award-winning educator. As LGBTQIA2S+ educators began to speak to their lived-experiences or became “uncloseted,” the United States began to see educators who were not resolved to disappear willingly.

LGBT Educators in the 20th Century

When there is concern regarding students’ rights and “safety,” it is not uncommon to see concern be leveled upon the educators themselves and their influence upon students either personally or through curriculum. In her text *Fit to Teach: Same-Sex Desire, Gender, and School Work in the Twentieth Century*, J.M. Blount (2005) documents the connectivity of the field of education and the LGBTQIA2S+ educators. In their first inceptions, schools reflected the homosocial society in which they function. In the 18th century, during which the “separation of spheres” was strictly enforced, women were restricted to the domestic spheres and the public/economic sphere was dominated by men – including education. Male educators’ tenure was temporary in that their time in the classroom was used to fill a gap while pursuing grander

employability: “Most did not view teaching as a life-long mission [. . .] after establishing reputations in her communities through teaching, men commenced their intended professions in law, commerce, medicine, or the ministry” (Blount, 2005). This continuous movement of male educators out of the classroom created the opportunity for women to enter the classroom and by the mid-1800s women began to outnumber men in the classroom and the shift toward teaching becoming more “women’s” work began. As the public perception of teaching changed to one of more nurturing (i.e. more within the domestic venue) and male teachers become less respected and paid, certain fields within education became “gendered.” Male teachers gravitated towards secondary education where they fought to be perceived as content specialists and for higher pay, and female teachers towards elementary education where they were perceived as nurturers (mothers) and paid for less (for less knowledge). As the wave of female educators continued, the structure of schools restructured to mirror family structures establishing male administrators of schools as the head of the family and female teachers as the “mothers.” The structure, according to Blount, was all predicated upon the expectation that once the female teacher married, she would leave the classroom. To educators within the LGBTQIA2S+ community, the expectation provided an opportunity (Blount, 2005).

One residual impact of working and sometimes cohabiting within schools became close relationships and friendships between female educators. As long the female educators provided no risk and did not “encroach on men’s privileges,” schools and communities looked away at the large number of unmarried women within the classroom – especially as the schools benefitted from their employment and disparity in salaries. However, as the educators sought higher education and participated in the suffragette movement, their relationships were targeted. Their movement toward agency and greater drew more criticism and discernment: “Essentially,

passion between women escaped notice until they were perceived to have transgressed their gender-appropriate boundaries and entered public realm” (Blount, 2005, 33). This attention transferred into concern felt by parents and the public into the idea that “homosexual teachers might seduce their students into lives of degradation and depravity” (Blount, 2005,) from which students needed protection.

It was Alfred Kinsey’s publication of his study, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948), that pushed the discussion of homosexual behavior among men to the forefront of minds. Interviewing and surveying 12,000 men, Kinsey documented and described their sexual behavior. Some participants described their sexual attraction to other men, and Kinsey’s work described the participants behavior more as “responses to stimuli” rather than a determination of sexual orientation. Despite that, common conventional thinking categorized individuals, not behaviors, as heterosexual or homosexual (Blount, 2005). In 1953, Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* which documented the sexual activities of 8,000 women. While arguing that a male’s response to stimuli is more a commentary on behavior rather than the individual, Kinsey’s research regarding women supporting the public perception that “better educated women tended to have a greater incidence of homosexual experiences” (Blount, 2005)

Furthering the public concern of the influence of homosexuals in society, the postwar military began its hunt and purge of homosexuals instituting screenings for estrogen and androgen levels in their soldiers. Senator Joseph McCarthy furthered their hunt of homosexuals into all government agencies and distributed a report “Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government” (1950) where homosexuals were likened to communists who posed national security concerns and who were potentially contagious especially when considering younger US citizens: “This is particularly true in the case of young and impressionable people

who might come under the influence of a pervert” (Blount, 2005). Soon after McCarthy’s report, Ralph Major published his article “The New Moral Menace to Our Youth,” (1950) where he warns America of the dangerous spread of homosexuality within the United States and the aggressive recruiting measures for young people: “He urged parents to scrutinize their children’s teachers carefully to avoid horrifying problems” (Blount, 2005). With the nation’s current apprehension and fears regarding sex and sexuality, homosexuality and teachers became the greatest concern for parents and communities.

LGBTQIA2S+ Educators Seek Legal Protections

As the Midwest district established a preferred name protocol mandating adults and students to complete a form to “verify” preferred name, the resulting conversations from staff members revolved about the protocol but also referenced people’s own beliefs regarding homosexuality and transgender people. As a cisgender, heterosexual woman, I found some of the comments inappropriate and was concerned about a friend of mine on staff who is openly gay. I wondered if presenting policies and protocols in such a lackadaisical manner could be likened to creating a hostile environment.

In their work Eckes and McCarthy (2008) define hostile work environment as an “adverse employment consequence based on sexual orientation are real concerns of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) public educators” and present the legal cases that LGBTQIA2S+ educators filed – hoping to erase the “apartheid of the closet.” Eckes et al document the sense of uncertainty many LGBTQIA2S+ educators feel in their jobs – even tenure does not give a sense of security. At the time of their work, thirty-seven states had statutes that allowed an educator to be dismissed based on “immorality” or “immoral turpitude.” And the cases tried 1960s-70s, supported these insecurities as educators’ firings were upheld due to

immoral lifestyles having a negative impact on students and classroom environment (Eckes and McCarthy, 2008). Key cases that demonstrated the use of immorality as grounds: *Morrison v. Board of Education*, 1969; *Acanfora v. Board of Education*, 1973; *Burton v. Cascade School District*, 1975; *Gaylord v. Tacoma*, (1977) (Eckes and McCarthy, 2008).

The second generation of court cases Eckes and McCarthy covered were from the 1980s and to the late 20th century; those cases mostly referenced the Fourteenth Amendment which grants due process and equal protection. The element within the Fourteenth Amendment argued on behalf of LGBTQIA2S+ educators was the right to privacy in regard to private acts and discourse and citizens (2008). *Lawrence v. Texas*, 2003 was pivotal in that it affirmed the LGBTQIA2S+ educator's right to privacy and the ruling overturned *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 1986 and *Romer v. Evans*, 1996 where the Colorado amendment that limited actions meant to protect homosexuals was struck down. And while there were some rulings that seemed to backtrack a bit on protective rights such as, *National Gay Task Force v. Board of Education*, 1984 (allowed the firing of teachers for homosexual activities), and *Rowland v. Mad River Local School District*, 1984 (fired teacher for revealing sexual orientation). The successes of cases like *Weaver v. Nebo School District*, 1998 where the Midwest District court ordered for the Midwest District to "reinstate the coach and pay her damages for the injuries she had suffered" (Eckes and McCarthy, 2008).

The third generation of cases that Eckes and McCarthy examined focused on the differing treatment of LGBTQIA2S+ educators in public schools compared to their heterosexual peers; these cases challenged under the Equal Protection Clause and antidiscrimination provisions. In California, cases such as *Murray v. Oceanside Unified School District*, 2000 and *Kavanaugh v. Hemet Unified School District*, 2000 found a biology teacher win a harassment suit regarding her

sexual orientation and another educator freed of reprimands after parents harassed her due to her sexual orientation (Eckes and McCarthy, 2008). In New York and New Jersey, the cases *Lovell v. Comsewogue School District*, 2002 and *Curcio v. Collingswood Board of Education*, 2005 found that a district failed to protect an educator from students' bullying once learning of her sexual orientation and another district was found that it unlawfully discriminated when it did not allow an educator to return after a leave of absence based on the anxiety induced by harassment from colleagues. These cases demonstrate slow moving change in providing LGBTQIA2S+ educators the same rights/protections as their heterosexual/cisgender counterparts; however, as Kahn and Gorski demonstrated, the unspoken heteronormative exemplar of educator as white, heteronormative, ciswoman still impacts the reality of LGBTQIA2S+ existence and implicitly creates a biased discourse/lens – intended or not. As Eckes and McCarthy conclude the remind us of the importance of that language and how legislation could better support the LGBTQIA2S+ community; I would argue that the advice is relevant to school boards and districts as well: “When states do pass such legislation they need to adopt language that protects public employees without a disclaimer stating that the state does not condone homosexuality [. . .] This type of language is equivalent to a civil rights bill prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race but including a disclaimer stating that the bill is not intended to protect minorities” (Eckes and McCarthy, 2008).

Karen Graves' (2018) work in “A matter of public concern: the first amendment and equal employment for LGBT educators” affirmed Eckes and McCarthy's documentation of cases fought in protection of LGBTQIA2S+ educators. Graves stated that “the history of antigay discrimination in schools underscores the notion that *who* is speaking can be perceived as much

as a threat to heteronormativity as *what* is being said” (Graves, 2018). The preoccupation with censoring sexuality becomes the obsession of censoring gay bodies.

Graves acknowledged “homophile groups” like Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis” for being the impetus to gay rights in the 1950s as they fought against gay stereotypes and moved to have LGBTQIA2S+ people accepted and a part of public life. Coinciding with the movement there is the decriminalization of homosexuality in Illinois (1961), the American Civil Liberties Union pushed the First and Fourteenth Amendment to a more “explicit anti-discriminatory stance based on the right to privacy (1966), the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as a mental illness (1973), and forty cities/counties in the U.S. pass laws stopping discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodation based on sexual orientation (1977) (Graves, 2018).

Despite the progress with the constitutional arguments, the counter claims connecting homosexuality with immorality continued to present roadblocks. In 1963 the California Supreme Court determined that being homosexual was not grounds for termination but if the termination could stand if the perceived immoral behavior became public knowledge (Graves, 2018). One case involved Peggy Burton in 1971 who was the first LGBT educator to file a federal civil rights suit for wrongful dismissal. The school district admitted she was fired for practicing homosexuality; the courts struck down the Midwest District’s “immorality” statute for vague language but as Burton was nontenured, she was unrenewed. Later the Supreme Court of Washington ruled that just being homosexual made one unfit to be an educator (Graves, 2018). The seminal case *Rowland v. Mad River Local School District*, 1984 where Rowland’s right to privacy was volleyed between being a “public homosexual conduct” and “public homosexual activity” or private discourse. Rowland’s first victory was overturned by the Sixth Circuit Court

who found that the public's reactionary fear demonstrated speech that was "a matter of public concern" (Graves, 2018).

LGBTQIA2S+ Educators Current Exigence

In Steven Camicia's chapter "Social Justice and LGBTQIA2S+ Issues in Schools" published in his book *Critical Democratic Education and LGBTQIA2S+-Inclusive Curriculum* (2016) furthers the conversation Butler began with her call to consider the scope and impact of limiting the influence of feminism and the conversation about gender. Camicia's work focuses on examining how school districts work towards greater LGBTQIA2S+ "recognition" and legitimacy – specifically on how to facilitate conversation towards "inclusion, recognition, and social justice" (Camicia, 2016). Providing rich data regarding the impact of the hidden curriculum experienced by LGBTQIA2S+ students within school systems, Camicia legitimizes the importance of moving beyond the concerns of understanding the social/historical/cultural constructs of the binary gender nomenclature and into providing safe schools that "consciously foster a climate of safety and recognition" (Camicia, 2016). When considering how the Midwest District in the Midwest responded to its Diversity, Inclusion and Equity Policy regarding preferred names (with parental permission and documentation), Camicia notes, "Some policies particularly targeted transgender students: 42.2% of transgender students have been prevented from using their preferred name" (Camicia, 2016). Perhaps the policy enacted by USD 475 targeted transgender/nonbinary students rather than provide equitable access. Camicia reminds educators that students, especially those within the LGBTQIA2S+ community, "benefit from schools that recognize them and support an increase in student health, safety, and learning" (Camicia 2016).

In the introduction to their text, *Queer, Trans, and Intersectional Theory in Educational Practice*, Cris Mayo and Mollie Blackburn (2020) continue the work initiated by Butler in the call to push beyond the accepted understandings of gender as a way to “reshape” all practices in school systems: “Deeper understanding to race, sexuality, and gender identity can push against the regulatory practices of schools and all too, to reshape our understanding of what it means to be an embodied subject who has to navigate hostilities and potentials of educational spaces” (Mayo & Blackburn, 2020). They argue that having the opportunity for educators, and thus the curriculum, to teach “gender normative categories” is to allow for the struggle against the binary which presents time to focus on “particular struggles” and provide the opportunity to focus on making connections. The authors point out that no one wants to be “medicalized” or “surveilled” but wants the opportunity to be understood and recognized. School district policies that document, require signatures from administrators and parents, require specific coding (like medical warnings) become ways to “mark” transgender and nonbinary students and creates an environment that is not safe and not conducive to learning (Mayo & Blackburn, 2020) and reaffirms a binary understanding of gender and heteronormativity.

SJ Miller continues the conversation in the essay “Gender Identity Complexity is Trans-section Turn” (2020) with the examination of gender fluidity within school systems. Speaking to school districts cisgender assumption, “the condition and practice of reinforcing cisgender privilege, cisnormativity, and the cisgender/cissexual body” (Miller, 2020), Miller demonstrates the need for school systems to begin to consider policies, procedure, and practices that moves away from the “cisgender assumption” and to a “trans-sectional gaze.” Miller defines trans-sectional as a convergence of multiple “forms of identities” that are ever changing and ever present. It allows for an amalgamation of new information, change of direction, and even shifts

of contexts like the journey that many who are transitioning (from one gender to another) may experience. Referencing Mayo, Miller characterizes the trans-sectional gaze as the “destabilization of gender” in which “a queering of identities undergoes, dismantles, and resists categorizations” (Miller, 2020). These ideas are further illustrated in Kevin Moore’s publication, “The rainbow knapsack revisited: being a gay teacher in a world of heterosexual privilege” (2020) in which Moore echoed McIntosh’s seminal work in 1989; rather than presenting a white audience with unearned benefits experienced in their lives, Moore presents the unearned benefits experienced by heterosexuals. From knowing that coworkers sharing their sexual orientations to being certain that administrators would be accepting when they fit school/workplace norms, Moore shows how districts function within a heteronormative default which can result in further destabilizing impact on both educators and students (Moore, 2020). It is through this constant shifting and changing that voice and agency is found; there is power in the refusal to be defined or labeled. The ability to name themselves, they were ending the processes and removing that “power in the refusal” and flies in the face of what Miller defines as the “indexical principle” (Miller, 2020).

LGBTQIA2S+ Policies/Procedures Impacts on Educators and Students

When school districts force students to document preferred names, it refuses and limits the process and refuses the destabilization of gender. Students who are transitioning or have transitioned or who are nonbinary/gender fluid are still negotiating their identity and place in the world, and students within the LGBTQIA2S+ community recognize that the Midwest District’s ability to recognize one’s gender identity falls align with the ability to recognize a full person – including their sexual orientation and gender expression. This self-awareness becomes more evident as the student ages and their voice, for many, will not be contained. Furthermore, the

ensuing conversations regarding student and parents' rights impact the work environment and sense of community for educators' allies within the LGBTQIA2S+ community.

The Midwest District is not the only to address the preferred name and pronoun "issue" stating that the request could only be made with parental permission. While the case filed by a middle school teacher against the Midwest District dealt with referencing a student by an incorrect pronoun, the case was settled leaving no precedent (Coleman, 2022), there are several others that can give insight.

In Suzanne Eckes' work, "Pronouns and preferred names: when public school teachers' religious beliefs conflict with school directives," references several court cases regarding preferred names and pronouns. The two cases covered were *Vlaming v. West Point School Board*, 2019 and *Kluge v. Brownsburg County School Corp*, 2020.

Vlaming v. West Point School Board, 2019, a French teacher refused to call a student a preferred name due to own religious beliefs at the time of the Eckes' work was still ongoing; however, *Kluge v. Brownsburg County School Corp*, 2020, a case filed when a teacher refused to follow the Midwest District plan for a transgender student including calling the student by the preferred name (with support of parents) citing that to do so would be "sinful to promote transgender behavior" (Eckes, 2020). In the case, the teacher made Title VII, First, and Fourteenth Amendment claims citing that the school/district infringed on his/her religious freedom, and that the school's policy was vague and too broad in scope. These claims were denied.

What needs to be examined is the backdrop to all these conversations and debates. Before these cases hit a courtroom, they exist in faculty meetings, faculty lounges, department meetings, hallways, and classrooms. LGBTQIA2S+ educators sit in spaces where

people assume heteronormativity as they speak about “disgusting” behavior or “mutilating bodies” or ask questions like “how do these children really know?” or “how many people change their minds?” or hear all too often “it’s just a phase.” In that moment, these educators are “othered.” Hearing such comments from colleagues, peers, maybe even people considered friends, impacts one’s positionality as an educator, faculty member, and colleague. The question of advocacy could be a frightening one when examining the legacy of job insecurity, but then who protects the students from intolerance and/or ignorance? Eckes’ ended her work with a concluding story about a transgender student dealing with a teacher refusing to use their preferred name, “[A]t one point, my stand [band] partner asked me why Mr. Kluge wouldn’t just say my name ... I felt forced to tell him that it was because I’m transgender” (Eckes, 2020).

Examining the Binary/Heteronormative Foundation and Theoretical Framework

In 1851, Sojourner Truth, a formerly enslaved woman and activist, delivered her well-known “Ain’t I a Woman?” address at the Women’s Convention at Akron, Ohio. In it she posed several limitations white men have placed on white women to preserve their safety, well-being, feelings, “brain strain,” all to keep women from the right to vote; Truth then poses how these “limitations” do not extend to all “women” as she, a black woman, is not afforded these protections – especially an enslaved person. Truth describes, “I am woman’s rights. /I have as much muscle as any man./I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped/and mowed, and can any man do more than that?/I have heard much about the sexes being equal [. . .] I am as strong as many man that is now” (Truth, 1851).

Many feminist scholars look at texts like Truth’s as a point of contention as feminists of color find the ability to separate the fight for equal rights and racism an impossibility while white feminism can sometimes focus solely on women’s rights. This sticking point is illustrated in

Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" where Welter speaks to the daunting responsibility placed upon the nineteenth century woman: "to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail what hand" (Welter, 1966, p. 152). Note that brown and black hands were not to be bothered with that responsibility nor were they seen as frail. Welter's work illustrates the difference that Truth speaks to as the white woman is a woman of virtue, purity, needing of protection, and lives as a perpetual child. It was social reforms that influenced change for the state of white women:

The movements for social reform, westward migration, missionary activity, utopian communities, industrialism, the Civil War – all called forth responses from woman which differed from those she was trained to believe were hers by nature and divine decree. The very perfection of True Womanhood, moreover, carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction (Welter, 1996, p. 174).

The change of social norms shifted how women perceived themselves and their positionality within society; it also changed how society began to consider women's role within it.

While focused on the white hands, Luisa Capetillo, in *A Nation of Women*, and Gloria Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands: La Frontera*, extend the conversation of womanhood to hands that look more like mine – Latina. Capetillo pushes the conversation of Womanhood towards the experience of working, Puerto Rican women. Giving voice and agency for women normally silenced within the patriarchal system of marriage, Capetillo argues that love and sexual awareness exists and can flourish outside of marriage and that women can find purpose and agency in the world through education:

Woman, you are able to sow justice and are willing to do so; do not be

upset, nor get upset, do not become restless, do not flee; move forward! And for the good of future generations place the first stone of the edifice for social equality serenely and resolutely, with all the rights that pertain to you, without bowing your head, since you are no longer the material and intellectual slave you once were. Your initiative will be crowned success, being achieved by your own efforts, and your soul will be luminous and beautiful like a sun of truth and justice (Capetillo, 2004, p. 21).

Anzaldúa speaks to the duality of identity experienced by Latinas and how this push and pull within differing systems of oppression causes more conflicts with senses of self. Anzaldúa's conflicts as Mexican, indigenous, Catholic, queer, and white. Her many juxtapositions of self-identity gives way to many definitions of her sense of womanhood – some developing upon each other and others canceling the other: “The Gringo, locked into the friction of white superiority, seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it [. . .]we were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed, and separated from our identity and our history” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 21).

While these women of color respond to the narrow focus of white feminism and extend the understanding of Womanhood beyond the “frail white hands” as described in Welter's work, Kimberle Crenshaw speaks to the intersectionality succinctly in her “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” Speaking about how white feminism and racism as permitted and even perpetuated violence against black women, Crenshaw notes how a group can focus on the rights of people of color and in the same breath deny the validity of women of color. She directs this issue to antiracist and feminist discourse that address issues of race and gender:

The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that the antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women. These mutual elisions present a particularly difficult political dilemma for women of color (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252).

Directed towards issues of race and gender (feminism), the same type of issue can be said for issues of gender where heteronormative/cisgender is considered the patriarchal stance of norm.

I believe Truth is also testifying to is the nuanced definition of gender. In this case, Truth is questioning society if she is not a woman. In the biological definition, she is a cisgender woman; born with a uterus, ovaries, breasts, and yet she is not seen or valued as other women. In a way, she is acknowledging how the term woman – and even man if considering how black men were treated – is a social construct. These other writers (Capetillo, Anzaldúa, Crenshaw) speak to other realities of brown and black women that extend beyond the normalized understand of Welter's presented ideas. As the definition of what a woman is changes based on social perceptions, it becomes understood that the definition is constructed. It is this type of social construction of gender that Judith Butler examines in her seminal text *Gender Trouble*, 1990.

First published in 1990, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* examined issues found within the realm of the growing field of cultural studies and one of its "off-shoots" – feminism. Focused specifically on the rights of women, feminism found itself with a narrow audience and even more narrowed purpose and voice. And as more "marked" groups began to develop under the feminism umbrella, specifically queer theory, theorists began to question to the primary

definition of feminism. Butler states, “because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (Butler, 1990). As such, if feminism may or may not be specifically about women as the definition of woman is nuanced, how is gender defined and how is that process connected to the idea of gender identification for those within the LGBTQIA2S+ communities across the nation and, in the case of my research, attempting to access safe and equitable education?

First Butler (1990) elaborates upon the differing beliefs on how a female “becomes” a woman through an examination of Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray. Referencing his work in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir contends that a person “becomes” a woman while experiencing “cultural compulsions” -- a phenomenon occurs while the body participates passively which helps establish the binary structures of gender found in language; however, the binary occurs through the marking of women as “other” (Butler, 1990, 11-12). Irigaray, however, argues that the concept of “woman” is more a paradoxical definition and metaphysical in nature. Rather than seeing “womanhood” and the identification of gender as something to happens to a female subject, Irigaray finds “womanhood” to be a “convergence” of both the cultural and historical realities into substantive being: “As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations” (Butler, 1990).

Through the discussion Butler demonstrates the underpinnings within school districts’ discourse and ideology when working to address access to facilities and curriculum for faculty and students within the LGBTQIA2S+ community. There seems that the beginning of the conversations in school districts, both in Midwest District and others across the nation, is within

the binary understanding of gender when the conversation may need to begin outside of this construct as the heteronormative/hegemonic leanings, intended or not, eventually sway the change back to the norm (comfortable) rather than to the “new-norm.”

My theoretical framework as a feminist was rooted in extending to include gender identity and using my voice and agency to provide space to other voices that have been silenced through intimidation and/or fear (Smith-Silverman, 2020) by patriarchal systems that ignore or deny their existence. While recently introduced to Capetillo and Anzaldúa, I find similarities in our understanding of education as a women’s role in country and culture (Capetillo, 2001) and the sense of competing cultural identities/dualities (Anzaldúa, 1987) and the influence it has when examining and fighting systems of oppression – even those within. I ground myself in understanding the intersectionality of identities (Crenshaw, 1991) and gender and focused my research and the case study to give the participants opportunity to address whether they perceived any conflicts themselves.

The theoretical perspective from which I entered my study was critical – specifically feminism. Within the umbrella of feminism is gender studies and more specifically queer studies. That critical framework examines the heteronormative expectations and cultural mores of the world, in this case the heteronormative mores of school systems. Because of these biases, the transgender and nonbinary student is viewed as an outlier and rather than being seen as a natural part of the community, they are viewed as an accommodation, the exception to the rule. In a negative connotation, they can be viewed as an annoyance to a smooth-running system. Queer studies, like feminism, examines loaded language, the power of narrative in “body” ownership, and the power to own voice and agency (Koro-Ljungberg, M., et al., 2009). While the policies and procedures enacted by the Midwest District in the Midwest may

be outside of the voices of the LGBTQIA2S+ community, as adults who are members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community and allies can advocate for student rights and push to continue to ensure all faculty members are supported, respected, and valued as educators.

The case study is further rooted within cognitive dissonance theory which aids in the discussion regarding teacher voice and agency (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019; Orta & Camgoz, 2011; Britzman, 2003; Lasky, 2005). Defining cognitive dissonance through Festinger's (1957) work, cognitive dissonance occurs when a person experiences psychologically discomfort due to choice/decision that is opposite to his/her belief. This discomfort would normally push the person to change his/her behavior or avoid the condition that causes the discomfort (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). People do not wish to experience discomfort and are driven by the need for consistency; when those inconsistencies (dissonance) occur, they attempt to rationalize them to ease the sense of discomfort. The magnitude of the dissonance stems from the value of what is causing the dissonant (Orta & Camgoz, 2011). One of Festinger's dissonance types that seemed to echo the educators' experiences with the preferred name/pronoun policy was the "Belief-Disconfirmation Paradigm" in which people must resolve themselves with information that is contrary to their own belief systems:

If the dissonance is not reduced by changing one's belief, the dissonance can lead to misperception or misinterpretation of the information, rejection or refutation of the information, seeking support from those who agree with one's belief, and attempting to persuade others to accept one's belief (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019, p. 6).

While discussing teacher agency Lasky (2005) describes the impact of cognitive dissonance on teachers' emotional health, "Experiences of emotion are inextricably

interconnected with belief, context, power, and culture” (Lasky, 2005, p. 901). When teachers experienced emotional security, they can be vulnerable. The greater the vulnerability the more teachers can be open and trustful, and the opposite is true, the lesser the vulnerability the greater the sense of “powerlessness, betrayal, or defenselessness [. . .] or feel they are being ‘forced’ to act in ways that are inconsistent with their core beliefs and values” (Lansky, 2005, p. 901). The sense of vulnerability remains in a fluid state influencing teachers’ sense of competence, values, beliefs, and identity; it fluctuates by the incidents that trigger that sense of vulnerability (Lansky, 2005).

This cognitive dissonance impacted teachers’ sense of agency, voice, and sense of power (an overlap into feminism). In Britzman’s (2003) work discussing teachers’ development of identity she focuses on the tensions of pedagogy that, while presented as parallel ideas, they are not to be perceived as neat binary ideas but as dialogic (Britzman, 2003). Britzman suggests that a teacher’s develop “double consciousness” in their functioning between the system and their sense of self, and that their first identity, developed as a student teacher or novice, is suppressing oneself: “But what occurs as well as the starting idea that the taking up of an identity means suppressing aspects of the self. So at first glance, becoming a teacher may mean becoming someone you are not. It is this dual struggle that works to construct that student teacher at the site of conflict” (Britzman, 2003, p. 27). While addressing identity at the beginning of a teacher’s career, Britzman allows for the development of a practice that all educators become adept at – cognitive dissonance in which the psychological discomfort is the norm. Britzman furthers the discussion regarding agency in her discussion of the use of silence and that silence itself is an expression of power; quoting Foucault, she notes:

There is binary division to be made between what one says and what does not

say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case.

There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies That underlie and permeate discourses (Britzman, 2003, p. 39)

In exerting silence, there is power, and power lends itself to social justice. Britzman defines power as the “ability to ‘draw upon modes of domination structured into social systems’” (Britzman, 2003, p. 39). This view of power allows educators to negotiate their own behavior, construct desire, and conform to mandates if needed. The understanding of power is negotiating how it acts upon one’s actions. It is also understanding that power is relational and exercised in resistance: “Understanding the *context* of power, in concert with the *relationships* it articulates and effectuates, allows us to move beyond an abstract notion of individual autonomy to construct a cultural theory of meaning grounded in social circumstances and material practices” (Britzman, 2003, p. 40). In the end, Britzman argues that despite the use of power, only a few voices are counted in history – the valued ones.

In being confronted with the Midwest District’s preferred name/pronoun policy, the study’s participants dealt with expectations they knew to be counter to the best interests of students within the LGBTQIA2S+ community as they had their own journeys in coming out and feeling vulnerable. How this cognitive dissonance impacted their response regarding their sense of agency, voice, power, and vulnerability, in addressing or responding to the policy helped answer the research questions.

The epistemological belief that influences my research is critical theory. As a woman of color, I have always been interested in reading the differing perspectives and narratives found

from other women of color and their journeys whether within the United States and outside; it was the interest that led me to literature and a graduate degree in English (cultural studies). As an educator, I have always pushed my students to think and read critically and to ask hard questions -- to never accept the status quo. As a critical theorist and feminist, I plan to examine the Midwest District in the Midwest Diversity, Inclusion and Equity policy with the same critical mindset. As a ciswoman and a parent of a bisexual, nonbinary child, I am an ally who is learning how to best advocate for the rights of the LGBTQIA2S+ community with the humbling knowledge that my perspective is limited.

Chapter 2 Summary

The importance of understanding that gender is social construct is important for all educators; however, if one's own personal "beliefs" makes providing a safe and equitable learning environment for all students difficult, the reality is all students are protected and guaranteed to that education. The time is here to begin to dismantle the comfortable ideology of binary thinking, and if that is too difficult, it is time to begin recognizing that the job of educators and educational systems is to ensure education to all – even if “we” do not fully “understand.” The research shows that not only the idea of gender as a social/historical/cultural construct is a new conversation but that students in the LGBTQIA2S+ community have only been waiting to be recognized, supported, and kept from harm's way. In the same way that African Americans fought for the same rights through desegregation, US school systems seem to struggle with another binary that requires some stretching. The Midwest District in the Midwest, possibly with good intentions, included the Preferred Name procedure with their Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity Policy. However, the policy resulted in students who may still been “closeted” to be

forced out or go into emotional distress. It forced teachers to either comply or resist. And it marked students.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will detail the design of the qualitative case study. The chapter will provide information regarding the population size and sampling method, the instrumentation used (interviews), and how data was collected. Data analysis procedures (memo-coding, magnitude coding, concept determination) and expected findings shared answering two research questions on how the participants perceived how the Midwest District's values aligned with its policies/procedures, and how the participants were affected by those policies and procedures.

Research Design

Case Study Design

The case study focused on the lived experiences of the LGBTQIA2S+ educators and administrators within the Midwest District and the impact they experienced when issues regarding subjects like preferred names/pronoun use, anti-bullying policies, and the resulting discussions occur. The qualitative case study focused on the period (academic year 2020-2021) when the Midwest District enacted the policy in its schools, provided corresponding district professional development, and decided to finally rescind the procedure requiring schools to inform parents of a student's preferred name. The study continued into academic school year, 2021-2022, as the policy continued to impact its faculty and, while modified, preferred name procedure remained like the previous year.

As a case study, echoing Yazan's attempts to solidify the "nebulous" nature of case studies in his work "Three Approaches to Case Study Methods in Education: Yin, Merriam, and Stake," my own "epistemological bent" influences the research topic and questions: "It

permeates every step of the entire investigation process, from selection of the phenomenon of interest that is put under scrutiny to the way the ultimate report is composed” (Yazan, 2015, p. 136). My own epistemological stance is grounded in a critical paradigm in that I am interested in how realities are created through social structure and power structures within society. As a feminist scholar, my interest is in the positioning of women, usually ciswomen of color, within the patriarchal systems in play within the education systems of the United States. My own understanding as a Puerto Rican and my daughter’s identity as nonbinary that furthers my desire to be an ally to the LGBTQIA2S+ community as they face similar structures of power.

Referencing Merriam’s work, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education* (1998), Yazan provides characteristics of how Merriam defines case studies. This case study follows the qualities of a Merriam case study. This study is a Merriam “case study” as it is focused on a particular group and policy, so there are boundaries set with the group and phenomena; my case study was “bound.” It focused specifically on one policy and procedures as it rolled out in the Fall 2021. Merriam’s description of case study is particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. This case study focuses specifically on the time the preferred name/pronoun policy/procedures were enacted; the participants were employed during that period. Interviews and the following descriptive narratives allowed for the participants own tacit knowledge and experiences to be shared allowing for the reader to have a full understanding of the phenomena being studied, “[I]t is reasonable to conclude that one of the more effective means of adding to understanding for all readers will be by approximating through the words and illustrations of our reports, the natural experience acquired in ordinary personal involvement” (Stake, 1978, p. 5). Merriam’s research design was utilized and useful in working through this case study: “conducting literature review, constructing a theoretical framework, identifying a research

problem, crafting and sharpening research questions, and selecting the sample” (Yazan, 2015, p. 149).

The case study’s data was descriptive as the work pulls its data from narrative analysis, conversation analysis, observations, and interviews (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2009). The case study also allows for knowledge to be gleaned from multiple ways in multiple forms discovering “diverse forms of rationality” which is at the heart of the differing perspectives and reactions to the same event: “Case study provides us with an opportunity to escape from a restrictive ‘literalism’ which constrains ways of knowing, and a way into the more uncertain realm of ‘contingency’, in which multiple knowledge forms can be apprehended” (Kushner, 2015 ,p. 69). This case study provided the opportunity for all participants to share their own perspectives on how the Midwest District values aligned to its policies/procedures and how it affected the participants.

Participants

The sample group comprised three teachers (one elementary school teacher, one middle school teacher, and one high school teacher) and three administrators (two primary and 1 secondary). The participants were faculty members who identified within the LGBTQIA2S+ community and were employed during the establishment of the Midwest District’s policies and resulting procedures during the 2021-2022 academic year. All participants were employed prior and during the enactment of the policy, as well as after the district rescinded the policy.

While the interviews were of a specified number of educators and administrators in the Midwest District, their interviews were purposeful as there are specific perspectives and internal stakeholder’s voices that I wanted to include in my research. Having these perspectives would ensure that the descriptive nature of the case is fully developed and allow for readers to have

more opportunities to draw generalizations as Stake (1978) argues in his essay on social inquiry. The number of participants resulted in what I believe was a sense of silence and/or fear (Smith-Silverman, 2020).

The participants for this study were selected for this case study based on the following criteria:

- They were employed by the school district during 2021-2022 school year, prior to the “Preferred Name Policy” being enacted.
- They were members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community.
- They were employed in the Midwest school district when the “Preferred Name Policy” was enacted.
- They were employed in the Midwest school district when the “Preferred Name Policy was rescinded.

All participants were employed by the Midwest district when the interviews were conducted.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom and then transcribed through Otter.ai. Each interview lasted about thirty to forty-five minutes depending on the educators’ own sense of comfort and willingness to expand or extend upon the question or their own educational experiences. Each participant offered to extend my invitation to colleagues that they thought would be interested in participating in my research; however, no one followed up with names or points of contact.

While I originally hoped for a bigger group of participants, the insight and details provided by the six in this group in relation to their experiences in the Midwest School District were profound and spoke to the sense of morale and comradery experienced by some educators within the LGBTQIA2S+ community.

Each interviewee was given a pseudonym, in a nod to my literary background, the names given were all dead, white male writers to remove concern over identification through pronouns or racial identity: Frost, Faulkner, Hemingway, Shakespeare, Shelley, and Fitzgerald.

Gathering Data

Data was gathered using interviews and observation notes. Interview questions focused on the Midwest District's policies and procedures and the participants direct opinions/responses to them – even the impact at the time. Each participant was interviewed once in an in depth, semi-structured interview up to 45 minutes. All the teachers were asked the same five questions, and the administrators the same seven questions.

Interviewing certain staff members and district leaders allowed for a fuller understanding of the whole narrative. To document the case, these interviews were the only way to get all perspectives. There was also some trepidation expressed by the participants. Some participants, while eager to participate, were difficult to schedule interview times or communicate with as they would not return emails. Another participant took time to agree to be interviewed; he needed to be assured that all precautions would be given towards confidentiality and anonymity. Because of these types of behaviors, I relied on one interview and felt that it would push all but one of the participants beyond their capacities to do more.

By observing the participants during the interviews, I hoped to glean any other messages that their body language may convey or that their words may not capture. While the video was not taken during the recordings of the interviews, observation notes were taken on the body language before and after the interviews. I noted how comfortable each participant seemed to be and their facial expressions. More telling was their tones of voices, the nervousness of chuckles,

awkward stuttering or repetitive phrases, these expressions exposed some of the apprehension and discomfort some were experiencing. These moments were documented in my notes.

Data Collection

Specific faculty members were asked if they would be willing to participate in my research; participants received the interview protocol explaining the purpose of the survey, the intentions of my research, and promising anonymity (Appendix A). I used Kansas State University's IRB's informed consent form (Appendices B-E). There were three teachers from each grade level (elementary school, middle school, and high school) and three administrators from each level (primary and secondary). The participants were faculty members who identify within the LGBTQIA2S+ community and were employed during the establishment of the Midwest District's policies and resulting procedures. The questions were semi-structured and the interviews face-to-face and took place from the May to the middle of June 2024. The interview took forty-five minutes to an hour.

The following interview questions were asked during the interviews with both teachers and administrators:

- What is the Midwest District's program in creating a culture that is inclusive to all students specifically those who transgender and nonbinary?
- How did instructors and supporting staff receive training in the Midwest District's new Diversity and Inclusion policy?
- How do you believe the Midwest District's procedures align with the values espoused in its policies?
- How do you believe the Midwest District's policies and procedures impact its LGBTQIA+ faculty and students?

- How does the Midwest County’s DIE policy compare to other districts within the state? Schools in the nation?

Additionally, administrators were asked the following three questions:

- What is the Midwest District’s program in creating a culture that is inclusive to all students specifically those who transgender and nonbinary?
- How do administrators receive training in the Midwest District’s diversity and equity policies?
- How do you believe the Midwest District’s policies and procedures impact its LGBTQIA+ faculty and students? How does enforcing the policies impact you?

Data Analysis Procedures

Interviews completed and recorded on Zoom through Kansas State University services and transcribing assisted through otter.ai. All data was saved on Kansas State University’s One Drive. Data analysis entailed the analysis and coding of the interviews. There was an examination for any consistent trends regarding the school district’s initiatives towards LGBTQIA2S+ educators and students, the training, and the continuing revising and/or reimagining of its policy. The qualitative data provided anecdotal evidence as well.

Evaluation Coding

Evaluation coding “assign[s] judgments about the merit, worth, or significance of programs or policy” through describing, comparing, and predicting (Saldaña, 2021). Evaluation coding is appropriate for my type of research (“policy, critical, action, organization” studies) and will be used in tandem with eclectic coding – specifically: sub coding and magnitude coding. Evaluation coding was the best avenue for my research; while still not free from bias, it performs more on the participants’ evaluation of the policy/program. The type of coding is also

directly aligned to the type of work the participants are used to performing as educators – evaluation. As educators, the participants were frequently evaluating the Midwest District and its policies and programs in one way or the other, and one thing the participants in the school district were not short on are opinions. If the participants felt as if they were being judged (value coding), they may not have been forthright as I needed; however, if evaluating an entity outside of themselves, even if their evaluation may shed light upon their own values may be seen differently.

Data Coding and Emerging Themes

The data presented by my participants provided for insight that was new and surprising. The sensitive nature of this qualitative study established the need for individual interviews and anonymity with assurances of confidentiality. The resulting data was analyzed through open coding, evaluative coding, and descriptive coding. Held outside of any school and on their personal time, the interviews focused on the following questions upon which my research is based:

Open Coding

After transcribing the interviews, I determined key words that grounded the intent of the five questions: context, training, communication, preferred name policy, educational community, procedures/values aligned. Each word was given a certain color to allow analytic memo-ing of each participant's transcribed interview (Table 1).

Table 3.1. Color-Coded Analytic Memo

Context	Training	Communication	Preferred name policy	Unknown Procedures	Educational Community	Procedures/ Values Aligned
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This coding helped me to start categorizing the participants responses as they answered my questions. It also allowed my analysis of the interviews to apply coded labels to each question as seen in the following tables.

Table 3.2. Teacher Coded Labels Relating to Question 1

Question 1: What is the Midwest District’s program in creating a culture that is inclusive to all staff/students – specifically those who are transgender and nonbinary? Has it been effective? If so, how?			
Preferred name/pronouns	Ineffective/questionable	No program	Diversity training but not LGBT
Nondiscrimination statement	No real policies/procedures	HR policies	Video trainings

Table 3.3. Teacher Coded Labels Relating to Question 2

Question 2: How did instructors and support staff receive the Midwest District’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policy? Was there any reaction?					
Unprofessional	Personally isolating/unwelcoming	People seemed unbothered	Communication to counselor then parent	Uncertainty	Not as much impact on elementary
No training	Unbothered HR	Discrimination	Questions about informing parents	Supportive staff	

Table 3.4. Teacher Coded Labels Relating to Question 3

Question 3: How do you believe the Midwest District’s procedures align with the values espoused in its policies?			
No opposition	No contradiction	Acceptance	Hostility
Good job in aligning	Confusing	Targeted alignment	

Table 3.5. Teacher Coded Labels Relating to Question 4

Question 4: How do you believe the Midwest District’s policies and procedures impact its LGBTQIA2S+ staff/students?

Concern/confusion	Respected	Created Barriers	Push back from higher level
Positive	Unwelcomed	Opened awareness	"Outing" students

Table 3.6. Teacher Coded Labels Relating to Question 5

Question 5: When staff is presented with DEI policies/procedures/training, are there conversations regarding LGBTQIA2S+ topics (local and/or national) that are insensitive or discriminatory in nature? If so, how does that impact your educational/teaching community?				
Positive	Respected	Accepted	Took seriously	Always Supported/ Educator first
Roadblock	No advocacy	No empathy	Unbothered	

The educators interviewed were quite open with their perspectives and were genuine with their opinion regarding the Midwest District and its policies and training. They revealed varying opinions related to their years of experience, personal contexts, and their own history as members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community.

Knowing that the administrator's perspective on the Midwest Districts enactment of its "Preferred Name Policy" would differ from the educators – especially as they would be the ones to enact it -- I completed the same coding separately for the administrative responses to the interview questions.

Table 3.7. Administrator Coded Labels Relating to Question 1

Question 1: What is the Midwest District's program in creating a culture that is inclusive to all staff/students – specifically those who are transgender and nonbinary? Has it been effective? If so, how?		
DEI training	Administrator directed	"Trickle Down"
PD including LGBTQ topics	Vision lacks clarity	Diversity topics focuses on race

Table 3.8. Administrator Coded Labels Relating to Question 2

Question 2: How did instructors and support staff receive the Midwest District's Diversity, Equity, and

Inclusion policy? Was there any reaction?	
Challenging to comprehend	Best delivered by one not in LGBTQ community
Executive admin did their best as cisgendered/heterosexuals	Preferred names were already used

Table 3.9. Administrator Coded Labels Relating to Question 3

Question 3: How do you believe the Midwest District's procedures align with the values espoused in its policies?		
Conflicted	Community strives for best	Choice of leaders within LGBTQ community

Table 3.10. Administrator Coded Labels Relating to Question 4

Question 4: How do you believe the Midwest District's policies and procedures impact its LGBTQIA2S+ staff/students?		
Respected/Used preferred name	School as safe place	Supportive parents only
Always informed parents	Remaining questions	Tough conversations
Hidden policy/parent teacher choice		

Table 3.11. Administrator Coded Labels Relating to Question 5

Question 5: When staff is presented with DEI policies/procedures/training, are there conversations regarding LGBTQIA2S+ topics (local and/or national) that are insensitive or discriminatory in nature? If so, how does that impact your educational/teaching community?		
Disheartening	Enacting difficult policies	Respectful
Concern regarding elected members	Self-protection	

Comparing the two sets of coded labels demonstrates the tendency of the educators to be a little more open in their reflections while answering questions. The administrative responses

demonstrated reluctance to answer some questions fully, and their limited synthesis for coded labels as seen in tables 8 and 9.

Magnitude Coding

Taking the coded labels from each group of participants, I then analyzed the labels for their magnitude. I used the symbolic coding of + for a positive connoting label, - for a negative connoting label, and N for a label that was neutral or factual using Salmons, Lieber, and Kaczynski (2020) direction that such ratings “can supplement a qualitative datum” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 115). Tables 12 and 13 show how the magnitude values placed and how that allowed me to develop the concepts through which to analyze the data further.

Table 3.12. Teachers’ Magnitude Coding

Positive (+)	Negative (-)	Neutral (N)
Opened awareness of preferred names (+)	Ineffective/questionable (-)	Preferred name/pronouns (N)
People are accepted x2 (+)	No real policies/procedures (-)	Nondiscrimination statement (N)
Addresses parental concerns (+)	Personally isolating/unwelcoming (-)	No training (N)
Good job in aligning (+)	Spoke to HR/HR was unbothered (-)	Concern (N)
Positive x2 (+)	No contradiction (-)	No program (N)
Respected x2 (+)	No clarity (-)	HR policies
Supportive staff (+)	Created barriers (-)	Diversity training but not LGBT (N)
Always supported/educator first (+)	People seemed unbothered (-)	Video trainings (N)
	Unprofessional (-)	Communication to counselor then parent (N)
	No opposition (-)	Not as much impact (elementary level) (N)
	Discrimination (-)	Took seriously (N)
	Align with “certain” students (-)	
	Push back at higher level (-)	
	Hostile intent (-)	
	Unaware (-)	
	Uncertainty (-)	
	Roadblock (-)	
	No stand for social justice (-)	
	No empathy (-)	
	Question about informing parents (-)	

Teachers made certain to mention that they were respected as an educator first and always felt supported by other staff members and their administrators; they felt that preferred name and pronoun usage was overwhelmingly supported by the staff members with which they worked. When discussing the policies, procedures, and training provided, the participants reflected honestly and did not refer to the events with “loaded” language. They acknowledged the shortcomings of video training, the racial focus of diversity rather than LGBTQIA2S+, and the aligning of the policies to the Midwest District’s nondiscriminatory statement in a matter-of-fact manner.

Table 3.13. Teachers’ Magnitude Coding

Positive Concepts:	Neutral Concepts:	Negative Concepts:
Accepting/Opened awareness	HR Policies	Unprofessional/Lack of clarity

I followed the same strategy when examining the code labels of the administrative responses. I used the same symbolic coding (+, -, N) followed by synthesizing the responses to determine three concepts within each category.

Table 3.14. Administrators’ Magnitude Coding

Positive (+)	Negative (-)	Neutral (N)
Unique community; Strives for the best of all (+)	Challenging to understand at first (-)	DEI Training (N)
Respectful (+)	Lacks vision clarity (-)	Beginning to include LGBTQ topics (N)
Purposeful choice of leaders from LGBTQ community (+)	“Trickle down” (-)	Always informed parents (N)
Preferred names were already used (+)	“Did the best they knew” (-)	Enacting difficult policies (N)
Respected/used preferred name (+)	Hidden policy/parent choice (-)	Administrator directed (N)
	Remaining questions (-)	School as safe place (N)
	Most diversity topics focus on race (-)	Tough conversations (N)
	Acknowledge conflict (-)	
	Self-protection (-)	
	Supportive parent only (-)	
	Disheartening (-)	
	Concern from elected stakeholders (-)	

Not surprisingly, the administrative participants responded using similarly as the magnitude coding determined that despite the reticence the administrators seemed to demonstrate in responding to the questions and what I perceived as a determination to keep their focus remaining positive on the Midwest District and its policies; however, the responses showed more negative responses (12) than neutral (7) and positive (6) responses. The synthesized concepts are as follows:

Table 3.15. Administrators' Concepts

Positive (+)	Negative (-)	Neutral (N)
Purposeful choice of leaders from LGBTQ community	Hidden policy/parent teacher choice	DEI training

Credibility, Dependability, Confirmability and Transferability

Credibility

Jackson (2007), Denton (2009), and Auicello (2016), all examined the lived experiences of LGBTQIA2S+ educators in the classroom from differing contexts. In each of their studies, they discovered different themes/stages experienced by educators within this community; they range from stages of teaching related to how “uncloseted” the educators were to levels of acceptance turning educators into overachievers. What many had in common was a sense of fear, the desire to help others, the need to be a role model for others, and to create safe places for LGBTQIA2S+ students (Simmons, Hahn, Pope, Russell, 2021). My research should fall within the similar trends lends to credibility.

Further credibility was also established by maintaining the anonymity of those who participate in both the interviews and surveys. Once that faith is broken, the research no longer is credible, and my own credibility will be questioned.

Confirmability

Confirmability was achieved through transparency and documentation. Including documentation and survey tools allowed for my research to be confirmed by others.

Confirmation is further allowed through the inclusion of the survey questions and data. By answering questions and sharing my research I would be able to confirm any of my data. Being consistent with documenting my research correctly would also make the research confirmable.

Transferability

Listening to the voices of LGBTQIA2S+ educators from the heartland, and how they are impacted both personally and professionally provided an opportunity that I believe is not given often. And when these discussions happen with adults, it would trickle down to empowering the students. While I am certain that all districts have an LGBTQIA2S+ educator, there would be several reasons why that educator would not speak up. The conversation is new to many school districts in rural areas, and I do not believe that District in the Midwest is the only one to struggle with supporting the needs of students who do not fall into the heteronormative structure (Eckes, S., 2021; Kopels, S., 2023). Research and discussion in a school system like the Midwest District, urban in its diverse student population, in the middle of conservative, white America is transferable to many school districts within the United States who mirror the same dynamics.

Ethical Issues

All interviews and surveys were completed with anonymity. The interviewees were coded so names will not be included on the transcript and coding. The pseudonyms used were all dead, white, men writers. This consistency in pronoun use and no disclosure of ethnicity, race, or gender. The interviews were conducted outside of the participants' workplace, via K-State zoom, and saved on the university server to eliminate any accidental access to the

recordings from outside entities. The interview recordings were just of audio, no video was taken, to aid in maintaining anonymity.

Chapter 3 Summary

My case study focuses on six educators within the LGBTQIA2S+ community, three teachers (elementary, middle, and high school) and three administrators (2 primary and 1 secondary), answering how they perceived the Midwest District's values aligning to its policies/procedures and how they were affected by them. The study used analytic memo-coding, magnitude coding, and narrative evaluation giving space for educators' own voices as they share their own perceptions on how the Midwest District aligns to its values and the impact felt during their day-to-day work experiences. My theories were framed in feminist and critical theory. This study aims to further the understanding of policy/procedure making and the unintended impact made on LGBTQIA2S+ educators, reaffirming silence and fear, by consistently upholding gendered norms and heteronormative standards.

Chapter 4 - Presentation of Data

The data presented in this chapter is derived from personal interviews with three educators from three grade levels (elementary, middle, and high school) and three administrators from two grade levels (primary and secondary). There are two sections of interviews: the teachers followed by the administrators. Each interview is first introduced with participant background information, then the interview, and then observation notes. After the section of interviews, the teacher and administrator themes are provided.

During the interviews both the teachers and the administrators share their perceptions on the Midwest District's enacting of its preferred name/pronoun policy in 2021-2022. Their interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes during which they answered semi-structured questions. The purpose of the interviews was to answer the research questions regarding how the participants were affected by the Midwest District's policies/procedures regarding LGBTQIA2S+ and how they perceive the Midwest District's values aligning to the policies.

Teachers

Robert Frost

The first educator, Robert Frost, is a secondary school teacher with eight years of high school classroom experience, all within the Midwest School District with an undergraduate degree in education and a graduate degree in curriculum and instruction. He will not be returning to the Midwest District. The interview lasted for almost thirty minutes via Zoom, but Frost is forthcoming and very succinct in his opinions.

Frost Interview

In answering the first question regarding knowledge of the Midwest District's program in creating a culture that is inclusive of transgender and nonbinary staff/students and its

effectiveness, Frost contends that the only official “policy” that he was aware of was the preferred name and pronoun policy and the Midwest District’s statement regarding nondiscrimination. Frost’s contention with the preferred name policy is its resulting “outing” of students to parents and/or faculty members without students’ full permission or readiness. Frost points to the policy’s ineffectiveness in its creation of distrust between staff (himself) and students: “I think that the policy is not effective because I have students now who are afraid to tell me their preferred names and pronouns, but I hear other students using preferred names and pronouns with them.” He blames the students’ reticence on the knowledge that if the preferred names are shared, the information must be shared with parents and the Midwest District as a whole. He worries that the students within the LGBTQIA2S+ community will feel “unwelcome and unwanted.”

When asked how the Midwest District policies and procedures impacted its LGBTQIA2S+ staff/students, Frost first describes feeling very “unwelcome.” He acknowledges that while he is not transgender or nonbinary, he is part of the LGBTQIA2S+ community and “can still relate to those people because of the discrimination that we faced together. It may not always be the exact same kind of discrimination [. . .] but it’s discrimination, and it just hurts to see that so many people didn’t stand against it.” Frost contemplates whether a sense of “blissful ignorance” stems from a place of privilege: “I mean, it sucks to say that, like, you have to face a level of discrimination in order to speak out against it. There’s no empathy. There’s no reasoning towards it.” Frost further speaks to his concern regarding student safety at homes that may no longer be safe once the student is “outed,” and that the school district’s policies did not address any of the consequences to these possibilities and having ready resources and solutions in place.

When asked about the Midwest District's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training Frost speaks to no training about who transgender/non-binary students are and what their needs are and recalls one specific DEI training in the past was regarding poverty through a poverty simulation during which Frost describes the staff as "very unreceptive" and found the staff not "seem to care." Frost acknowledges DEI focuses on race and recently on trauma but laments the limited focus on what is considered diverse: "We haven't really looked at religious diversity. We haven't really looked at any sort of sexual identity diversity. We haven't really looked at gender diversity." When asked about if he believed there would be push back at the building or district level, Frost states that at the building level he has only been received with "welcoming ideas and understanding." It is the Midwest District level, who he feels supports the heteronormative/cisgender families and students, from whom he receives resistance. Despite this resistance Frost longs for real DEI training for himself and the Midwest High School: "I really wish we had some sort of actual, valuable DEI training because even I don't know what the looks like. I've never experienced it, and I want to know how to treat people who are different from me with more respect and welcoming. I don't think those staff members that I talked with would be likely to fight against it. I think a small group would fight against it, but you have to start breaking those walls somehow. You can't let that super small group stop the flow of progress just because they may the louder voices."

Frost Observation Notes

Robert Frost was very eager to participate in my research. He was the first to agree, and the first to arrange his interview. I found him to be quite open and willing to expand on his answers to my questions. He is jovial and quite upbeat. I believe his decision to accept a position outside of the Midwest District removed any reticence in any retribution he may receive.

He acknowledged that during his time in the Midwest District, he had experiences that resulted in his being angry – especially the “preferred name” policy and the resulting stances made by the Midwest District. During the interview he stated: “[I]t’s made me very angry. I’ve had many days, just thinking about it where I am sitting at my desk shaking with rage at how they could treat human beings like that. And I feel [. . .] I can’t have the best relationship that I could with [my students], which of course, affects teaching and learning.” Besides his anger and his sardonic/sarcastic tone when responding to some of the questions, Frost also spoke with an almost dystopic tone when speaking of how he viewed the Midwest District’s possible future plans of segregating those who identify themselves as transgender or nonbinary: “I can just see it’s spiraling out of control to the point where we, like, they’ll make a claim that all this transgender business is just getting too much for the school district, so we need to put them into a separate facility in order to make this easier on everyone.” Frost seems to easily imagine the worse.

William Faulkner

William Faulkner is a six-year classroom teacher with all his years of experience in the middle school, secondary level in the Midwest District. From the area, Faulkner feels very connected to the community and the Midwest District: “The community has always been kind of accepting of differences. I’ve felt lucky that I’ve gone through that community and school as a gay student because I always felt accepted by the students and most of the staff.” His interview lasted nineteen minutes and while Faulkner was open and honest; he did not seem to draw upon himself to elaborate or connect ideas or experiences to answer the questions further.

Faulkner Interview

When posed the question regarding the Midwest District's program in creating a culture of inclusivity and understanding for those within the transgender/nonbinary community specifically, Faulkner first mentions the online trainings that educators within the Midwest District must take; these trainings include Blood Born Pathogen, Jason Platt/Suicide, FERPA/HIPPA, ALICE, 504s. The training videos also include two that directly speaks to Human Resources and Diversity training: "they do touch on what sort of comments could be offensive to employees and why it's important to be aware of coworkers' background and culture and what things we could do to keep a positive environment with our coworkers." He does consider how engaged faculty members are during these training courses as one could, foreseeably, click through the video. He is quick to defend his colleagues by stating that "I find my coworkers to be respectful of our differences because I do work with people that have come from different backgrounds and different sets of believes and that has never been an issue from anything I have experienced."

When posed with questions regarding the Midwest District's policies and procedures regarding transgender/nonbinary staff and students, Faulkner expresses confusion regarding the policies and that parents and students were left wondering if the preferred name policy was an option available to them. Despite this concern, he believes that the Midwest District is still supportive of parents' needs and that "if a student expresses or family expresses that they would like to go by a different name, different pronoun, at least from my experience, that seems to be respected." Faulkner further elaborated upon the impact of the preferred name policy questioning the Midwest District's decision to rescind its policy. Where Frost's response to the preferred name policy was negative, Faulkner sees the policy as the impetus to long-needed

conversations: “I think it did kind of open the dialogue there. From what I can remember, before the initial policy was set in place, preferred names and pronouns were not really something that was ever talked about. And so, it was just not a topic of conversation that came up very often. But since the policy was put in place, and even after it was taken away, it kind of became more commonplace topic or thing to talk about.”

Faulkner could not respond to whether or not he felt the Midwest District’s values aligned with its values espoused in its policies or provide any examples of the impact of the policies on the staff or students, but he did speak his belief the students who are transgender/nonbinary are accepted by their teachers as he has never experienced any negative reaction through his own experiences matriculating through the Midwest District. Faulkner also states as there are no real consistent policies and procedures, it is hard for anyone to be discriminatory. He did continue to speak positively of the Midwest District based upon his own experiences attending the Midwest District as a student appreciating the community's unique acceptance of diversity and difference: “the community has always been kind of accepting of differences [. . .] it is a very diverse community, that it’s just kind of built into the culture of the Midwest District and the community that we’re just very accepting.”

Faulkner Observation Notes

William Faulkner was an eager participant as well. He’s context in the Midwest District is compelling as he was a gay, student in the Midwest District who found acceptance and respect which has, in his own words, informed his context as an educator. His perspective was positive, and answers were quite succinct – usually not delving too far from what the question asked.

Faulkner’s responses consistently connected back to feeling supported and respected as an educator. He saw no conflict with the preferred name policy and appreciated the opportunity

it gave to begin conversations regarding transgender/nonbinary people and the concepts of “dead names” and preferred names. I found this interesting as middle school students are at the age to begin having discussions about their gender identity. One of the first issues presented by Robert Frost was the concern about “outing” students to their parents. This issue was not mentioned by Faulkner.

John Steinbeck

John Steinbeck has been teaching for nineteen years all within the Midwest District and all within the elementary level; while a senior educator in the Midwest District, Steinbeck lives outside the Midwest District zoning area, has children schooled outside the Midwest District, and grew up a small town outside of the Midwest District. These experiences inform many of Steinbeck’s experiences and perceptions as an educator.

Steinbeck Interview

When posed the question regarding the Midwest District’s program in creating a culture that is inclusive to all staff and students (specifically those who are transgender/nonbinary and whether it is effective, Steinbeck has a lot to share. Steinbeck acknowledges that there isn’t a program that speaks to LGBTQ+ besides the general human resources nondiscriminatory policies; however, he states in all the time he has worked in the Midwest District, he has been accepted for who he is. The professional development received may not speak to LGBTQ+ issues specifically but to diversity in general: “I don’t know that all of our professional development and training necessarily lends itself to the LGTQ perspective specifically, but I do feel like we are subject to a lot of diversity in our training and exposure to different things strictly because we are military affiliated and we get people from all over.” Comparing the Midwest district to the one from which he attended as a child, he comments on the Midwest

district's global perspective and diversity; in the small town where the global perspective was limited, Steinbeck lived very closeted. Steinbeck further acknowledges the need for more conversations regarding LGBTQ+ issues as more students within elementary ages are identifying within the LGBTQ+ community and elementary schools/educators need to prepare and have resources ready to support families and students: "We're starting to see it more at the elementary level. It's been something that has largely been seen as a secondary issue because that's when we think about people exploring their sexuality [. . .] But I think it needs to be started to be seen as human thing rather than a strictly sexuality piece." Steinbeck recognizes the need for the Midwest District to provide better resources to staff and families regarding LGBTQIA+ and issues within that community specifically.

Responding to the question regarding the preferred name policy and staff response, Steinbeck states that he did not have much exposure to the policy and impact as many of the students he worked with did not have to deal with that issue. He did contend that the parents that he has worked with have been quite responsive and empathetic; they have grown in the last five to six years: "I just feel like families are doing a better job of being more welcoming to that and just trying to understand it rather than fight it." The staff he works with he finds supportive and attempts to understand. He remembers feeling very proud of his staff as no one made jokes about preferred names when the policy was announced; they took it all very seriously. Steinbeck credited the mandatory suicide training that spoke the connection of higher suicide rates within the LGBTQ+ community.

Answering if Steinbeck sees a misalignment between the Midwest District's values and its policies, he believes that he has never seen an opposition in the two or seen the Midwest District contradict itself. He sees the environments in the buildings in which he has worked to be

positive: “We’ve done a very good job of aligning ourselves to what we believe in what the Midwest District believes, so and trying to uphold that.” And when asked about the impact of the Midwest District’s policies upon its LGBTQ+ staff/students, Steinbeck shares that he has never seen a negative impact and that he has “been defended on numerous occasions by the admin [and] by other teachers.” He speaks to an incident where parents have questioned their child being placed in a class with a gay, male teacher and that his administrators have always supported and defended him, “[K]nowing that I have that behind me, makes me feel really good.” His hope is that the Midwest District continues to “foster a community of understanding, love, and support.”

Steinbeck continues to praise his colleagues when responding to the question regarding any insensitive or discriminatory conversations when LGBTQIA+ topics are brought up locally or nationally. He acknowledges the diverse staff with which he works that includes lesbians and faculty with students on the LGBTQ “spectrum” and believes this context creates more sensitivity to students who are dealing with issues that fall “to that side of things.” He speaks to only one incident in the ten years he has worked in a building where a classified staff member was caught talking about him in a disparaging manner and was corrected by another staff member; they have since become friends. Steinbeck draws from the incident how the staff continues to grow in understanding: “I do feel like the people that I’ve worked with have always come at it from a sense of understanding and a place of love and inclusion. And I never thought that that was possible, when I was a kid growing up, and going to school and being a part of a school community that was not tolerant of such things.”

Steinbeck does consider this moment in education where there needs to be a decisive stance when it comes to professional development. Stating that being LGBTQ is “politicized”

and “polarizing”: “[T]here are people that are very, very against it still. And whether that be for political reasons, religious reasons, personal reasons, that’s not for me to determine, but regardless of that, you have to overcome that, those beliefs, to be able to be equitable to your kids and to [. . .] treat people fairly.” He understands the Midwest District’s perspective when trying to plan professional development and whether they can have a presenter or trainer that can state homosexuality is acceptable when the topic remains so polarizing. Steinbeck then ruminates on the similarities this issue would have had with racial discrimination and how many would think that desegregation was also unacceptable and polarizing and contends that conversations regarding LGBTQ+ need to happen and in the end, it’s not going away: “We need to feel the same way [as with racial segregation] about LGBTQ because it’s here; it’s not going anywhere. It’s a part of our society, and our kids and our families are all pieces of that. Definitely.”

Steinbeck Observation Notes

John Steinbeck is the most experienced educator who participated in my research and both his reflective answers and digressions demonstrate his experience. He was eager to participate and eager to share his experiences as a gay man who when through schooling in a school district quite different from the Midwest School district and his experiences as an educator in the Midwest District. He was forthright and very open – even sharing his children’s experiences in school today.

Steinbeck’s position as an educator was unique as he spoke from the elementary perspective and gave recognition that gender identification is not as frequent of a discussion in primary schools. Steinbeck did, however, state the need for a DEI specialist in the Midwest District to provide research and support for the constantly developing and nuances within the

LGBTQIA2S+ community who could provide research, resources, and professional development for teachers. Steinbeck stated that just because he was gay did not mean he knew what it was to be transgender and what the correct “protocols” were to be equitable to that community. He too was a learner.

Administrators

Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway was quite hesitant in participating in my research study and needed much reassurance that anonymity was given, and identity would be protected as much as possible. Hemingway has served the Midwest District for eleven years at the elementary level, two as an administrator, and was working as a coach when the preferred name policy was enacted by the Midwest District.

Hemingway Interview

Hemingway’s response to the question about the Midwest District’s creation of a culture that is inclusive to all staff specifically those who identify as transgender/nonbinary and whether it was effective was succinct. He affirmed that in his building children feel safe, and he has seen, when asked, students are referred to as their preferred names and pronouns throughout the Midwest District. I followed-up by asking if Hemingway believed that was a district expectation or an administrator’s personal prerogative, and he was noncommittal. This question did, however, extend itself to discussing the Midwest District’s roll out of the preferred name/pronoun policy in which Hemingway acknowledges that it was “quite a challenge to understand that policy.” He then went into how the policy is followed today: “[I]f a child wants to go by that preferred name and pronoun, we cannot, you know, we have to use that all the time around whomever if we call home, calling them by that name.” Hemingway continues by

relating that the policy is to protect from liability issues but sees how it “take[s] away the opportunity for school to be the safe space for a child.”

When asked about the staff/faculty’s response to the Midwest District’s preferred name policy, Hemingway recalls a specific incident which he found disappointing. As the policy speaks to moments where people transition from one gender to another and choose another name more fitting their new sense of being (a preferred name), one of the staff members in Hemingway’s school stated that his preferred name was “Shakespeare.” Hemingway recalls: “I remember feeling really kind of defeated after that meeting thinking, oh, man, they’re not ready for our next generation of kiddos [. . .] So that was pretty disheartening.”

Responding to if Hemingway believed that the Midwest District’s procedures and policies were aligned with its values espoused, he speaks to a conflict between the procedure and the fact that “school is a safe place” for students. He also speaks to the lack of additional safety measures given to students who unintentionally may be “outed” by the school’s preferred name policy during which the school contacts the parents/guardians to confirm the preferred name/pronoun usage and obtain permission. The school contact may inadvertently open the student to uncomfortable conversations or other repercussions at home; Hemingway states: “Which kind of stinks because then they’re not going to get to go by their... If they’re not safe at home, then they additionally can’t be going by that name and pronoun at school.”

The question regarding how the Midwest District’s policies and procedures impact its LGBTQIA+ staff allowed Hemingway to speak to two points. One is to praise the Midwest district for “bolstering” its diversity, equity, and inclusion training over the last years for the administrators in the Midwest District with the goal that they return to their respective buildings and train their staff. The other is to affirm the Midwest district’s diversity in its administrative

hiring of administrators within the LGBTQ community: “We have a pretty diverse staff, and I’m not just the one in the room [. . .] there are other people that would be in the LGBTQ community that are also fellow administrators.” He continues by expressing how good it feels to have that comradery and support.

A follow-up question asked was to whether there was conflict between enacting policies that may conflict with his own personal sense of ethics as a member LGBTQ+ community and how does he reconcile these conflicts. Hemingway reveals that he has yet to be put in this position but imagines that there would be a sense of conflict but believes he will always side on the safety of the student: “I feel like it would be so important to make sure the child that their parent will know. And then a child that has a supportive parent will be just fine with that. And everything’s good. And we move forward. But then there’s the opposite side of the coin. Hard.”

The last question regarding how local or national conversations regarding LGBTQIA+ issues or trainings may illicit conversations that may be insensitive or discriminatory with staff members and its possible impact on the educational community in the building continued Hemingway’s juxtaposition between personal conflicts and professional responsibility: “[T]here’s times I disagree with the way things are going in [this state], but yeah, I don’t really have a choice, I guess, when a policy is a policy, and we’d have to enact it.” He specifically recalls a moment where he experienced cognitive dissonance to a policy regarding bathroom use requiring transgender students to use private restrooms: “I remember that maybe [the transgender student] would have a choice of using a different facility, but in my mind, you know, the person that was so uncomfortable with it, why don’t they use a different facility? Why couldn’t they be

offered that? You know? But again, I understand there's two sides of the coin." He ends by stating that the whole situation is "tricky."

Hemingway Observation Notes

Ernest Hemingway agreed to participate in my research when I began my and he was still in the classroom; however, he became hesitant in his administrative role. He was concerned about confidentiality and anonymity and took about a month to agree and set up interview dates and sign paperwork.

Hemingway's hesitancy is seen in his formal tone which is not his normal tone when talking to me and his short and concise answers. There was no elaboration and no digression to allow for any other information. He seemed to only want to answer the question and leave no room for misinterpretation of anything he may have said. I believe he wanted to be helpful to my research but was incredibly cognizant of his position within the school district.

Percy Shelley

Percy Shelley is an elementary administrator that first served as an elementary teacher; he has been an administrator for two years in the Midwest district and grew up in a town in a similar size to the one the Midwest District serves. Percy Shelley and F. Scott Fitzgerald chose to be interviewed together. Their interviews, however, are presented separately.

Shelley Interview

Shelley first responded to the question regarding the Midwest District's building of a culture that is inclusive to all staff and students specifically including those within the LGBTQIA2S+ community and whether it's effective. Shelley was quick to speak to the past several years of professional development that administrators received through the Midwest district that focused on DEI. He also mentioned the DEI training that the whole district received

yearly, but acknowledged that the Midwest district may lack a clear vision as to how the administrative training was meant to impact or be delivered to the classroom teachers and support staff: “I don’t think they have a clear vision or plan on what that looks like to make sure that it’s not just administrators getting this professional development [. . .] maybe like a program like of expectation. So, there is no follow-up on how we take our training and teach our staff.”

When considering the question about how the staff responded to the policy/procedure(s) regarding the preferred names/pronouns, Shelley recalled being told that his school was specifically told that they were not “outing” students to their parents. He then recounted how he received guidance from KSB (Knowledge, Skills, Behavior) attorneys the policy enacted included “tough” conversations with parents: “[W]e were told if a student did want their name to be a different name or a pronoun, other than what they were born/identified [. . .] we would have to talk to parents about that.” He further stated relief that he has yet to have those tough conversations.

Shelley responded to the question about whether the Midwest District’s policies/procedures align with its values rests in its hiring practices. He pointed to the Midwest District’s recent hiring of several educators (teachers and administrators) who are non-closeted LGBTQ+ community leaders in the Midwest District which seemed to give Shelley hope; however, he then expressed some concern as he shared that a nonbinary, teacher’s struggled with administration at a previous building. He stated: “It does make me worry that that it would just take a lot more understanding, like to get to the point of like, loving and respect and all.”

The question regarding the impact the Midwest districts policies and procedures have on its LGBTQIA2S+ staff gave Shelley a chance to examine his role against all parts of the Midwest District. Not having felt like he had been discriminated against as a leader in the

Midwest District, Shelley spoke to an awareness of a tension with community members who may have different perspectives: “I do worry sometimes about the Board of Education more than I worry about our administration. For whatever reason, there are some board members that I think would love to get rid of people if they knew more about some of us being part of the LGBTQ community.” Despite this concern, Shelley spoke to a sense of protection from within the educational community and the Midwest District community in general as he knew they can speak to his general hard work to earn his positions first as a classroom teacher and now an administrator for over a decade. Shelley contended that the Midwest district’s policies and procedures are aligned with its beliefs – not just individuals’ personal beliefs.

I asked Shelley if he’s had to deal with a decision with which he had a personal conflict. He spoke of an incident where a student did not want to go home after having a conflict with his mother regarding pronoun usage. Shelley stated: “Yes, it’s the policy on the one hand and you’re on the other, and then your brain in the middle.” He gratefully acknowledged being able to find a loophole that enabled the ability to both “respect the kid and respect the parents too.” He also recalled BOE discussions where members were stunned at the possibility of parents not being informed of students’ decisions/desire to go by different names/pronouns; Shelley was surprised that they could not imagine homes where parents are not supportive, abusive, or hurtful. Shelley continued by affirming unwritten policies where parents’ requests to have their students not enrolled in certain teachers, gay or nonbinary, and those requests were followed. He also referenced to how, despite living as a gay person, he felt the need to call his partner his “friend” and at times has left questions regarding his marital status (heteronormatively referenced) vague.

When Shelley considered how his staff has reacted to topics regarding LGBTQIA2S+ when covered in professional development or covered in local or national news and whether it

elicited any type of negative conversation, Shelley first noted that he has many religious, politically conservative staff members but has always felt support and loved. He stated he would be very surprised if anything untoward was said regarding these topics or towards any staff member: “If it is going on, and I’m oblivious. I will be very sad to know that first of all, that I’m oblivious to something like that happening, but just for the most part, it happened, and people didn’t talk.”

F. Scott Fitzgerald

F. Scott Fitzgerald has been in education for thirteen years and has finished his third year as an administrator at the secondary level. He is from the area, but a smaller town than the Midwest district. Fitzgerald is also a person of color and speaks from a trans sectional position throughout his interview.

Fitzgerald Interview

Fitzgerald’s response to the first question regarding the Midwest District’s creating a culture inclusive to all staff, specifically those within the LGBTQ+ community, was brief mentioning recent professional development. He mentioned the Midwest District enlisted a speaker that spoke specifically about LGBTQ topics, and that people needed to recognize that diversity extends beyond race: “Our last trainer that we had come, I felt out of the ones we’ve had come from the state, but he was one I could connect to the most and did kind of reference – reference a few LGBTQ things. I felt like in diversity people just typically think race [. . .] but other than that, I don’t think I have anything else to add.”

Responding to the staff’s response to the Midwest District’s roll-out of the preferred name/pronoun policy in 2020, Fitzgerald first commented on the communication errors made by the Midwest district. He felt that the Midwest District did the best they could but recognized that

as outsiders to the LGBTQ+ community, they made errors in the language used and the scope of the impact because, in the end, Fitzgerald felt the Midwest District's intent was to support and respect the student's choice: "[I]t could have been settled a little bit better, but they did the best that they could."

When considering if the Midwest District's policies and procedures align with its espoused values, Fitzgerald stated that the policy was meant to protect students. Fitzgerald also referenced the nondiscrimination statement that is on all materials from the Midwest District and wondered when will the Midwest District stand for those stated principles and values: "At what point do you know, politely, talk to that parent that this is our board policy. We're not going to discriminate. You know, with parents asking, I don't want my child in that class, like at what point do we, I guess, for the adults, do we draw the line and say we are not going to tolerate that as discrimination." Fitzgerald spoke to the frustration of appeasing the requests of parents and allowing this type of discrimination of "quality teachers" just because of their identity within the LGBTQ+ community.

Thinking about how the Midwest District's policies impact LGBTQ+ staff, Fitzgerald connected to his place as both a gay person and a person of color, "a minority in two ways." On one hand he felt the conflict when parents use their own personal beliefs to circumvent their student from having a teacher who identifies as LGBTQ+. And on the other, he acknowledged the challenge in making the right choices by policy/procedures while and not being seen as an imposter: "[N]ever wanting to fail, or, you know, making sure I am doing the right thing. [. . .] Because of, you know, being a minority just knowing that people don't always agree or is as open as you would hope." When asked how Fitzgerald felt enforcing policies that he may personally disagree with he answered honestly stating he followed the policy but was open with

the students about the steps of the policy and the consequence of each step: “I kind of just have a real conversation and try to connect with them that it’s a process, and I understand why you didn’t want to [if a student decides not to continue with the process to use a preferred name] if you’re unsure that they won’t accept you.” He continued to assure the student that despite the requirement to use his/her given name, as soon as the student decided to make the change, he was there to support the student.

Fitzgerald, in his response to whether there’s been any negative discourse from staff in response to professional development or local/national coverage regarding LGBTQ+ topics, stated he has never heard anything negative from his staff and believed if something was to be said that someone would bring it up to him. He spoke to having a positive experience in the Midwest District and was thankful for the opportunities the Midwest District has given him in his professional career: “It’s been a positive experience and, you know, not feeling or having instances I felt of discrimination. But just feeling like, you know, we know better, we do better and continuing to evolve with society. So, I like that.”

Observation Notes Percy Shelley and F. Scott Fitzgerald

While the interviews were presented separately, Percy Shelley and F. Scott Fitzgerald asked to interview together. The interplay between the two was interesting as their close relationship allowed them to become comfortable and to relay more information than they may have intended. As colleagues they seemed to have shared some of the situations they have faced at their respective schools with parents, students, and the conflicts they may have felt as gay administrators. Many times, Shelley would extend and elaborate upon situations Fitzgerald experienced in his own building as an administrator.

Teacher and Administrator Themes

Teacher Themes

The “common thematic elements” (O’Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015) found in what was shared from the teachers after magnitude coding were these themes: feeling of being accepted and respected (positive), the awareness of HR policies (neutral), and lack of professional clarity in the enactment of policies/procedures (negative). When first examining the teachers’ interviews, I believed that they were very positive in their responses, which I found surprising and enlightening. However, after magnitude coding, I found that there were more negative (20) connoting words within their responses than positive (8-10) and neutral (12). Teachers made certain to mention that they were respected as an educator first and always felt supported by other staff members and their administrators; they felt that preferred name and pronoun usage was overwhelmingly supported by the staff members with which they worked. When discussing the policies, procedures, and training provided, the participants reflected honestly and did not refer to the events with “loaded” language. They acknowledged the shortcomings of video training, the racial focus of diversity rather than LGBTQIA2S+, and the aligning of the policies to the Midwest District’s nondiscriminatory statement in a matter-of-fact manner.

While maintaining a critical lens in examining the Midwest District’s work, the participants expressed several negative statements regarding the effort. They found the Midwest District’s roll out of the policy to be: “ineffective,” lacking clarity, “unprofessional,” discriminatory,” containing “hostile intent,” and resulted in “creat[ing] barriers to student/teacher relationships.” Once completing the magnitude coding, I examined the trending concepts/ideas and synthesized the following concepts for each category which will allow for further analysis of each teacher’s responses. The teachers' positive concepts for the Midwest District focused on its

openness and acceptance of its staff within the LGBTQIA2S+, that the staff in each of the respective buildings were supportive, and that each participant experienced positive, respectful interactions and relationships in the tenures with staff. The neutral concepts that trended for the participants spoke to the Midwest District's procedures already in place to support nondiscriminatory practices: its human resources policies, its nondiscriminatory statements, and its Vector video trainings on diversity. The negative concepts focused on the Midwest District's "Preferred Name/Pronoun Policy." The trending negative concepts spoke to the Midwest District's "unprofessional" behavior and their lack of clarity, that the policy had "hostile intent" and was void of empathy towards the LGBTQIA2S+ community, and in the end "created barriers to teacher-student relationships."

Feeling of Being Accepted and Respected

The first thing that Faulkner, Steinbeck, and Frost acknowledged was the respect and the acceptance they had received while working in the Midwest District. Faulkner, a middle school teacher, spoke honestly about feeling respected by his coworkers and that the preferred name policy enabled open conversations and some new understandings regarding the LGBTQIA2S+ community and students needed by staff members:

"So, as a staff member, I always felt, you know, respected as a LGBT staff, and seeing how some of the staff – how open they were to it [preferred names and pronouns] was very encouraging to see, and, you know, even when the policy was taken away, I think it kind of opened the dialogue there for, at least from what I can remember, [...] Preferred names and pronouns were not really something that was really ever talked about, and so it was just not a topic of conversation that came up very often. But since

that policy was put in place, and then even after it was taken away, it just kind of became a more commonplace topic or thing to talk about students. Like, “Hey, this student is going by stating the student is going by this pronoun.” So, you know, it is kind of sad that the policy was taken away, but the fact that it was in place for that amount of time that kind of open that dialogue” (Faulkner).

Faulkner reiterated that he had never experienced any moment of discrimination or disrespect during his tenure at the middle school and that conversations regarding preferred names and pronouns were “always respectful.”

Steinbeck, an elementary, has worked in the Midwest District a bit longer than Faulkner or Frost. His experience has also been positive: “I feel as, as someone who has worked for this district for a very long time; I feel like I for the most part, am accepted for who I am. And as an educator first, above everything else.” He believed that Flatt suicide training required in the Midwest District and the statistics regarding suicide within the LGBTQ+ community resulted in his staff taking trainings seriously and being respectful because the matter is worth taking seriously:

I also think it was, you know, I think it kind of came about when suicide training became a big part of our Vector training that we do at the beginning of each year. Even down in the elementary level, and having to have mandatory suicide training. When you teach kindergarten through fifth grade, is kind of a big wakeup call when, You know, when the statistics are showing you that – that is, it’s becoming younger and younger, where students and [...] children in general are having these thoughts and these struggles with mental health. And largely

based on who they are as individuals and whether they're good enough for, you know, worthy of being alive.

Steinbeck's perspective extends into the community as well as he credits families' abilities to be more open and respectful: "I Just feel like families are doing a better job of being more welcoming to that and just trying to understand it rather than to fight it."

Frost was the outlier amongst the teachers. Not returning the following year, Frost was not inhibited in his responses. Assuming a teacher who had the tenure and experiences he had while teacher at the high school would have colleagues that he would be respected and accepted him, Frost stood firm on his assessment of the Midwest District's policy and his resulting feelings:

[T]hat made me feel unwelcome because, I mean, in the acronym that you were using at the beginning in your statement [LGBTQIA2S+], like we are all one community, and I may not be transgender or nonbinary, but I can still relate to those people because of the discrimination that we have faced together. It may not always be the exact same kind of discrimination or be different levels of discrimination, but it's discrimination none-the-less. It just hurts to see that so many people didn't take a stand against it. I tried to speak out against the policy by having meetings with our union representative, as well as the head of HR of the Midwest District."

The respect or sense of acceptance, to Frost, ended when an enacted policy that could endanger LGBTQIA2S+ students by potentially outing them before they were ready, and the lack of cooperation from the Midwest District felt like an extension of disrespect to Frost, "[The] head of HR didn't seem to care."

Awareness of HR Policies

All three teachers spoke about the Midwest District's nondiscriminatory practices and policies but in generalities. They mention seeing it on the bottom of their emails, but do not know if there is any specific training or professional development opportunities save the online training provided at the beginning of the school year. Faulkner mentioned the training and questioned the quality and whether it met the intended purpose: "[T]he training itself, the quality of the training, is not – I wouldn't say it's the best. It's just a few slideshows that you kind of click through. I don't know how well people are engaged in that training." Steinbeck questioned the scope of the professional development as it focused more on racial justice than LGBTQIA2S+ issues, "I don't know that all of our professional development and training necessarily lends itself to the LGBTQ perspective specifically, but I do feel like we are subject to a lot of diversity in our training." Frost mentioned DEI training that the Midwest District had provided in the past, a poverty simulator, but questioned the reception and the impact it had on the staff and connects the lack of reception to the staffs' possible lack of empathy to other issues under the purview of social and racial justice:

It was – the simulation was interesting; I don't think it hit the point that it was trying to hit. And people were – the staff members were very unreceptive to the lesson at the same time, so it didn't seem like they were trying to understand what the actual purpose of the simulation was, as opposed to the purpose, or the lesson that we did receive. It, most of our staff just don't seem to care, and I think that comes from a place of privilege because they are unbothered by what happens to people who are different than them. They – I mean, it sucks

to say that, like, you have to face a level of discrimination in order to speak out against it. [. . .] There's no empathy. there's no reasoning towards it. It's just blissful ignorance."

The Midwest District's teachers accepted the opportunities offered for professional development even if they felt that the learning was limited in scope or not received well by the staff.

Lack of Professional Clarity in the Enactment of Policies and Procedures

What was viewed negatively was the Midwest District's lack of professional and lack of clarity in their enacting of their preferred name and pronoun policies/procedures. Faulkner did not speak directly to the lack of professional but to the lack of clarity first experienced by the parents, "[A]t least with the old procedure, it was said that the parents did not have to be informed of the name changes, and I knew that at some points that became an issue. The parents were not happy that they weren't being communicated." He then spoke to the teachers' confusion:

[T]he district doesn't have clear procedures for preferred names, preferred pronouns; I think it could cause some confusion with families and students as to how would I go about this? Is this an option for me? It just is – I just don't feel like it's openly communicated with parents.

Steinbeck viewed lack of professional/clarity regarding resources available to staff, "I think our district could do a lot better as far as providing more information to staff on how to address issues, especially when it comes to students and families" but pushed Faulkner's response further by contemplating the reason behind the Midwest District's lack of professionalism/clarity:

I think that being LGBTQ has become so politicized. And I think it's very, I mean, it's very polarizing, you know, there are people that are very,

very against it still. And whether that be for political reasons, religious reasons, personal reasons, that's not for me to determine. But regardless of that, those beliefs, to be equitable to your kids and to treat people fairly, you gotta be able to put that stuff aside, and the only way we can do that is there's more of an understanding, but I think it becomes difficult when you're looking at it from the Midwest District's perspective. [...]

Steinbeck's response allowed the Midwest District to give space to individual faculty members own sense of individual freedom to express their opinion regarding the "right" to be gay a profound and selfless act from a person who experienced, and continues experience, being "othered." He then considered how the context of being gay compared to the othering of being a person of color:

[Y]ou know, if you think about, like race, you know back when there was still segregation and stuff, there was probably some similar types of, you know, how are we going to address this when, when this is so polarizing? It is, so you know, you're on this side, or you're on that side of it? And, but I feel like largely, at least in our district, we have, you know, that's not as much of an issue. I don't see it as much, of course, I'm a white male, so who knows, but like, I think, we don't have, we don't necessarily shy away from those kinds of conversations. We need to feel the same way about LGBTQ because it's here. It's not going anywhere. It's a part of our society, and our kids and our families are all pieces of that.

Frost agreed with Steinbeck's assertion that discussing LGBTQIA2S+ should be equal to the way issues of race are discussed; he argued that the Midwest District's policies/procedures were

not professionally delivered and lacked any clarity, “the way we received the information on the policy and procedure was extremely unprofessional [. . .] there was no training.” However, he predicted a more ominous intention behind the preferred name/pronoun policy:

“[To] put students in an unsafe environment which I would not be surprised if that was the whole intention of the policy. I mean, they know exactly what they’re doing at the Midwest District level with that policy and with the procedures, and they set that up in a way that those students who identify in that way are put in a hostile position. I think that the people who are in positions of power believe that this is something that sexual identities are something that “spreads” -- something that can be stopped. And I mean, I can just see it’s spiraling out of control to the point where [. . .] they’ll make a claim that, oh, all this transgender business is just getting too much for the school district, so we need to put them into a separate facility in order to make this easier on everyone. I would not be surprised if that was the next step. If we went back towards a form of segregation because that’s all -- that’s always the claim is that it’s better for every- one. It’s what the people want, and so I think the Midwest District knows exactly what it’s doing. I’ll leave it at that.

Again, Frost had no qualms in sharing his opinions regarding the Midwest District and its policy/procedures regarding preferred name/pronouns. He did not return the following year and was not worried about any retribution. However, when compared to Faulkner and Steinbeck, his comments were the outlie and dark as they brought images of segregation in separate facilities. Now, Frost’s words have the tone of ominous prediction in the context of the current political stance regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Administrative Themes

Administrator Themes

If the teachers seemed to lean towards positive to appease the Midwest District, the administrative participants did so even more. Their responses supported the Midwest District's policies and procedures and acknowledged the legalities behind the decisions made; they touted the Midwest District's seemingly purposeful effort to hire LGBTQIA2S+. Despite this overt leaning towards the positive, perhaps inadvertently, the administrators revealed a hidden policy that strikes quite negatively in the Midwest District's claim towards nondiscrimination.

LGBTQIA2S+ Growing Leadership

The positive theme mentioned by the administrators was the Midwest District's hiring of LGBTQIA2S+ leadership. Hemingway admitted that in the beginning of his career he felt very vulnerable in discussions regarding LGBTQIA2S+ topics, "[W]e're having the conversations, that it, you feel like a little exposed, because, you know, like, you're 'the one' in the room. But you know, we have a pretty diverse staff, and I'm not just the one in the room, you know. There are other people that would be in the room." Hemingway then extended that the inclusion to the administrative level and how knowing that there are "other in the room" provides a level of support that he found positive to his experience as an administrator in the Midwest District, "the LGBTQ community that are fellow administrators, so I have that kind of opportunity to talk things over with them, you know, after the fact and kind of see where their head is at and things like that. So that feels like a good level of support." This seemed to create more of a community in where the teachers worked more in isolation with support from cisgendered/heterosexual colleagues.

Shelley agreed with Hemingway in noting the Midwest District's concerted efforts in hiring administrators within the LGBTQIA2S+ community:

You know, our district in the past few years, has selected, I think, knowingly selected members of the LGBTQ+ community to be leaders in the Midwest District. And I feel like that's actually changed significantly. In the past, I would even say, five years. I mean, it's hard to know how things would unfold. If we had nonbinary, you know administrator in our, in our district, or transgender. I would hope, I would really hope that it would be as seamless as it does seem to have been for, like gay and lesbian administrators in our district.

Fitzgerald tacitly agreed with Shelley (as they interviewed together) but offered no specific feedback on his own; instead changed the topic to discuss the contradiction the Midwest District has regarding nondiscrimination.

DEI Professional Development

The administrative participants were quite neutral in their perceptions of the training received to support diversity, equity, and inclusion – specifically the training to support understanding the policy/procedures to support the preferred name/pronoun policy and the impact on LGBTQIA2S+ students and families.

Hemingway stated that the policy itself was “a challenge to understand” but contended that the Midwest District had “bolstered up their diversity, equity and inclusion training in the last several years.” He celebrated that the Midwest District has improved their communication regarding the policy: “we’ve come a long ways in a short amount of time.” He elaborated that administrators received regular DEI training with the “expectation that [. . .] we bring some of that training back to our staff as well.”

Shelley echoed Hemingway by reiterating, “[the Midwest District has] provided training through a variety of professional developments on like DEI, like diversity, equity and inclusion,” and that the expectation was for administrators to take that information back to their staff. He further stated:

[T]hey’ve also added in some of our like, online module requirements, they’ve added one year at a time they randomly threw DEI training. And so, I do think they’re [the Midwest District] are aware that this needs to be a part of everyone’s training. However, I don’t think they have a clear vision or plan on what that looks like to make sure that it’s not just administrators getting this professional development. I don’t know, maybe requiring more, more of a maybe like a program like of expectation, so there is no follow-up on how we take our training and teach our staff. [. . .] I do appreciate that hey assume we are doing it, and we’re doing it well – like that’s great autonomy. However, I don’t know if everyone’s getting the same level of DEI expectations, exposure, and training.

Fitzgerald stated that a lot of the trainings focused on issues of race and LGBTQ topics: “Our last trainer that we had, I felt out of the ones we’ve had come from the state, he was one I could connect to the most and he did kind of reference – reference a few LGBTQ things. I felt like in diversity people just typically think that race is what [you] would think, you know.” He seemed to have saw this as a sign that there would be more training similar in nature.

Hidden Policies/Procedures

The administrative negative concept was revealed perhaps unwittingly; it was in discussing the Midwest District’s hidden policies/procedures regarding LGBTQIA2S+ faculty. The perspective was revealed when they were asked a question about having to enact

policies/procedures with which they may have a personal conflict or disagree. In responding, the administrators spoke to both the conflicts they may and may not have experienced but also to a hidden practice of moving students out of a LGBTQIA2S+ teacher's classroom upon a parent's request.

Hemingway spoke to moments of conflict, "[T]here's times I disagree with the ways things are going in [the state]. But yeah, I don't really have a choice, I guess, when a policy is a policy, and we'd have to enact it." He elaborated further:

There was a specific example about transgender restrooms, and I don't remember all the details, but I remember that maybe they would have a choice of using a different facility, but in my mind, you know, the person that was so uncomfortable with it, why don't they use a different facility? Why couldn't they be offered that so? You know, but again, I understand there's two sides of the coin. And it's tricky.

Hemingway spoke to the conflict again referencing the two-sided comparison, "It's such a, it's so difficult, because you know, I'm on the administrative side of things, and I understand you know, liability and things like that. So I understand why the policy is written the way that it is, but I think there's some qualities there that take away the opportunity for school to be the safe space for a child So that's [. . .] a sticking point."

Shelley affirmed the two-sidedness that Hemingway spoke of when both a person of the LGBTQIA2S+ community and an administrator in public education citing the difficulty in choosing between what is believed is right and what the expectations are. Like Hemingway, he spoke about the law's guidance,

I really am glad that they seek lawyer advice as well, to make sure that we are I

mean, following the law and being a public school educator, like how you feel about something, you know, is one thing but you know, following protocol, and what's expected is, you know, they can, they can be conflicting. And so, I mean, sometimes, you just have to do what you believe is right.

Shelley further stated, "You [are] always trying to do what's best for kids while also, you know, not trying to get [yourself] in legal trouble [. . .] I know, that [the policy] probably stemmed from a legal issue." Later, Shelley spoke to a situation of intolerance when asked about the Midwest District's values aligning with its procedures/policies -- specifically mentioning what I'll recall a "hidden policy" (apropos to educator's "hidden curriculum"). A hidden policy is an administrative expectation to serve a parent's request as if he/she is a customer, so if a parent requests his/her student have another teacher, and the request is reasonable and does not create any problems (i.e. uneven class sizes, early in the term, choice of teacher is possible) the administrator is to facilitate that change. This "hidden policy," based on the interviews, seemed to be in place when parents find their children enrolled in a class with an LGBTQIA2S+ teacher. Shelley stated:

I did want to add to thinking about the unwritten policies and thing like the parent in particular who requested next school year that their student is not in this nonbinary teacher's music class. And like Fitzgerald said, like we do have to, and when I talk to this music teacher, especially last year, there were three students that parents.

Fitzgerald, however, provided more insight to the "hidden policy" and the conflict he experienced as a person with intersectional identities. Fitzgerald did not speak much on the double-sidedness of having to enact policies that he with which he may feel conflicted. He did

however ponder when the Midwest District will hold parents to the nondiscriminatory statement regarding LGBTQIA2S+ issues as it does to racial issues:

[A]t what point you know, politely, you know, talk to that parent, that this is our board policy. We're not going to discriminate, like, you know, with parents asking, I don't want my child in that class, like at what point? Do we I guess, for the adults, do we draw the line and say, we're not going to tolerate that as discrimination kind of thing.

With Shelley's support, Fitzgerald continued:

And how do we, you know, and not just appease them by "Yeah, we have another teacher." So yeah, let me go ahead and put them in the other class. You know, that, that I feel is just showing them that you can discriminate and you can, you know, just move the problem to somewhere else. And, you know, especially when those we know, those teachers are quality teachers and [. . .] just discriminating for them being part of the LGBTQ community.

Despite his frustration with the Midwest District's approach to parents' requests, Fitzgerald was still hopeful in the Midwest District's growth stating: "We know better, we do better and continuing to evolve with society."

Chapter 4 Summary

This chapter presents the interviews from the teachers and administrators who answered five to seven questions in a semi-structured, 30–45-minute interview. Each participant's interview was presented with introduction, data, and observation notes. The teachers and administrators were

presented first answering the five questions with the administrators presented with three additional questions.

Through open and then magnitude coding, three themes (positive, neutral, negative) were determined for each group of educators. The teachers three themes were: feeling accepted and respected, the awareness of HR policies, and the lack of professional clarity in the enactment of policies and procedures. The administrators' themes were: LGBTQIA2S+ growing leadership, DEI professional development, and hidden policies/procedures.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

Introduction to Chapter 5

This chapter will provide the findings from the case study based on Merriam's qualities (Yazan, 2015), the study focused during 2021-2022 when the preferred name/pronoun policy was enacted in the Midwest District. The six participants (3 teachers, 3 administrators) were all employed at that time. All six are identified within the LGBTQIA2S+ community and were interviewed between May and June of the year 2024. The findings answered how the participants perceived the Midwest District's values aligned with its policies and how the participants were affected by the policies/procedures.

One common sentiment spoken by the participants in my interviews was the idea that the Midwest District was moving towards improving its understanding and training regarding diversity (DEI) to include the LGBTQIA2S+ community. With President Donald Trump's signings of executive orders including "Defending women from gender ideology extremism and restoring biological truth to the federal government" (January 20, 2025), "Ending illegal discrimination and restoring merit-based opportunity" (January 21, 2025), and "Ending radical indoctrination in K-12 schooling" (January 29, 2025), and most likely ending any future professional development that the participants wanted. By defining two legal genders, removing nondiscriminatory protections under Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion offices, and labeling public school systems as centers of radical ideology that creates unpatriotic students, President Trump has paused and potentially stopped the progress being made not only in this Midwest District but in Districts and states across the country. Despite feeling hopeful and respected, my participants expressed concern about their identity being exposed and were concerned for their safety; this sense of unease has been experienced by LGBTQIA2S+ educators from the moment they've

walked into the schoolhouse (Blount, 2005). With defining lines of gender/sex, the dissolution of DEI, and the villainization of public educators, I fear the sense of unease been exacerbated.

Summary of the Study

The connectivity between education and gendered and/or “queer” work has been well established (Welter, 1966; Blount, 2005; Smith-Silverman, 2020) as well as the historical precedence the lack of safety (Lasky, 2005; Smith-Silverman, 2020). Those within the LGBTQIA2S+ community who work in public schools continue to face the same lack of security as new policies enacted across the nation regarding transgender/nonbinary students continue to press against the ideologies of DEI and heteronormative norms (Eckes, 2020; Elassar, 2022; Kopels, 2024). The purpose of this study was to examine the participants’ perceptions on the Midwest District’s policies, how they were affected by the policies, and whether they felt the policies aligned to the Midwest District’s values.

The study included six participants: three teachers (elementary, middle, and high school) and three administrators (2 primary and 1 secondary). The study entailed one in-depth interview per participant, since despite their willingness to participate, they spoke to their concerns regarding anonymity and retribution if participation was discovered. The one participant who had no concern was not returning to the Midwest District the following year. After completing the interviews, I conducted analytic memo-ing, open coding, and analytic coding which allowed me to identify three key concepts for each group: teachers (acceptance/open awareness (+), HR policies (N) , and unprofessionalism/lack of clarity(-)) and administrators (choice of leadership (+), DEI training (N), and hidden policy/parent-teacher choice).

The interviews allowed for greater insight into how the educators were internalizing any conflicts experienced during the enactment of the preferred name/pronoun policy, the rescinding

of it, and the current state of the Midwest District's policies. When first examining the participants responses, I noted a sense of duality or cognitive dissonance as seen in feminism (Anzaldúa, 1987; Crenshaw, 1991) compounded by a sense of restriction in voice and agency. In feminism, voice is either a result of capitulation or the choice of resistance (Parpart, 2009) and in these moments, women experience a "double consciousness" or cognitive dissonance. Their awareness society's perceptions of them and their own internal awareness. The same was witnessed in the participants what and how they answered questions and whether they answered questions at all. The participants, especially the administrators, seemed to ignore their personal self in favor for their professional self: refusing to answer a question or relying on the importance of following the policy as it is legally required. The teachers were more vocal, but their words were connotative and revealed more ambiguous language; Steinbeck reiterated the importance for him to be seen as an educator first before being seen as a gay man.

For educators in the study, working in the Midwest District during the policy, made them feel vulnerable. Lasky (2005) demonstrated that a sense of vulnerability in teachers impact their teacher professional identity and whether they feel openness; the more vulnerable a teacher can be, the more agency they would feel. If the participants felt they could not vulnerable it would create feelings of powerlessness, impacting their sense of agency which would develop into cognitive dissonance (Lasky, 2005). Britzman (2003) speaks to the continuous discourse of educators between the authoritative discourse and the internally persuasive discourse; the authoritative is received, static knowledge like the canon of knowledge (e.g. "word of the father") while internally persuasive discourse is subversive in nature and as such is denied all privilege. It pulls away from all norms (Britzman, 2003, p. 42).

This conflicting discourse mirrors the dissonance defined by Festinger's (1957) research and how people, in this case teachers, act to lessen the discomfort resulting from the conflict (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). The participants demonstrated their vulnerability in both acknowledging their conflict and in remaining silent about their conflicts (Britzman, 2003). The discussed their personal conflict and how they negotiated the dissonance demonstrating aspects of the "Induced Compliance Paradigm" when receiving information differing from personal beliefs (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). All participants found ways to accept, reinterpret, or the Midwest District's preferred name/pronoun policy to fit within their own personal schema. The educators within the elementary schools relied upon the age of the students and the reality that they have not had any conflicts regarding the policy; when Shelley did have an experience, he joyfully referenced a loophole available to not have to "out" the student. The secondary educators had three responses all within the paradigm. One, William Faulkner, misinterpreted the policy; I first thought he misremembered the event but believed he remembered it in a way that was positive as he viewed the event in a positive moment as preferred names were now discussed. F. Scott Fitzgerald focused on the policy, but his go-around was to give students full disclosure on the consequences before they decided to start using a preferred name/pronoun formally. And Robert Frost, he spoke out against the policy; he refused the information.

Despite acknowledging missteps made by the Midwest District and ways it can improve its professional development, for the most part the participants ended their interviews with a sense of hope and belief that public schools not only in this District but perhaps in the state and nation would improve as they have seen such growth from their own lived experiences living as educators within the LGBTQIA2S+ community.

Research Question

Research Question One: How were the participants affected by the Midwest District's policies and procedures regarding the LGBTQIA2S+ community?

The teachers spoke to a general feeling of support and respect when discussing their tenure in the Midwest District. When the preferred name/pronoun policy was enacted, however, they all discussed how the Midwest District's lack of clarity caused confusion among teachers and parents which resulted in the frustration they felt. Frost described how the Midwest District's stance on discriminatory actions made him feel:

And that made me feel unwelcome because, I mean, in the acronym that you were using at the beginning in your statement, like we are all one community, and I may not be transgender or nonbinary, but I can still relate to those people because of the discrimination that we have faced together.

Frost understood the intersectionality of identity in that he recognized the similarity in his oppression to those like him – transgender/nonbinary. While not exactly the intersection that Crenshaw defined (Crenshaw, 1991), it was the recognition of his connection to others within the LGBTQIA2S+ community beyond his own identity that was important. Countering the silence many in the LGBTQIA2S+ experience due fear of job security (Smith-Silverman, 2020), Frost's voice was unburdened. He was not returning to the Midwest District and was no longer inhibited – strong with agency, power, voice.

The lack of professionalism that the teachers felt was demonstrated through its quick enactment with no forethought and clarity in the procedures on the part of the Midwest District seemed to undermine the sense of ease that the teachers normally felt creating a sense of vulnerability and possible defenselessness (Lasky, 2005). While no teacher spoke of specific

acts of hate, they all spoke of feeling on edge in wondering how their staff would respond to the ideas of preferred names/pronouns. Frost spoke of his unease: “It’s made me very angry. I’ve had many days, just thinking about it, where I am sitting at my desk shaking with rage at how they could treat human beings like that.” Some teachers wondered if the context itself, the policy and procedure, would provide the opportunity for others to be insensitive or discriminatory. Steinbeck recalled, “[I]t was a ripe opportunity for people to crack jokes or to you know be silly about it.” The sense of unease reflected the trepidation experiences when facing information that conflicts personal beliefs (Induced Compliance Paradigm). The teachers spoke to realizing that the “ripe opportunity” for their colleagues would present them with information that would conflict with the already believed information that their colleagues were good and kind people. In the interview, the teachers expressed fear of having to face that possible moment of cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). They unknowingly spoke to not being ready to reimagine colleagues in a new light.

Referencing Meyer (2003) and Meyer & Ouellett (2009) in their manuscript, “Experiences of educators who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual” (Simons, Hahn, Pope, Russell, 2021), the authors speak to the result of employers’ policies that are monolithic. For LGBTQIA2S+ educators where policies may create an environment where safety may subconsciously be questioned the ability to share experiences with other sexual minority teachers may become quieted which undermines the sense of self: “For educators who identify as LGB, navigating the complex nature of one’s own unique identity and additional work identity leads to attempts to balance personal and professional selves in congruent and incongruent ways” (Simons, Hahn, Pope, Russell, 2021, p. 2). The answers the teachers provided reflect both the lack of community to share experiences but perhaps the building of two selves (personal and

professional) that allows for the ability of two realities to exist: the ability to feel respected and accepted but to also feel that there are moments ripe for discrimination, to see the lack of professionalism and effort to understand and clarify for the needs of LGBTQIA2S+ students safety and own sense of selves (Britzman, 2003). Frost attempting to create community to impact change: “I tried to speak out against the policy by having meetings with our union representative, as well as the head of HR of the districts; however, our union rep was very understanding but our head of HR was not and didn’t seem to care to see my point of view and seem to only care about the parents.” Neither Faulkner nor Steinbeck spoke of community save their circle of colleagues that have always been supportive and accepting. None of the three educators spoke to a support group of other LGBTQIA2S+ educators that provide support and a sense of agency to impact change or protection outside the union. It surprised me as historically the union and LGBTQIA2S+ groups have had strong connections and purpose (Blount, 2005; Smith-Silverman, 2020).

A greater sense of incongruence is seen in the responses from the administrators. They all spoke to the Midwest District purposeful choices in hiring administrators that were LGBTQIA2S+ and how it was a sign of the Midwest District’s support for the community and diversity. However, cognitive dissonance exists in being asked to enact policies that counter the personal beliefs of the administrators but also, in some cases, will force the administrators to “out” a closeted student (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). As Harmon-Jones and Mills (2019) suggested, the administrators reframed the perceived information to a supportive policy that puts the power in students’ hands. When asked about the conflict, all participants responded by referencing litigation and the importance of following the policy despite their own convictions. Eventually, the two elementary administrators spoke to being happy that they not had to deal

with those situations due to the ages of their students. The ability to keep their heads down and focus on the work seem to reflect what Simons et al. referenced as coping “by using silence and working harder to overcompensate for perceived flaws” (Simons, Hahn, Pope, Russel, 2021, p. 2) in that the administrators keep to the policies/procedures and do not allow perceived biases to call into question their integrity and/or work ethic which leads to “multiple identities within one’s self, leading to stress and conflict” (Simons, Hahn, Pope, Russel, 2021, p. 2) and unintended effect of the Midwest District’s policies.

Hemingway demonstrated this when he expressed understanding “liability and things” and soon admits that it “take[s] away the opportunity for school to be the safe space for a child.” He also acknowledged not having had to deal with this type of situation yet so simply didn’t want to address the question: “That would be really difficult for me, I think, to. I honestly probably don’t know enough what those policies are because I haven’t come face to face with them. But having not had the experience, I don’t want to speak on it.” However, when consider the idea of agency/power in both feminism and in Britzman’s work on teacher agency, silence has been used purposefully in acts of power as well if it is choice and not due to restriction (Britzman, 2003). Hemingway expressed this power when he refused to answer a question because of his lack of experience; however, during the interview, based on his background, I felt it was an answerable question. His silence was a political one. He may not have intended it to be one. But in that moment, he demonstrated he was vulnerable – powerless. Perhaps being “‘forced’ to act in ways that are inconsistent with [his] core beliefs and values” (Lasky, 2005, p. 901). I believe his reticence is a lack of experience but perhaps the difficulty of being pushed into a position of enacting a policy that inherently makes him question his own sense of ethics –

a real difficult dilemma. A realization of loss of agency/voice and power – (Britzman, 2003; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019).

Shelley and Fitzgerald gave the Midwest District praise for its hiring practice of more LGBTQIA2S+ administrators and its apparent desire for diversity. Shelley was honest in the conflicted answers provided by the Midwest District and, despite the need for “tough conversations” referenced the appreciation for legal support:

I do remember that at first, we were not – we were told that we will not be outing students to their parents. And then after guidance from KSB attorneys, we were told we if a student did want their name to be a different name, and correct me, from a different name or pronoun than they were, you know, born identified, as I guess you’d say, but that we would have to talk to parents about that. So that was, that was a really tough conversation. And I feel fortunate that I haven’t had to do that, you know, out a student because that would feel really difficult, But, but I’m glad they are giving us guidance.

Despite Shelley’s gratitude, there were moments of conflict reflected in his response: the change in the Midwest District’s assurance, the “tough conversation,” feeling fortunate, and having to follow the policy would be “really difficult.” These descriptions revealed his experienced cognitive dissonance between the presented information and his own values (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). As Shelley’s values were tested the greater the dissonance is felt (Orta & Camgoz, 2011) which may be why he could not mask those emotive words behind the optimism he was trying to convey.

Fitzgerald also focused on the policy and how it protected students. He, however, is the only administrator to question the alignment of the policy to the Midwest District's values and acknowledge his own intersectionality of identity as a person of color (Crenshaw, 1991). Fitzgerald's intersectional identity may also allow for his comfort in being uncomfortable. If cognitive dissonance could occur in a dialogic between authoritative and internally persuasive discourse, perhaps an intersectional identity relies on an internally persuasive discourse as his identity is already subversive, pulls away from the norms, is denied all privilege (Britzman, 2003, p. 42). In this moment, Fitzgerald demonstrated this unique conflict/overlap of intersectionality. Later in the interview he spoke to the impact of that identity:

I think it's just natural when you do not align to the majority, and people don't always necessarily know that unless you are a minority. So, not feeling like I have to be better than everybody else. But, and that's just who I am, personally, is just never wanting to fail or, you know, making sure I am doing the right thing. You know, not just by my beliefs, but, you know, policy procedures. Because of, you know, being a minority just knowing that people don't agree or is open as you would hope. [. . .] It's just, you know, you know, you're in a room and you look around for people that look like you, or connect to your same beliefs and values, and when there's not as many, it's tough, but that's not at all who I am. And I don't ever want people to just put me in that box either.

The impact has created unintended conflict in Fitzgerald that he will work harder to support the policies/procedures of the Midwest District while dealing with the multiple identities felt and the resulting stress (Simons, Hahn, Pope, Russel, 2021, p. 2).

Research Questions Two: How did the participants perceive the Midwest District's espoused values as aligning to its policies?

Most of the teachers wanted to see the Midwest District's values as aligning their policies. They felt respected and accepted in their respective buildings and during their tenure. However, in their critical evaluation of how the Midwest District enacted their policies, they reached the same conclusion. The Midwest District seemed unprofessional in how they communicated their expectations in the "roll out" and that their lack of consistent, clear communication caused frustration and confusion among the staff and families. In their world, one more thing on teachers' plates and the feeling of consternation is tantamount to disrespect.

Faulkner spoke to the parents' confusion and anger, "The parents were not happy that they weren't being communicated." He further explained that the biggest confusion expressed when the policy/procedures were first explained was that staff thought parents were to be informed: "I would say the biggest point of confusion or concern was maybe the fact that parents had to be informed if a student expressed that they wanted to go by a different name." He continued by stating that there is still confusion on how parents/students can access information on how to inform schools about preferred names and pronouns: "I do wish that it was more openly communicated like hey, this is an option that you have if you would like to do this." However, he couldn't speak to how the policies aligned with the Midwest District's values. Faulkner did not reflect on the nondiscrimination statements. He mentioned the trainings teachers received, but did not reflect on how they relate to the preferred name/pronoun policies. Faulkner's limited response seemed to stem from his being in his formative years in teaching (six years) and may still be creating his teaching identity in which he is suppressing his "self" and still developing the person he is not (Britzman, 2003). His responses focused on his own lived

experiences growing up nearby and how positive it was. Those experiences influenced his perspective: no critical responses – only positivity. The other possibility regarding his answers would be the opposite. He felt too vulnerable, is unsafe, (Lasky, 2005) and so masked his answers in positivity.

Steinbeck did not directly state that the lack of clarity rested in a lack of knowledge in LGBTQIA2S+ culture or even an intolerance, he connected the Midwest District's problems with discomfort in dealing with a politicized topic and allowing families' own beliefs about homosexuality and transgenders to influence policy/procedures rather than being consistent regarding nondiscriminatory statements: "just our, you know, our HR policies, whatever, that we can't discriminate." Steinbeck then spoke to the idea that LGBTQ is politicized and polarizing. In that moment, he began to reflect some of the intersectionality discussed in Crenshaw's work (1991) and the duality of identities expressed in Anzaldúa's work (1987); there's a sense of oppression against the sense of heteronormativity and a surrendering to another sense of oppression – but whose? Steinbeck acknowledged: "I think that being LGBTQ has become so politicized. And I think that it's very, I mean, it's very polarizing, you know. There are people that are very, very against it still [. . .] I think it becomes difficult when you're looking at from like the district's perspective [. . .] Do you have, you know, someone up there basically saying, 'Being gay is okay,' or you know, like, because it is so polarizing." As a gay man, would the answer not be, yes? This was an interesting conflict. Steinbeck then reflected on the intersectionality when he stated: "I'm a white male, so who knows."

To Frost, that "discomfort," extended to creating a hostile environment in which he felt he was no longer welcomed and predicted the current political climate in which the government pronounced two genders – attempting to erase the existence of transgender/nonbinary people all

together (Title 3 – The President – Defending women, 2025). He foretold a future where transgender/nonbinary students would be segregated as school systems would find them too taxing on to accommodate: “I think that the people who are in positions of power believe that this is something that, sexual identities, are something “spreads” something that can be stopped. [. . .] So we need to put them into a separate facility.” Perhaps more telling is while the teachers generally felt respected/accepted during their time working in the Midwest District, only Frost actively fought and protested the preferred name/pronoun policy. Seeing the potential danger the policy posed for his students and without worry of repercussions, he spoke to both the union representative and the executive director of human resources. The others did not, and I believe it is out of a sense of self-preservation and double-blindness: “[E]ducators generally have been inclined to keep sexual identity *private* in order to avoid both exposure to deep-seated prejudice in school communities and dismissal” (Graves, 2018, p. 454).

Steinbeck and Frost also held great capacity of agency, power, and voice. Steinbeck’s sense of teacher identity rests in his years of experience and credibility within the Midwest District and has built his own authoritative discourse (Britzman, 2003). Frost’s agency, power, and voice rested in his acknowledgement of the intersection of identities (race and gender) and his own internally persuasive discourse as the subversive, rebel, who was pulling away from the Midwest District in not returning the following year (Britzman, 2003). Because of their own sense of voice/power, they spoke with truth and seeming void of the dissonance of their contemporaries. Their answers were full and acknowledged the realities of LGBTQIA2S+ in public schools today and the scary possibilities of the future – a definite alignment of values to the policies.

The administrative participants demonstrated similar responses as the teachers. As the spoke of the Midwest District's concerted effort in diversifying its administrative team through hiring administrators from the LGBTQIA2S+ community, they also disclosed personal discomfort in having "tough conversations" that the policy/procedures required and that it required them to, at times, act against their personal beliefs – Induced Compliance Paradigm (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). The administrators responded with the same double bind and cognitive dissonance in which they cannot see how these two truths conflict with each other.

Hemingway's perception highlighted his cognitive dissonance. Unable to answer the question, Hemingway circled the question demonstrating his discomfort and inability to resolve the conflict and his own sense of professional identity; Lasky asserted that this identity was malleable to school policy/reform and evolves over time (Lasky, 2005, p. 901). Perhaps Hemingway, faced with conflict between knowing and being (Britzman, 2003) as a leader and a gay man, quote revealed an attempt to rationalize the dissonance to a resolution (Orta & Camgoz, 2011):

So the way the policy is written now, and the way I understand it, if a child wants to go by that preferred name and pronoun, we cannot, you know, we have to use that all the time around whomever if we call home, calling them by that name. [. . .] Kind of as an additional safety measure, I suppose. Which kind of stinks because then they're not going to get to go by there. If they're not safe at home, then they additionally can't be going by that name and pronoun at school. Yeah.

Shelley perceived the Midwest District's values aligning to their policies as lacking. Perhaps feeling adequately vulnerable (Lasky, 2005), he credited the Midwest District for their hiring of LGBTQIA2S+ leaders and expressed hope for continued growth in the future, and then

reflected on his current concern regarding a teacher in his school: “But just knowing the experience of one of my teachers at my school, who is nonbinary, and some of the things she has gone through with our previous administration; it does make me worry that it would just take a lot more understanding, like to get to the point of like, loving and respecting and all people [do] that.”

Fitzgerald, as an administrator who identified within another minority group, pointed out the discrepancy between the Midwest District’s nondiscriminatory statements and the hidden policy that allows parents to remove their students from classrooms with an LGBTQIA2S+ instructor. I believe his intersectional identity has cemented a sense of agency and power in speaking to the conflict of values seen in the Midwest District as he is seated within a community that has consistently fought for civil rights (Lasky, 2005). Fitzgerald pointed out how this practice would not be supported if a parent requested a student be removed due to the race of the teacher:

At what point you know, politely, you know, talk to that parent, that is our Board policy, we’re not going to discriminate, like, you know, with parents Asking, I don’t want my child in that class, like at what point? Do we I guess For the adults, do we draw the line and say, We’re not going to tolerate that As discrimination kind of thing.

This perception of the Midwest District’s conflict between its values and practice undermines the culture of acceptance and respect that both groups of participants espouse. I believe it was his intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) that allowed Fitzgerald specifically to see the incongruence between the Midwest District nondiscrimination statements and its hidden policy that administrators have been asked to employ. Michele Kahn and Paul C. Gorski reminded

educators (administrators and teachers) that this type of double speak has an impact on the school environment and is meant to maintain a gendered and heteronormative culture:

It is important to remember, as well, that we cannot mitigate oppression away by, for instance, ignoring these cultural norms and putting Safe space stickers on the office doors of teachers who are attempting to create a welcoming environment for LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students and colleagues or offering anti-bullying professional development.

(Kahn, M., Gorski, P.C., 2016, p. 28)

In Fitzgerald's questioning and Shelley's subsequent examples in which these types of parent requests were granted, we see how the Midwest District, despite its nondiscriminatory claim, is in fact undermining their LGBTQIA2S+ staff.

Implications for Practice

During the beginning of my research study, I would have anticipated that the implications would include the need of more professional development within the scope of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion beyond the purview of racial justice (racial diversity) or economic justice. As the administrative participants stated in their interviews, professional development at both the administrative and educator level that included LGBTQ+ topics and issues public school systems. This movement towards understanding left three of the participants feeling positive about the Midwest District's growth and desire to become more inclusive regarding the topic. Is the Midwest District an anomaly in the United States? Perhaps.

Any possible growth towards positive change in the Midwest District, however, will most likely be halted due the flurry of Executive Orders enacted by President Trump in the first few weeks of his presidency in January 2025. When he signed his executive order on January 21,

2025, “Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity,” President Trump terminated the ability for any DEI training to occur as the resource itself would be dismantled: “Terminate all “diversity,” “equity,” “equitable decision-making,” “equitable deployment of financial and technical assistance,” “advancing equity,” and like mandates, requirements, programs, or activities, as appropriate” (Ending Illegal Discrimination, 2025, p. 2); in Section 5 of the order, President Trump speaks to coordination of the Attorney General and the Secretary of Education to review State and local educational agencies who receive federal monies and their use of DEI. Dismantling offices and programs that encourage and support DEI hinders the hopeful progress that the participants in the Midwest District was hoping to see continue and may make them feel more vulnerable.

In President Trump’s other Executive Order signed on January 29, 2025, “Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 School,” Trump continues to restrict any progress districts had made in making their LGBTQIA2S+ faculty feel accepted, welcomed, or valued by attacking public school educators. Alluding to his executive order, “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government” signed on January 20, 2025, that defined the existence of two genders (Title 3 – The President, 2025), Trump suggested that it was public school educators that used their influence to persuade or convince students to become transgender or nonbinary (Ending Radical Indoctrination, 2025). Connecting to the same fear mongering seen by past politician against homosexual educators (Blount, 2005), Trump states that schools and teachers have been: “steering students toward surgical and chemical mutation without parental consent or involvement.” Such language begins to fuel a seemingly already antagonist relationship between parents and teachers. The administrators in the study spoke to experiences in which they were expected to move students from an LGBTQ+

teacher to a cisgender/ heterosexual teacher. As the President and his constituents continue with this type of inflammatory language, will the LGBTQIA2S+ educators continue to feel respected and supported as they have in the past?

What the executive orders do accomplish is halt any progress. In the Midwest District, the discussion of differing types of families and parents was just beginning. One participant spoke how he was viewed as an educator first, and a few participants acknowledged the need to understand other forms of gender expression to include what it looks like at the elementary level to how to support adolescents who may not have safe homes. Now those discussions may be soon ending or may be considered subversive and illegal: “The Attorney General shall coordinate with State attorneys general and local district attorneys in their efforts to enforce the law and file appropriate actions against K-12 teachers and school officials who violate the law by: (i) sexually exploiting minors; (ii) unlawfully practicing medicine [. . .]; or, (iii) otherwise unlawfully facilitating the social transition of a minor student” (Ending Radical Indoctrination, 2025, p. 7-8).

I had hoped the implication for practice would be that taking care of teachers who may become the administrative team is one way that this district has built a sense of respect within the LGBTQIA2S+ educators/administrators who participated. Despite isolated instances in which they may have felt discriminated against or felt the need to protect their own “truths” from students/parents, they perceive the Midwest District as living to its espoused values. As educators and leaders, they were ready to learn more about other gender expressions and support their students, but the new political environment, the recent Executive Orders, and the possible dismantling of the Department of Education, leaves many public schools, including the Midwest District, paused in regard to its DEI training, its policies for transgender/nonbinary students, and

its future in general. While the country waits to see if the executive orders are contested in court, or if the new election cycle changes Congress or Senate, school systems like the Midwest District will have to find new ways to serve its community – perhaps less effectively.

Limitations of Study

In her essay, “‘Gay Teachers Fight Back!’: Rank-and File- Gay and Lesbian Teachers’ Activism against the Briggs Initiative,” Sara Smith Silverman (2020) speaks to the historical influence the LGBTQ community had on education – so much so that she contends that teaching is defined as “queer work” – a work environment that employs a high percentage of LGBTQIA2S+ people that the career is sought after as being a “safe” place for the community. Documenting key cases and the advocacy that gay/lesbian teachers undertook to not only stay in the classroom but receive equal protections, Silverman also shares the resulting fears experienced by LGBTQIA2S+ educators:

Queer people often felt (and continue to feel) silenced at work, fearing that coming out will threaten their job security or lead to alienation at work. Hiding an essential part of one’s identity and personal life can have devastating psychological consequences, particularly in cases where antidiscrimination is combined with allegations that an individual represents a threat to children, as is the case for teachers. (Silverman, 2020, p. 106).

This fear and silence became a limitation for the study. I found the teachers and administrators to be enthusiastic to participate in the study when we spoke in personal informally; however, when I sent the informed consent form, they became more hesitant and fearful.

I saw hesitancy with the teacher participants. I found it difficult to set up appointments with teachers. A couple missed scheduled times and needed to be rescheduled, and while their answers were honest and open, the two returning teachers tried their best to not be overly critical. The youngest teacher did not answer beyond the surface level of the questions; I could not get an answer that was reflective or pushed beyond his personal experience growing up near the Midwest District. When I asked if they knew others who would be interested in participating in the study, they all knew of others who would be eager to participate and then gave no names or contact information. In the end, I believe their fear became silence.

The administrators were fearful. One of the administrators agreed to participate and then was incredibly concerned about his anonymity and needed reassurance that his contribution would not be traced. His interview was short with underdeveloped answers, and his usual enthusiasm had turned into a formal, stiff interaction with a lot of “Ma’ams.” It was a disappointing interview. The other administrators fear revealed itself in their request in interviewing together. I believe they felt safer together, and when one answered a question that was a bit difficult, it allowed the other the option to simply agree and not reveal his own perceptions. At first as I surprised by their fear as all three administrators live very non-closeted lives, are married, and have children, but I do acknowledge the fear of retribution especially as protection for administrator who have yearly contracts without due process in the Midwest District and nebulous protections in the United States (Kahn, M., Gorski, P.C., 2016).

Despite these limitations, I believe that the participants provided useful and insightful information regarding their perceptions of the Midwest District’s values and how it aligns to the policies/procedures and the impact (intended or unintended) it has on the LGBTQIA2S+ staff

that enacts it. While facing fear and the instinct to be silent, they participated and spoke their truth.

Recommendations for Further Research

One area of further research will have to be the impact of President Trump's Executive Orders on public schools like the Midwest District regarding its treatment of LGBTQIA2S+ educators. Do nondiscriminatory statements that include sex go away? Does the allowance of preferred names stop? Pronouns? Will clubs like the Gay, Straight, Alliance (GSA) no longer be allowed to exist in schools? Will professional development no longer speak of the needs of LGBTQIA2S+ staff and students? Will there be no protections against harassment and bullying for LGBTQIA2S+ staff and students? The impact of these orders and the decisions made by states have the potential to create toxic environments for staff and students. What will be the impact on staff and students? Will there be a mass exodus of instructors? What impact will that have on public schools are facing teacher shortages already? How long would it take for school systems to recover?

Another area that would be of interest is to examine the impact on students and their mental health – especially transgender/nonbinary students. Current legislature made interviewing students in the Midwest District quite difficult; it would be even more difficult if questioning students' sexual orientation and gender identity. I think it would be of interest to examine how LGBTQIA2S+ teachers impact LGBTQIA2S+ students and how public school's policies/procedures impact the students own sense of belonging and self. Most school district, the Midwest District for certain, pride themselves for keeping what's best for students in the forefront of all decisions. My question would echo Frost's statement in his interview: all

students? Or do school districts build cultures and make decisions with only gendered-norm and heteronormative students in mind?

Summary

A study of three teachers and three administrators answering how they perceived the Midwest District's espoused values aligned with its policies and how they were affected by the Midwest District's policies/procedures regarding the LGBTQIA2S+ community. Feminist/critical theory regarding voice, agency, and power helped examine their experiences and how they shared their experiences highlighting moments of silence and fear. Narrative analysis gave space for participants to share their perspectives in their own voice; the goal is to undermine the Midwest District's "unintended" goal "to keep the sensibilities of dominant social groups focused on the experiences of those groups" (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1259-60). Both teachers and administrators reflected on seeing conflicts between the Midwest District's values and its policies which made them confused, frustrated, fearful, and undermined perhaps feeling the message affirming gender-normed, heteronormative expectations. This research pushes our understanding the complex impact of policies/procedures relating to LGBTQIA2S+ community has on staff – which are more complex than I believe the Midwest District considered. And as the President establishes the binary in gender, referenced teachers as indoctrinating students and encouraging transitioning genders, and removed DEI, the sense of safety and fear for these educators should be at the forefront of school system's thoughts.

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Appendix A - Interview Protocol and Questions

Appendix E: Interview Protocol and Questions

Purpose: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. The purpose of my research is to examine the impact of discourse during teacher training and exposure to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professional development/training on educators within the LGBTQ2S+ community and on their overall feelings of protection/support and connectivity to the educational community.

Your participation and insights will be pivotal in providing a voice and context to experiences that may be unfamiliar to those unfamiliar lived experiences outside the binary/heteronormative mindsets and the impact that “teacher lounge” conversations may have on their peers.

Interview Protocols: I have allotted 60 minutes for the interview. The information presented in the interview, in correlation with other interviews, to determine any similar or unique situations, feelings, or insights that speaks to a general experience to some within the LGBTQ2S+ community in the district and their sense of protection/support and connectivity in relation to the district’s DEI policies/procedures and training. Here are the norms for the interview:

1. Your experiences and thoughts are welcome. You will not be interrupted.
2. Please feel free to take a break if needed.
3. If there is a question you do not wish to answer, you may pass.
4. There are no right or wrong answers.
5. Your identity and name will be protected, and you will remain anonymous within my research.

Questions:

1. Tell me a little about yourself, your job title, and years at the position you currently serve.
2. What is the district’s program in creating a culture that is inclusive to all staff/students – specifically those who are transgender and nonbinary? Has it been effective? If so, how?
3. How did instructors and support staff receive the district’s Diversity and Inclusion policy? Was there any reaction?
4. How do you believe the district’s procedures align with the values espoused in its policies?
5. How do you believe the district’s policies and procedures impact its LGBTQ2S+ staff/students?
6. When staff is presented with DEI policies/procedures/trainings, are there conversations regarding LGBTQ2S+ topics (local and/or national) that are insensitive or discriminatory in nature? If so, how does that impact your educational/teaching community?

Closing: Thank you for your participation and willingness to share your insight and perspective. If you have any questions or remember something you wish to share, you can contact me at: lctorres@ksu.edu.

Appendix B - IRB Informed Consent Form: Educators (p. 1)

IRB Informed Consent Template Form		→ Page 2	
PROJECT TITLE:			
Breaking Heteronormativity in a Midwest District: Impact of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Policies and Procedures on LGBTQIA2S+ Educators			
PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:	2/19/2024	PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:	2/19/2026
		LENGTH OF STUDY:	1.5 hours
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:			
Dr. Eileen Wertzberger			
CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):			
Lisa C. Torres-Wigton			
CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:			
lctorres@ksu.edu 785.375.4092			
IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:			
Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.			
PROJECT SPONSOR:			
Kansas State University			
PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:			
The case study is focusing on the lived experience of the LGBTQIA2S+ educators and administrators within the Midwest County District and the impact they experience when issues regarding subjects like preferred names/pronoun use, anti-bullying policies, and the resulting discussions occur. The qualitative case study focuses on the period (academic year 2020-2021) when the Kansas, Midwest County District enacted the policy in its schools, the following district professional development, and the final decision to rescind the procedure requiring schools to inform parents of a student's preferred name. The study continues into academic school year, 2021-2022, as the policy continues to impact its faculty and, while modified, preferred name procedure remains like the previous year.			
PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:			
You will be participating in a Zoom interview that should last 45-60 minutes. A week before our scheduled interview, you will receive the informed consent form via email. It will be sent through your personal email. The interview will be recorded. Before the recording we will establish a pseudonym to be used to avoid the use of your legal name. The recording will only be audio – no video recording will be taken. A transcript will be made from the interview and a coding analysis will be collected the material. Before the coding begins, you will have an opportunity to review the transcript to add/modify anything and to ascertain that any identifying markers has been eliminated.			
RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:			
There are some risks and/or discomfort that you may experience in participating in this research study. Some questions may ask you to share some personal or sensitive information. You may feel some discomfort from a sense of invasion of your privacy, of your subject, or family. You may experience a sense of social or economic risk.			
BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:			
One expected benefit is the resulting reflection districts would undergo in the types of discourse undergone, when discussing gender identity and sexual orientation, and the impact these discussions have upon their faculty within the LGBTQIA+ community. An already vulnerable community, these educators and administrators face even more scrutiny and perhaps unintended bias/homophobia during the post-district initiatives that focuses on policies like how to do deal with "preferred names."			

Appendix C - IRB Informed Consent Form: Educator (p. 2)

The second benefit is to demonstrate that these types of conversations are not issues left to bigger states or districts. These are conversations to be had in Kansas, in smaller districts, in rural communities as all faculty members deserve to be protected in the workplace and to feel that they are a valued, respected member of the learning community and the community at large.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

Audio only (no video) will be included with Zoom during interviews. Participants will be given pseudonyms before recordings to prohibit legal names from being used during the interview and kept on a separate file from the recording. The transcripts will be reviewed for any identifying markers in order for them to be removed. Afterwards, participants will be given the opportunity to examine the transcript to review and/or modify any answers.

The information or biospecimens collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS? ☐ Yes ☒ No

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant).

PARTICIPANT NAME:

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:

WITNESS TO SIGNATURE:
(PROJECT STAFF)

DATE:

DATE:

Appendix D - IRB Informed Consent Form: Administrator (p. 1)

IRB Informed Consent Template Form

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Page 2

PROJECT TITLE:

Breaking Heteronormativity in a Midwest District: Impact of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Policies and Procedures on LGBTQIA2S+ Educators

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:

2/19/2024

PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:

2/19/2026

LENGTH OF STUDY:

1.5 hours

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Dr. Eileen Wertzberger

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):

Lisa C. Torres-Wigton

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:

ltorres@ksu.edu
785.375.4092

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:

Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

PROJECT SPONSOR:

Kansas State University

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The case study is focusing on the lived experience of the LGBTQIA2S+ educators and administrators within the Midwest County District and the impact they experience when issues regarding subjects like preferred names/pronoun use, anti-bullying policies, and the resulting discussions occur. The qualitative case study focuses on the period (academic year 2020-2021) when the Kansas, Midwest County District enacted the policy in its schools, the following district professional development, and the final decision to rescind the procedure requiring schools to inform parents of a student's preferred name. The study continues into academic school year, 2021-2022, as the policy continues to impact its faculty and, while modified, preferred name procedure remains like the previous year.

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RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

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BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

One expected benefit is the resulting reflection districts would undergo in the types of discourse undergone, when discussing gender identity and sexual orientation, and the impact these discussions have upon their faculty within the LGBTQIA+ community. An already vulnerable community, these educators and administrators face even more scrutiny and perhaps unintended bias/homophobia during the post-district initiatives that focuses on policies like how to do deal with "preferred names."

Appendix E - IRB Informed Consent Form: Administrator (p. 2)

The second benefit is to demonstrate that these types of conversations are not issues left to bigger states or districts. These are conversations to be had in Kansas, in smaller districts, in rural communities as all faculty members deserve to be protected in the workplace and to feel that they are a valued, respected member of the learning community and the community at large.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

Audio only (no video) will be included with Zoom during interviews. Participants will be given pseudonyms before recordings to prohibit legal names from being used during the interview and kept on a separate file from the recording. The transcripts will be reviewed for any identifying markers in order for them to be removed. Afterwards, participants will be given the opportunity to examine the transcript to review and/or modify any answers.

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Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

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PARTICIPANT NAME:

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:

WITNESS TO SIGNATURE:
(PROJECT STAFF)

DATE:

DATE: