

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of Education

**“I HAD TO LEAD A HIDDEN LIFE IN SOME WAY”:
IDENTITIES OF LGBT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS**

A Dissertation in

Curriculum and Instruction

by

Allison K. Kootsikas

© 2011 Allison K. Kootsikas

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2011

The dissertation of Allison K. Kootsikas was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Kimberly Powell
Assistant Professor of Education and Art Education
Dissertation Advisor
Chair of Committee

Stephanie Serriere
Assistant Professor of Education

Jeanine Staples
Assistant Professor of Education

Margaret Lorah
Assistant Professor of Counselor Education

Glendon Blume
Professor of Education
Graduate Program Coordinator

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School

ABSTRACT

This study focused on identities of six LGBT elementary school teachers in Southern City, USA, a metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. Specifically, it focused on how these teachers perceive themselves in schools that represents societal norms of gender and heterosexuality. This study examined how LGBT elementary school teachers presented themselves to students and parents, as well as other school faculty, administrators, and staff and the implications that were incurred due to their choices. A series of three interviews were completed with the study participants. These interviews discussed their life history, details of their experiences, and reflection on their practices. The data analysis was framed in performativity and positioning theory in order to examine the participants positioned themselves in relation to storied contexts and also to examine how they were able to shift their identities in various contexts.

Narratives were crafted from the participants' interviews in order to place the findings in context of their lived experiences. The four main themes that emerged from the interview data were those of the shifting identities based on context, the use of language to position the self in relation to context and to manage identities, private versus public identity management, and the subversive nature of religion in the schools.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------|
| List of Figures..... | vii |
| List of Tables..... | viii |
| Acknowledgements..... | ix |
| Chapter 1 Introduction..... | 1 |
| Prologue..... | 1 |
| Are you a boy or a girl?..... | 3 |
| Purpose of the Study..... | 6 |
| Research Questions..... | 7 |
| Chapter 2 Background and Review of the Literature..... | 8 |
| Justification for the Study..... | 8 |
| Theoretical Framework..... | 10 |
| Performativity..... | 10 |
| Positioning Theory..... | 13 |
| Historical Expectations of Teachers..... | 19 |
| Symbol of Teacher as Discourse..... | 20 |
| Examination of Males versus Females..... | 21 |
| Looks/Presentation/Appearance..... | 21 |
| Danger Narrative..... | 22 |
| LGBT Teacher Identity..... | 24 |
| Passing..... | 26 |
| Conclusion..... | 28 |
| Chapter 3 Methodology..... | 29 |
| Research Design..... | 29 |
| Sample..... | 31 |
| Context of the Study..... | 35 |
| Interview Methods..... | 37 |
| Research Questions..... | 38 |
| Data Analysis..... | 39 |
| Validity..... | 43 |
| Conclusion..... | 44 |
| Chapter 4 “Alright God I’m gay. What are you going to do about it?: MJ’s Story..... | 46 |
| Early Life and Coming Out..... | 46 |
| Outward Bound Experiences..... | 53 |
| Teaching Experiences..... | 59 |
| Vision for the Future..... | 75 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter 5 “It becomes clarity in that I am at peace with myself.”: Carter’s Story | 79 |
| Early Life and Coming Out | 79 |
| Teaching Experiences | 80 |
| Vision for the Future..... | 87 |
| | |
| Chapter 6 “I’m much more comfortable with don’t ask, don’t tell at school.”: Jamie’s Story..... | 91 |
| Early Life and Coming Out | 91 |
| Teaching Experiences | 94 |
| Vision for the Future..... | 101 |
| | |
| Chapter 7 “I want people to accept me for who I am.”: Ansley’s Story | 103 |
| Early Life and Coming Out | 104 |
| Teaching Experiences | 107 |
| Vision for the Future..... | 123 |
| | |
| Chapter 8 “I had to lead a hidden life in some way.”: Mary’s Story..... | 126 |
| Early Life and Coming Out | 126 |
| Teaching Experiences | 132 |
| Vision for the Future..... | 138 |
| | |
| Chapter 9 “When I’m on my time, I’m not a teacher, I’m a person.”: Susan’s Story..... | 143 |
| Early Life and Coming Out | 145 |
| Teaching Experiences | 149 |
| Vision for the Future..... | 164 |
| | |
| Chapter 10 Findings and Discussion | 169 |
| Shifting Identities Based on Context and Storylines | 172 |
| Sexual identity and gender identity | 172 |
| Positioning others based on perceived identities | 177 |
| Stereotypes | 178 |
| Teacher identity | 179 |
| Positioning selves as role models | 183 |
| <i>Students in schools seeking out LGBT teachers</i> | 184 |
| Working with students | 185 |
| Using Language to Position the Self | 187 |
| Changing names and pronouns | 187 |
| Insider language with others | 190 |
| Changing the subject..... | 191 |
| Silence..... | 192 |
| LGBT topics in the classroom | 195 |
| Public versus Private Identity Management | 198 |

| | |
|---|---------|
| The role of relationships in being out | 201 |
| Contradictions | 205 |
| Subversive Nature of Religion in Schools..... | 208 |
| Religion in the schools..... | 209 |
| Religion in the participants' lives | 212 |
| Chapter 11 Strengths, Limitations, and Implications | 217 |
| Strengths | 217 |
| Limitations | 218 |
| Implications | 220 |
| Implications for professional development..... | 220 |
| Implications for teachers..... | 220 |
| Implications for policy..... | 221 |
| What does it mean to me now?..... | 222 |
| Final Comments..... | 223 |
| References | 224 |
| Appendix A Definition of Terms | 233 |
| Appendix B Interview Questions | 235 |
| Appendix C Recruitment Letter | 236 |
| Appendix D Informed Consent | 237 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|---|-----|
| Figure 10.1: Overview of Themes and Sub-Themes..... | 171 |
|---|-----|

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|---|----|
| Table 3.1: Participant Information..... | 34 |
|---|----|

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is a point I have been looking forward to for five years, thanking everyone who helped me along my journey to completing my dissertation. Now that I am here, it is hard to put into words the gratitude I feel towards everyone in my life who helped me get to this point.

First of all, I would like to thank my committee, Drs. Kimberly Powell, Jeanine Staples, Stephanie Serriere, and Peggy Lorah. Dr. Powell was always patient with me as I came to her with a hodgepodge of ideas about where I wanted to go next in my study. Her patience was tremendous as she allowed me to explore different areas to learn for myself whether or not it would fit for what I was doing. She encouraged me to explore and learn on my own, which made me a better-rounded student because I learned so much about phenomenology and narrative inquiry. Thanks to Dr. Staples for allowing me to drop in on her in her office to see how things were going and her constant encouragement. I also want to thank Dr. Serriere for helping me think about identities in a new way, expanding my definition beyond the singular conception of it. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Lorah for always reminding me to breathe.

I would also like to thank my parents Bill and Sandy, my sisters Alana, Deanna, and Stephanie, and my grandmothers Maggie Foster and Georgia Kootsikis for their love, support, and patience as I kept moving my graduation date for a few years as I navigated this process. This is the final date!

I have countless friends who have helped to get me through this process. First of all, I'd like to thank Julianne Guillard-Patton and the SSWG for countless readings of my drafts and encouragement when I was not sure where I was going next with my study. I also have to thank Ryan Guillard-Patton as we became the three monks finishing up our dissertations. Friday night dinners helped get me through this. I would also like to thank Blaire Willson Toso for all of her valuable feedback and taking time for coffee breaks with me.

I would not have gotten to where I am without the love, support, and encouragement of my wife Liz. It is nearly impossible to put into words how much her love and support mean to me. She was always there to push me when I needed the extra kick, to stand back and let me muddle through when I needed to, and to be a sounding board as I tried to work out my ideas. This study developed out of our nightly talks on the back porch as the sun was setting above us. I also have to thank our son Marshall, whose impending birth gave me a push to finish my writing, but whose birth also brought new meaning and purpose to my life.

Finally, I would like to thank my participants for opening up their lives and sharing their stories with me. I hope this study helps to start in opening up some closet doors that exist in elementary schools, making them more open and safer places for LGBT teachers and students. I am indebted to your openness and kindness.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Prologue

Before starting graduate school, I was a third grade teacher for six years in Chambers County¹, just outside of Southern City, USA. It was a Title 1 school and the students and staff in the school were predominantly African-American. Towards the end of my third year of teaching, I came out to my family, my friends, and myself. I also came out to one teacher with whom I was close at the school. When I came out to my dad, he warned me to be careful about coming out at school because he was worried about me losing my job. Later that year, I was outed to some staff members by another teacher who assumed I was gay. I could not believe she would do that, but the other teachers said nothing to me about it. It was still kept silent. After that, I slowly came out to other teachers on my grade level, but never to my students or their parents. I would not keep a picture of my partner on my desk out of fear someone would ask who it was. I would tell students I was not married and did not have a boyfriend when they asked, feeling like I had to lie to them because I could not share that piece of my life with them. When my partner and I became engaged, I could not share it with the entire staff like the other heterosexual teachers were able to do. It felt stifling at times.

I came into graduate school wanting to research urban education and as I progressed through my program, decided to focus in on preparing teachers for urban settings. I completed my comprehensive exams and moved onto my proposal, trying to come up with ideas about what I wanted to write my dissertation about. The problem

¹ Names of places and participants have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

was, I could not find one area to focus in on. There were concepts that were interesting to me, but nothing that really grabbed my attention; there was nothing I was truly passionate about. Throughout my graduate school coursework, I wrote papers on LGBT students, identities of drag kings, and teacher identity of marginalized teachers. I always thought this type of work could be a side project for me.

In the spring of 2009, I heard about the suicides of Jaheem Herrera and Carl Walker-Hoover, both 11 years old, both committed suicide after being bullied for their perceived sexual identity. These students were fifth graders. I could not understand what was going on in the schools where it was possible for bullying to get so extreme that children decided it was easier to kill themselves than to tolerate that type of torture from their classmates. That summer, I spent two weeks in Philadelphia as a graduate assistant for an immersion course in urban education settings with second-year education students. On our final day there, one of the students called us from her school placement because a 7th grade girl killed herself after her girlfriend broke up with her. Although this was not related to bullying, it was still a tragic loss.

That was the last day of our course, and we were heading back to State College. I chose to drive my van back without any of the students as passengers so I could be alone with my thoughts. I cried the entire way home. I cried for the youth who were being so tormented that they thought suicide was the only way out. As I pulled into Happy Valley, I thought to myself, “What *aren't* we doing as educators that these children are taking their own lives?” This was the turning point for me in my research and after talking with my wife one night on the back porch, decided that I *had* to do something and could not

let my interest in LGBT students and teachers just be a side project. This was the start of my work with LGBT elementary school teachers.

Two years later, the news reports start to break. Asher Brown, 13, Seth Walsh, 13, Billy Lucas, 15, Tyler Clemente, 17, all victims of bullying for perceived sexual identities, all committed suicide. There was also the 2008 murder of Lawrence King, 14, by a 14-year-old classmate because Lawrence had a crush on him. The discourse it is not acceptable to be gay is still running rampant in the schools and society. The cycle has continued and the cycle needs to be broken. Perhaps it is possible to start in elementary schools while the students are young and teach them compassion, acceptance, and empathy for others. Maybe if we can make it safer for LGBT teachers to be out and visible in elementary schools, breaking the discourses of what it means to be “normal” as an elementary school teacher. If LGBT elementary school teachers are able to be out in the school and classroom, they can alter the normative discourses that pervade these contexts. This will signal to students that diverse lifestyles, orientations, subjectivities, and voices although different from their own experiences, are valid ways others experience the world, expanding their vision of what is acceptable.

Are you a boy or a girl?

I was recently sitting in a first grade classroom observing student teachers and was being asked questions by three students who were sitting near me in the classroom, two boys and one girl. They were asking me questions such as: “Who are you?” “ Why are you here?” “Are you Ms. P’s teacher?” and finally, “Are you a boy or a girl?” It is not the first time I have been asked about my gender by students in elementary school classrooms, both as a teacher and a supervisor. Usually I just answer I am a girl, the

students give me weird looks like I might be confused, and we move on. This time however, the two male students disagreed with me, while the female student agreed I was female. “No, you are a boy,” was the answer I received from the boys. This time, I asked them why they thought I was a boy. Their response, “Because you wear boy shoes, boy pants, a boy shirt, a boy watch, and have short hair.” I asked if it was ok for girls to wear these types of clothes and to have short hair. They were not too sure about whether this was ok or not, and they went on with their science lesson.

During this line of questioning one of the male students kept looking at my chest and then back to my face with a confused look on his face. His look seemed to say, “If she said she was a girl, why am I having trouble finding the physical signs on her body that would confirm that?” To these students, gender is based on physical features, either you look like a girl, so you are a girl, or you look like a boy, so you are a boy. They are not sure where to put those of us who might identify as female, but present as more masculine. The students never really did accept my answer that I was a girl and we left it at that.

As I have grown and had the opportunity to come out as queer in my personal life, and later, my professional life at the university level, I have also started to question, from my own experiences, why teachers at the elementary school level are not able to be open and out about their sexual identity. It is seemingly more acceptable for teachers at the middle and high school levels to be open about their sexuality, but not at the elementary levels (Bliss & Harris, 1998). There is a limited amount of literature focusing on gay and lesbian elementary school teachers and much of the literature that does focus on elementary school teachers is in a setting outside of the United States (Cushman, 2005;

DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). We are living in a time where gay marriage is beginning to be recognized in some states, while it is being constitutionally banned in others, where people can lose their jobs just because their sexual identities. Heterosexuality is privileged within the walls of schools and classrooms across the United States. It is the unquestioned norm. What happens when this norm is disrupted? Is it possible to break down teacher identity to being simply in or out of the closet, or do we need to take into account the negotiating of the closet door by these teachers and what is entailed in that process (Jackson, 2007)?

Schools across the United States at the elementary, middle, and high school levels contain teachers who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender (LGBT). But whether the teachers choose to or are able to come out about their sexuality, or not, is a different story. Stories about LGBT teachers in the schools have been written (Jennings, 2005; Woog, 1996) and as a closeted elementary school teacher, I cherished these writings, because even though I did not know the people whose essays I was reading, I was connected to them because of our shared commonality of being LGBT elementary school teachers. At that time, I was not concerned about the grade levels the teachers in the essays were teaching. I was happy to know there were other teachers in schools who were gay, even if we had to remain closeted to protect our jobs. I worked with two other men who were also gay, one who was more open about it than the other, because of his fear of not being able to be promoted within the school district. The three of us, however, were not out to students or parents. Looking back, I still wonder what would have happened if I were to come out, but still believe negative consequences would have been incurred by coming out to our students and their parents.

As I talked to people about my dissertation topic, they offered to connect me to people they knew for my interviews. They always asked the same question though, “Does it have to be elementary school teachers? I don’t know any gay elementary school teachers, but I do know middle and high school teachers who are gay.” Why did so many people know middle and high school teachers who were gay, but not anyone at the elementary level? There are LGBT elementary school teachers. I was one. I had friends who were. Where then, are these teachers? Why do we not hear anything about them? Why did people have difficulty connecting me to these teachers? Why do other straight teachers not know of many gay elementary school teachers? How many gay and lesbian elementary school teachers have to go back into the closet when they walk through the front doors of their schools? My own experiences as a closeted, lesbian elementary school teacher in the southern United States led me to think about the difficulties that other LGBT teachers might face by being public with their identity.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the identities of LGBT elementary school teachers in Southern City, USA, a metropolitan city in the southeastern United States. The study was situated there because of the conservative nature of the schools and because of its location within the Bible Belt, where homosexuality I examined the levels of performance, otherness, and framing around gender and heterosexuality that potentially occur with how LGBT elementary teachers might present themselves to students and parents, as well as other school faculty, administrators, and staff and the implications that might be incurred due to their choices. This study is important because much of the research that has been previously done has centered on gay and lesbian

middle and high school teachers as well as their experiences with LGBT topics in their classrooms and does not focus specifically on elementary school teachers (Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma, & Hemingway, 2008; Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; Ferfolja, 2007; Jackson, 2006; Jackson, 2009; Khyatt, 1992; Resenbrink, 1996).

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study are about the experiences of gay and lesbian elementary school teachers. The questions are: a) What are teachers' perceptions of their experiences as gay and lesbian elementary school teachers? b) What does it mean to the participant to be a gay or lesbian elementary school teacher? c) How does the participant make sense of his/her identity as a gay or lesbian teacher? and d) How do the school settings frame their experiences as a gay or lesbian teacher?

Chapter 2

Background and Review of the Literature

Justification for the Study

Much of the LGBT literature that exists centers on gay and lesbian middle and high school teachers, as well as on their experiences with LGBT topics within the classroom (Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma, & Hemingway, 2008; Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; Ferfolja, 2007; Jackson, 2006; Jackson, 2009; Khayatt, 1992; Rensenbrink, 1996). Khayatt (2006) argues that a teacher's sexuality has no place in the classroom, but every time heterosexual teachers talk about their spouses, sexuality is present. I am not referring to sexual acts, but instead to the reference to the gender of the person they are dating or married to. The primary difference is that heterosexuality is the norm and is not questioned, but when homosexuality is introduced, it is reduced to a sexual level that is not directly implied in heterosexual relationships (Jackson, 2006). If a same-sex reference is made, assumptions about the sexual acts that may occur between these two people are forefronted, not the relationship that exists between two people of the same gender. This disrupts the notion of an asexual teacher (King, 2004), making LGBT identities more problematic for those who do not identify as heterosexual. Further, there are few empirical studies pertaining to LGBT teachers (Duke, 2008). Some have argued this might be because of the taboo nature of the topic, as well as it not being as valued within heteronormative research (Allan et al., 2008; Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; Duke, 2008). Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma, and Hemingway (2008) note LGBT teacher identities are not usually discussed in school contexts. Heterosexual teacher identities are discussed when they discuss their spouses or whom they are dating,

because it is a societal norm. These social references that hint at identities are treated differently when they are discussed. When people speak about heterosexual identities, they are desexualized and when it is spoken about, it is usually in the comfort of the teachers' lounge, out of earshot of the students. For LGBT teachers, identity is oftentimes sexualized, which is vastly different from their heterosexual colleagues (Jackson, 2006). Teachers who identify as LGBT must self-regulate in order to remain closeted, in a sense, actively policing their own identities (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009). This self-regulation can be enacted through dress, language, or how they present themselves to others.

Although studies exist that include LGBT elementary school teachers, the elementary teacher populations are oftentimes grouped in with middle and high school teachers (Jackson, 2006; Jackson, 2009). Many studies also choose to focus exclusively on primarily gay or primarily lesbian teachers, not combining the different populations (Ferfolja, 2007; Khayatt, 1992; Rensenbrink, 1996). Much of the research on primary school teachers has also occurred outside of the United States, providing further support for the need for this type of research to be done in the United States (Allan et al., 2008; Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; Ferfolja, 2007; Khayatt, 1992).

Queer theory and post structuralism as well as feminism informed this study. The theories include Butler's (2004; 2006) notions of performativity and identity and positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Slocum, 2003; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). Queer theory seeks to disrupt the naturalized categories of gender and sexuality. The power structures at play within elementary schools, however, do not always allow for this disruption to occur. Elementary school teachers are expected to fit

a particular role of teacher and act it out on a daily basis. I was interested in gay and lesbian elementary school teachers' performances of gender and heterosexuality, so I employed Butler's notions of performativity and identity. Included in this is Butler's heteronormative matrix (2006), as well as the role of individuals' subjectivities. I also use positioning theory in my study (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Slocum, 2003; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). I begin with a discussion of the theory that informed my study. Next, I discuss the historical notions of teaching, as well as the expected roles of teachers. From there, I move into chapter two, a review of the literature on gay and lesbian teachers. Chapter three explores the methodology used in this study. Chapter four contains the participants' full narratives in order to situate my findings within the context of their experiences. In chapter five, the findings and discussion of the study are shared. Finally, in chapter six, limitations and implications of the study are discussed.

Theoretical Framework

To approach this study, I employed queer, poststructuralist, and feminist theories. A queer theoretical framework, perceives "gender and sexual identities as unstable performances, constantly mediated by relations of power and open to the possibility of change" (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 4). These identities are constantly shifting and are not fixed entities. I begin with a discussion of these theories that inform my study. I then discuss the historical notions of teaching, as well as the expected roles of teachers. From there, I move into a review of the literature on gay and lesbian teachers.

Performativity. Individuals who perform the role of teacher are constantly constructing and reconstructing what it means to perform this role properly. Students in classrooms across the United States watch their teachers on any given day of the school

year, looking for them to perform the proper role of what it means to be a teacher.

Teachers are performing this role and inscribing this discourse within themselves as well as to their students on a daily basis through the repeated acts of “being” a teacher. This role usually reflects that of a White, heterosexual woman (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). For these teachers, their personal lives mirror their professional lives (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006). Typically, these White teachers do not have a view of the world outside of their own life experiences (Sleeter, 2001). They do not see social change as needing to address the structural inequalities that exist (Su, 1996, 1997 as cited in Sleeter, 2001). Sleeter’s work is framed in the context of preparing White, women teachers to work in urban settings and the role of multicultural classes and field experiences, but it can be applied to expanding notions of gender and sexuality as well. Not all teachers fit this particularly raced, gendered, and sexualized role. Teachers outside of the normative role of teacher need to decide which performance is proper to present to students, parents, and school staff. They need to decide which parts of their identity needs to be given up or hidden in order to properly perform the traditional, widely accepted role of teacher.

Butler (2004) views gender as performative. According to Butler (2006), a subject is constructed in discourse by the repeated acts it performs. These repeated acts are what define and construct the accepted notions of gender and sexuality. Because gender norms are reproduced through repeated action, they can be altered and challenged. By labeling a person female or male, and their actions as traditionally feminine or masculine, the idea of gender is perpetuated and thus the performance of gender is

enabled. It is these performative acts that have acquired meaning through their repetition (Levitt & Hiestand, 2004).

Butler (2006) also discusses the notion of the heterosexual matrix. The heterosexual matrix was developed as a way to “designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized” (p. 208). Bodies become gendered through conforming to naturalized ideas of what it means to be male or female and the heterosexual matrix leads to the normalization of heterosexuality and gendered norms (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Butler, 2006). Butler further defines the heterosexual matrix as:

A hegemonic discursive/epistemological model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (Butler, 2006, p. 208).

In other words, bodies are supposed to subscribe to notions of what it means to be male and female as defined by normalized, heterosexual practices. For people who identify as homosexual and for those who do not fit what is expected from gender binaries, the heterosexual matrix is being disrupted, making room for more than one expression of gender and what it means to be male or female and to act within those roles.

Furthermore, Butler (2006) defines gender as a verb. In this usage of it, it is something that has to be done and from that sense, gender is being performed. Gender expressions then, are the results of doing gender (Butler, 2006).

Complicating this performance of teacher is the layer of sexuality that exists around LGBT teachers. The normative sexual identity of teacher, whether male or female, is heterosexual. When teachers do not identify as heterosexual, there is another layer of performance that must occur. If they are not out, they must either remain silent, not making any references to their sexuality or pass as heterosexual (Griffin, 1991; Khayatt, 1992).

Typically, school personnel, students, and parents are not comfortable with those who do not fit the prescribed role of teacher (Jackson, 2007). They can be ostracized and face backlash from those around them because they do not fit the normative role of how a teacher should act or look. This role is that of a White, heterosexual woman, the traditional image of an elementary school teacher (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005; Sleeter, 2001). Day, Kington, Stobart, and Sammons (2006) argue that the “events and experiences in the personal lives of teachers are intimately linked to the performance of their professional roles” (p. 603). This may be true for those who identify as White, heterosexual women, but what about those who do not fit these categories of identity? For those who do not fit the role of what a teacher needs to look like and how they need to act, their personal and professional lives are oftentimes kept quite separate. The role of teacher is one that has been established over time. This institutionalized expectation of what a teacher should be is the role LGBT teachers step into, oftentimes putting them back into the closet when they enter the school setting in order for them to perform their role of teacher.

Positioning Theory. “The act of positioning refers to the assignment of fluid ‘parts’ or ‘roles’ to speakers in the discursive construction of personal stories that make a

person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts" (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999, p. 17). Within schools, LGBT teachers' roles as heterosexual individuals are constructed through what is *not* said. LGBT teachers are not able to openly discuss their significant others or what they did over the weekend as their colleagues are. They might be passing as straight or remain silent, as to not call attention to themselves and their identities. Thus, LGBT teachers who are not able to come out to their colleagues are positioning themselves as straight within the stories being constructed within the school walls, by choosing not to speak about their lives or by disguising their significant others as friends or roommates. Outside of these walls, the stories may be differently constructed as the teacher being an LGBT individual. These stories are not fixed and shift depending on the context they are being constructed.

This performance of heterosexuality falls under moral and personal positioning as defined by van Langenhove and Harré (1999). When people are positioning themselves in different institutions and contexts, they use moral and personal positioning because they take into account the moral orders that exist within these situations. Within schools, the moral order rests on the role of the heterosexual teacher who performs the roles of gender and teacher appropriately. This means they do not deviate from the expectations of how a teacher should look or act.

As LGBT teachers negotiate their identities within a classroom, they are participating in stories about their identities in order to conform to expectations.

An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. Accordingly,

who one is, is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we makes sense of our own and others' lives. (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46)

When LGBT teachers participate in discussions with their colleagues about what happened over the weekend and allow the colleagues to assume they were with heterosexual partners, instead of their own same-sexed partners, they are participating in this reconstitution of their identity, as the teachers they work with perceive them as straight.

In relation to Davies and Harré's (1990) positioning theory, Butler's theory of performativity can come into play. Davies and Harré discuss the construction of people through conversation and how their discourses shift based on the discussion and with whom it is enacted. "They may conform because they do not define themselves as having choice, but feel angry or oppressed or affronted or some combination of these" (p. 50). Butler (2006) also posits subjects are constructed in discourse through the acts they perform. Performativity and positioning theory both stress the importance of discourse and stories in the construction of identity. Both theories discuss individuals' subjectivities and both recognize that subjectivities can shift from one situation to the next. The different positioning taken up by individuals in any given event becomes a part of the individuals' subjectivities (Davies, 1992). This allows for individuals to be constructed through multiple discourses that they can take up as their own for given events and settings (Davies, 1992).

Performativity and positioning theory are also different from each other. Butler's notions of performativity are rooted in the performance of specific, repeated acts of the body people engage in. Performativity is more specifically focused on gender and heteronormative acts than are Harré and Davies. Positioning theory is more focused on the conversations people use to position themselves in particular discourses. These conversations shift depending on the context the person is in and with whom they are speaking. Using both of these theories together will allow me to take both the acts and language the participants in my study into account as I analyze my data and listen to their stories.

The historical use of discourse in positioning theory is also important to consider. "If we want to talk about 'sexism' or 'ageism' in the use of language, what we are talking about is the highlighting of certain past conversations as morally unacceptable exemplars for talking and writing now" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 44). It can also be argued this extends to the discussions existing around homosexuality. It is still an acceptable practice to many people to discriminate based on sex, age, or sexual orientation. These discourses, while being challenged, are not yet shifting and are set up in binaries of opposition, consisting of good versus bad (Harré & Slocum, 2003). Davies and Harré (1990) continue,

Acquisition of who we take ourselves to be involves: Learning the categories which include some people and exclude others, participating in the various discursive practices through which meanings are allocated to these categories, positioning of self in terms of the categories and story lines, recognition of oneself

as having the characteristics that locate oneself in a member of various sub classes of dichotomous categories and not of others. (p. 47)

In schools, this can mean taking on the discourse of straight teachers who conform to expected gender norms. LGBT teachers make these negotiations when they perform gender and heterosexuality within the walls of their schools.

Schools are discursive spaces and this also adds to the complexity of existing discourses. Gruenewald (2003) discusses the foundations of place and five dimensions of place: a) perceptual, b) sociological, c) ideological, d) political, and e) ecological (p. 623). The different dimensions interact with each other and define schools as spaces that are pedagogical. The sociological dimension of space discusses the social space of school as socially constructed and as a product of our culture. People act as place makers and as a result places are an artifact of their culture. Lives are not lived in isolation. People interact with places and as a result, that relationship between people and place help to form who they are (Gruenewald, 2003).

Along with the sociological dimension of space is the ideological dimension of space. Gruenewald (2003) also sees space as a reproduction of power relations because space contains the politics of those who occupy that space and their particular ideologies. Spaces are products of the social formations that exist within them. In the case of schools, not only is the school as a space important, but also the geographic location because of the different political ideologies attached to the spaces.

When discussing sexualities, heterosexual orientations, because they are the norm, are desexualized, whereas homosexual orientations are thought of in more sexual terms (Cavanagh, 2008). Within the heterosexual norm, teachers are also thought of as

desexualized or asexual (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; King, 2004). When discussing LGBT teachers, this norm and concept of teacher as a desexualized or asexualized individual is disrupted. Heterosexuality is the assumed identity of people who appear in a certain way or are perceived in certain ways; as performing the traditional, naturalized roles assigned by society to their projected position, unless they make the choice to come out. If teachers are not able to come out in the classroom due to fear of losing their job or perceptions of administration, colleagues, and parents, they continue to be perceived as heterosexual. Because of this silencing, LGBT teachers are made invisible because they cannot portray their true identities (Allan et al., 2008).

Normative discourses are produced through regulatory practices, as well as punishment (Foucault, 1977). Punishment in schools can exist for those who are dismissed from their jobs because of sexual orientation. Other social consequences can include being socially ostracized or positioned as less than, unworthy, or indecent/unacceptable, which can be just as threatening as job insecurity. It can also exist for those who have to portray themselves in an acceptable manner deemed by those they work with, whether is it in how they dress or present their sexual orientation. They follow the prescribed discourse of what a teacher should be and to deviate from those practices can result in negative effects. Until a recent Supreme Court decision in 2003, Lawrence v. Texas, sodomy was considered an illegal act between two consenting adults (Lawrence et al. v. Texas, 539 U. S. 558, 2003; Sodomy Laws, 2007). In four states, these laws specifically targeted homosexual partners. Under moral turpitude laws, LGBT teachers can be at-risk for losing their jobs based on their sexuality (Griffin, 1991). The state in which this study occurs defines moral turpitude as everything contrary to justice,

honesty, modesty or good morals (Identifying Reference, 2000)². Oftentimes, homosexuality is discussed in terms of morality, leaving this definition open to a wide interpretation. Until recently, it was a felony to engage in homosexual acts; and in some states sexual orientation is not protected in the workplace under the law. Due to the laws that still exist, and without state or federal protection, LGBT teachers may be unwilling to come out due to the fear of losing their jobs.

Historical Expectations of Teachers

The teaching profession has traditionally been seen as women's work because elementary school teachers are expected to be sensitive, emotional, creative, and caring, attributes that are not typically thought of as masculine (King, 2004). This is evident in the number of women who are teachers, especially at the elementary level. In 2005, 75% of K-12 teachers were women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). In elementary schools, this ratio is even more drastic, with 91% of teachers being women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005; Sleeter, 2001).

The morality of teachers has also been controlled because of the image that needs to be presented to the public. In the 1800s, there were strict rules governing the behavior of teachers, including not marrying, being home between the hours of 8 p.m. and 6 a.m., not smoking or drinking, and not keeping company of men other than family members (Evans, 2002; Harbeck, 1997; New Hampshire Historical Society, 2008). These rules were in place because a certain image was to be portrayed by the teachers, that of a proper and prim woman who would not do anything to disgrace her image. This image posited women as asexual beings (King, 2004). Even today, teachers are expected to

² Citation masked to protect location of study.

carry themselves a certain way both inside and outside of school and can be punished if they do not fit the stereotype.

For example, in the state where this study occurred, teachers are held to a set of standards they must follow. These standards make up the code of ethics for educators (Identifying Reference, 2000). Within these standards, educators are not to engage in behaviors that may be detrimental to “health, welfare, discipline, or morals of the students” (Identifying Reference, 2000). To some parents and administrators, having their children taught by gay teachers could morally harm their students (Harbeck, 1997). Teachers are held to different standards than other professions because of their roles in the schools and the lives of students. This moral front becomes a collective representation of what a teacher should be because the stereotypes of what a teacher should be take on a meaning and role of what a teacher should be. The historical expectations of teachers’ behavior has been reiterated through time and because of this, teachers’ expected behaviors still mirror the expectations of the 1800s (Evans 2002). These expectations are the generally accepted moral framework of teachers.

Symbol of Teacher as Discourse

Not only is the moral ideation of teacher controlled by the historical expectations of teachers which still exist today, the symbol of teacher also acts as a discourse that governs the social context of schools, classroom, and one-on-one interactions and dynamics. Teachers are positioned even before they arrive in the school because of the cultural practices already in place within the space of schools. People who occupy spaces contribute to the discourses present within these particular spaces (Gruenewald, 2003). Schools play a role in producing spaces and social contexts and this is partially enacted

through the symbol of teacher. The space of schools is socially constructed and part of this construction exists through the symbol and of teacher (Gruenewald, 2003). The culture of schools is constructed through the role of people as place makers, in this case, the role of teachers as place makers. As teachers continue to work in defining the place of school, they are reproducing human culture and our expectations of what teaching and schooling should look like.

Examination of Males versus Females

Ferfolja (2009) believes it is necessary to place focus only on lesbian teachers and not gay male teachers because of the inherent power differentials that exist between men and women. Masculinity is a privileged position within society, and men have advantages that women do not have (Khayatt, 2006). Ferfolja believes that men, by their gender, inherently have more power and privilege in society than women, even if they identify as gay. While I believe this is an important perspective, I also find it necessary to include the viewpoints of gay male teachers because of their experiences as a part of a marginalized population. In particular, there are a small number of males who are teachers in elementary schools. Because the men are teaching in elementary schools, they may not necessarily have the power and privilege of their peers who teach in middle or high schools. Men who deviate from the expectations of what masculinity means, can be very quickly othered and feminized because they do not represent the gender binary in place.

Looks/Presentation/Appearance

Elementary teachers are also expected to convey a certain look. This stereotypical look might include denim jumpsuits and holiday sweaters. When my pre-

service education students are preparing to enter the classroom for the first time, they discuss buying “teacher clothes” for their first enactment of “teacher.” These first enactments of teacher are ways the pre-service education students are conforming to the normative discourses of teaching. There are educators who do not fit what the norm of what a teacher should look like, whether they dress in gender-deviant ways, have tattoos, or multiple piercings. These teachers are quickly othered for not looking the part of the teacher because tattoos and piercings are not generally welcomed in schools (Colbert, 2008). Teachers who do not conform to the normative discourse of teaching are disrupting it, whether it is a conscious disruption or not.

For male teachers, there is also another layer of presentation that exists. Oftentimes, they are seen as the disciplinarians of the school, who have to perform the role of masculinity (Francis, 2008). If male teachers are nurturing to their students, their masculinities are called into question because they are not representing the gender norms that are expected for males. Teaching is seen as a feminized profession, especially in the elementary grades. For men who choose to teach in an elementary school, they can be perceived as effeminate or less masculine for their choice in grade levels (King, 2004).

Danger Narrative

One of the narratives that exist around LGBT teachers in the classroom is the danger narrative. Parents are concerned about their students being molested by their gay teachers or the gay teachers attempting to “recruit” their students to being gay (King, 2004). The ‘danger narrative’ which is also played in the public is another reason gay teachers may enact the heterosexual front during the school day. The stereotypes of gay teachers posit them as deviant and dangerous and that they may be out to recruit the

children they work with, in a sense, to turn them gay (Cavanagh, 2008; Evans, 2002; King, 2004). This is especially true for male early childhood teachers.

One belief of male early education teachers is they enter the field of education to possibly molest children (Jackson, 2007; King, 2004). Over and over again, they are warned not to be alone in the classroom with a student with the door closed. Although this rule is also conveyed to heterosexual teachers as well, this tactic does contribute to a sense of pathology around homosexuality in public consciousness, reifying the traditional, naturalized role of the young, White, heterosexual woman as “teacher.” Sexuality is pathologized in these scenarios because the fear of sexual predators is the overriding discourse.

A ‘danger narrative’ exists around males in education because teaching is gendered. When males perform the feminine aspects of caring for students, as well as being sensitive towards them, they are stepping outside of their normative gender roles. In the elementary grades, males are expected to be caring towards their students, but if they do so in a physical manner, such as hugs, there can be backlash because of the fear of child molestation. Male teachers are encouraged to not have physical contact with their students because of the fear of sexual abuse. Male teachers have to figure out how to show affection to their students without reinscribing the danger narrative that is portrayed through males showing too much affection (Hansen & Mulholland, 2005). Male teachers are under much greater scrutiny than female teachers about the contact they have with students.

LGBT Teacher Identity

There has been literature written about LGBT educators. Much of the literature, however, is either dated, does not focus specifically on elementary school teachers, does not focus specifically on teacher identity, but also examines how teachers are able to ‘queer the curriculum’ or discuss LGBT topics in classroom settings (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; Dankmeijer, 1993; Griffin, 1991; Jackson, 2006; Jackson, 2009; Rensenbrink, 1996). Another shortcoming in the literature is that the majority of the literature focuses on middle and high school teachers. If studies are completed on K-12 teachers, there are a very small number of elementary level teachers in relation to the number of middle and high school teachers included in the study (Jackson, 2006). This lack of attention to elementary school teachers silences voices that exist, which are voices that need to be heard. Also, if the literature does focus on specifically elementary school teachers, much of it is in European and Australian contexts, and not within schools in the United States (Allan et al., 2008; Ferfolja, 2007).

Ferfolja (2007) examined the experiences of lesbian high school teachers. In her study, Ferfolja examines the silencing that occurs around the teachers’ sexuality and how that marginalized the teachers because of the dominant discourse of heterosexuality that exists within their schools. In this study, lesbians who were previously married to men or had children were able to pass as heterosexual because it was their assumed sexual identity, even if they were involved in same-sex relationships. Ferfolja also recognizes the power in the teachers’ sexualities because it challenges the dominant discourses, even if it is kept quiet because the teachers were exercising their right to privacy.

While there are teachers who bring LGBT-themed material into their elementary classrooms, the teachers themselves are not always out to their students (Allan et al., 2008). When elementary school teachers are able to be out in the school, it is usually within locations that have strict boundaries between students and teachers, such as the teachers' lounge (Allan et al., 2008). Once teachers walk out into the school halls, they immediately become desexualized individuals, who do not have a sexual orientation different from the norm of heterosexuality. Even teachers who identify as heterosexual are considered to be asexual once they enter the school building (King, 2004).

Jackson (2006) found teachers who were able to be out in the classroom were more able to use personal stories as examples in classroom discussions around topics pertaining to LGBT issues. They were also more able and willing to push students' thinking around the status quo and identity. Jackson did find LGBT teachers, whether they were out or not, were able to queer the curriculum, by directing their students to challenge the status quo and open up more space for learning about those who are traditionally othered or marginalized.

Rensenbrink (1996) completed a study with an out, fifth grade teacher who identified as lesbian. This study is rare within the literature because it focuses on an out elementary school teacher. She found the teacher in the study was able to be out because of legal, institutional, and personal support she received. Had she not been legally protected in her job, she would not have been able to come out at her school. Many teachers do not have these types of protection in place. This is especially true for teachers who may live in conservative areas, where the majority of the population does not accept homosexuality and sees it as morally wrong, such as in the Bible Belt or small

towns in the United States. Rensenbrink did find that through the teacher's ability to be out in the classroom, she fostered a safe space in her classroom for her students, was able to question and disrupt the dominant culture and pass that along to her students, and help her students develop the ability to question the world.

Passing

Passing is another theme that exists within the LGBT literature. This is similar to the African-American literature and what Du Bois (1903) refers to as "double consciousness." Within this double consciousness, African-Americans have to bridge the gap between their Black identities and the dominant White, European ideologies. Du Bois suggests that African-American individuals acknowledge both identities in order to bridge this either/or divide. Similar to Du Bois's concept of double consciousness is the idea of passing within the LGBT community. Passing can occur when a person who identifies as LGBT acts within heteronormative discourses as not to out oneself (Griffin, 1991). This can mean that the LGBT individual does not come out of the closet to others, but instead pretends to be heterosexual in order to fit in with the normative discourse. Passing also includes the presentation of gender that is acceptable to those who are the majority. For those who do not subscribe to the traditional notions of gender or who trouble what it means to be masculine or feminine, passing may have to occur in order to fit in with what it means to be traditionally masculine or feminine as not to out themselves in order to protect their LGBT identities and ultimately, their jobs.

Within the double consciousness or passing, it might be possible to "code switch" or change the language one uses in order to pass within a particular group, but also to talk amongst the similar group without detection using insider language, which traces back to

the times of slavery so the slaves were able to talk and joke amongst themselves without detection from the slave owners (Watkins, 1994). Insider language and code switching also occur within the LGBT community within some references to each other, such as “being family,” or by switching names and pronouns of significant others, which will be discussed in chapter ten.

Atkinson and DePalma (2009) define passing as active identity policing because the subjects are knowingly acting within the realms of what is expected for heterosexuality and gender presentation. Ferfolja (2007) does not see having to pass to fit in the normative discourse as a negative thing. She believes when the lesbian teachers chose to pass in the normative discourses, they were exercising their agency and power. Although the teachers in Ferfolja’s study are exercising their agency and power by being able to blend in with the normative discourses, I argue they are doing so at a price. They are giving up a piece of who they are by having to hide their LGBT identities.

Shortcomings exist in the literature on LGBT teachers. One of them is the focus on White, LGBT teachers, even though there are teachers who are ethnic minorities in the classrooms across the United States. More must be done to recruit LGBT teachers of color in studies. Although this may be a difficult task, it is a necessary one. Another shortcoming is the lack of literature focusing on elementary school teachers. Much of the existing literature either folds elementary school teachers in with middle and high school teachers or does not focus on them at all. If more attention is given to LGBT elementary school teachers, perhaps it will start to open the door for them to be able to come out.

This has great implications for the future and anti-LGBT bullying curricula in the schools because there will be more teachers able to be out and open about their identities,

creating a safer space for their students. If teachers are able to be out in the classroom, it will disrupt the normative discourses about gender and heterosexuality and perhaps will shift the norm of what is expected of teachers in their everyday presentation of themselves.

Conclusion

Few studies have been done focusing specifically on LGBT elementary school teachers. Historically, teachers have been expected to portray a particular morally acceptable role and this expectation continues today. This expectation occurs in teachers' portrayal of both gender and sexuality and those who not conform to these expectations are quickly othered and possibly labeled as dangerous to youth. LGBT elementary school teachers need to position themselves within the expected gender norms and within acceptable notions of heterosexuality in order navigate these positions within schools.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Research Design

My study was based on Seidman's (2006) structure for in-depth, phenomenological interviewing. The goal of this interview method is to have the participants reconstruct their experiences pertaining to the topic they are being interviewed about. Seidman (2006) suggests a series of three interviews, including a focused life history, the details of experience the participants' experiences, and reflection on the meaning, which are discussed later in this chapter. Seidman's method of interviewing allows for the discussion of the temporal, personal/social, and place to occur. The interviews encompass the temporal aspects because the interviews trace the participants' experiences through the past and into the present. The interviews also allow for reflection on these experiences.

Within these experiences, place and context are also important. The participants in this study are located within elementary schools, but are also situated within the larger social culture as well. They are teaching within a context of a state that does not protect individuals in their jobs with regards to sexual orientation or gender identity. I am focusing my study on gay and lesbian elementary teachers in Southern City, USA, a metropolitan area in the Southeastern United States. I am doing this because it is the environment I taught in and am most familiar with. I know what it is like to be a lesbian elementary teacher in this area and the perils that exist for us. If I were to interview teachers from other locations, I would not have as thorough of an understanding about the environments they are teaching in.

Seidman's phenomenological approach also emphasizes the lived experiences of the participants (2006). In addition to this phenomenological framework, narrative inquiry is also helpful in framing this study because people's lives occur within specific contexts and cultures during particular and specific points in time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Actions do not occur in isolation, instead, experiences rise from previous experiences and there is a storied context in which they occur (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This study is situated in time and place and includes the interactions that occur in personal and social situations between the actors involved in a particular situation (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In this instance, narrative inquiry is helpful because of the specific context of the teaching environment, as well as political atmosphere in Southern City, U.S.A. The three interview structure allows the participants to reconstruct their lived experiences and also allows them to reflect on how the different experiences impact each other during various locations in time. The use of narrative inquiry also allows the participants to reflect on how the context and place of their lived experiences impact them throughout their lives.

Studies using this phenomenological approach maintain the first-person voices of the research participants because their voices are heard in their entirety. These studies are also autobiographical because of my own experiences as a lesbian elementary school teacher, which are significant for me in conducting this study. I am interested in the experiences of my participants as LGBT elementary school teachers, but my story plays out in this as well. My experiences are central to the framing of this work because the research stemmed from my own experiences as a lesbian elementary school teacher. My

own experiences may or may not be similar to those of the participants, but it gives us a common starting ground.

Research has previously been done in which the researchers belong to the same population as their participants (Berger, 2001; Jackson, 2007; Khayatt, 1992; Sears, 1991; Willick, 2006). In doing qualitative research in which the researcher is a member of the group of participants, it is important to recognize the reflexivity of the researcher. Recognizing this reflexivity is important because the researcher may have biases, understandings, and knowledge an outsider may not have (LaSala, 2009; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). My own experiences as a lesbian elementary school teacher will allow me to reflect on my shared experiences, as well as empathize with and relate to the participants in the study (Jackson, 2007).

I am a member of the population I am studying and because of this, I also have to be aware of biases or assumptions I may bring to the study based on my own experiences. I have to remember that just because we are of the same population does not mean we have all had the same experiences, good or bad. I will have to also make sure participants fully explain themselves, so I do not make incorrect interpretations of their words because I may have had similar experiences or assume I know what they are talking about (Jackson, 2007; LaSala, 2009). I also have to be careful not to project my own feelings about participants' experiences back onto them (LaSala, 2009).

Sample

The participants from this sample were chosen through purposeful sampling. I chose purposeful sampling because "particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that cannot be gotten as well from other

choices” (Maxwell, 2005). For the purpose of this study, the participants were chosen because they were LGBT elementary school teachers and worked in a metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. The population I targeted is small and not easily accessible, and because of this, I drew from people I was familiar with using purposeful sampling and then used snowball sampling to gain more participants. In snowball sampling, the interviewer asks participants for further referrals, who can then in turn give further referrals (Weiss, 1994). Snowball sampling was used because it can be difficult to find LGBT educators to participate in studies, especially if the teachers are not out in their school, but are in their social groups.

There were six teachers who participated in this study. This small amount of participants provided in-depth information without being an overwhelming number of voices. Also, the number of participants was kept smaller because the interviews were more in-depth than they would be if I were to complete a large number of interviews. Context is important in phenomenology (Seidman, 2006) and because of this, I used LGBT elementary school teachers from Southern City, USA because it is where my career as an elementary school teacher occurred. I am familiar with the teaching environment for gay and lesbian teachers in this area. If I did my study in another area of the United States, I would not have had as complete of an understanding of the experiences of those teachers because it is outside of my realm of experience. I am also familiar with the political as well as the social contexts of the area, giving me more insight into the participants’ experiences because I taught in the same contexts.

My representation of participants was made up of four White women, one African-American man, and one participant who identified as gender queer³, who was White. Three of the participants identified as lesbian, one as bisexual, one as gay, and one as gender queer, which allowed her to flow through gender identities. While not specifically a sexual identity, such as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, gender queer is used because the participant does not ascribe to any one label of sexual identity. The participants were between the ages of 29-35. They had been teaching from 2-13 years. Table 3.1 shows the participant information, including age, gender, sexual orientation, teaching experience, grade taught, and teaching location.

³ For a definition of terms, see Appendix A.

Table 3.1 Participant Information

| Name | Age | Gender Identity | Sexual Identity | Race | School District | Grade Taught | Years Taught |
|-------------|------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| MJ | 31 | Gender Queer | Queer | White | Hampton School | After School ages 5-14 | 2 |
| Carter | 35 | Male | Gay | African-American | Franklin County | 5th | 13 |
| Jamie | 33 | Female | Lesbian | White | Dallas County | 5th | 11 |
| Ansley | 29 | Female | Lesbian | White | Capsas County | 5th | 8 |
| Mary | 31 | Female | Bisexual | White | Franklin County | Art | 5 |
| Susan | 31 | Female | Lesbian | White | Casper County | Kindergarten | 10 |

Context of the Study

This study was completed with LGBT elementary school teachers in Southern City, USA, a metropolitan area located in the southeastern United States. This city has a rich history of having an active LGBT community. Prior to the 1970s, gay identities were kept silent and were not publically recognized. Although there were networks of gay men and lesbians, they were kept quiet (Identifying Reference, 2008). Many of the activists who relocated to this city during the late 1960s and 1970s came there because of the active community and political climate of the time (Identifying Reference, 2003). Many of these groups were made up of younger gay and lesbian individuals, bringing a younger gay population to the city. There were many political activists in that area at the time and the LGBT movement was informed by the already existing anti-war movement, the women's movement including women's healthcare and abortion rights, and the struggle for Black liberation.

The city was a relatively tolerant location for LGBT persons in comparison to other cities in the south, but gay bashing was not uncommon during the mid-1970s. Gay and lesbian social networks existed, but were kept quiet. For example, in the 1950s, there were not specific gay bars, but there were areas within bars for people to meet. In the 1970s, gay enclaves began to form within the city, being referenced as gay neighborhoods (Identifying Reference, 2003).

The first gay pride march was organized in 1971 with 125 people in attendance. In 1973, the City announced that there would be no discrimination against LGBT persons in city services. From 1971, the attendance at gay pride in the city grew from 125 people in the first parade to 1,500 marching in 1977 and 3,000 people attending the gay pride

rally. In 2005, the pride rally attracted over 300,000 people. In 1974, the first Feminist bookstore opened and it is still in business today (Identifying Reference, 2011).

Within the LGBT population were sub-communities including the White gay male community, the White lesbian community, the Black gay male community, and the Black lesbian community. In the Black gay community, during the 1970s, there was a great deal of exclusion and marginalization. One example was the exclusion of Black men in bars by requiring triple ID checks for these men. These sub-communities still exist today, with gay pride and Black gay prides. Although there is this divide within the gay community, this divide represents a way for those communities to get their needs met because although the LGBT community as a whole is a marginalized group, there are still people within this group with other identities, some of which are also marginalized, such as race. Having separate groups allows for them to get their needs met outside of the context of just identifying as gay (Identifying Reference, 2003).

Socializing for those who identified as gay occurred in bars and later, churches and other types of community places. In the 1970s, the biggest divide was between the older gay people and the younger gay people. The older community saw it as issues of individual rights and rights that should be protected by the Bill of Rights and the younger LGBT community saw it as identity and shared community. It was just who you were. (Identifying Reference, 2003; 2010).

The city is now one of the most populated cities for LGBT individuals with one of the highest percentages of adults who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Gates, 2006). Although Southern City, USA, where this study occurred is relatively accepting of the LGBT community, it is situated in a state that has constitutionally banned gay marriage

(Human Rights Campaign, 2011). In all but one of the school districts represented in this study, sexual orientation and gender identity are not represented in the districts' non-discrimination policies for teachers (Chambers County School District, 2010; Cullman County School District, 2010; Dallas County School District, 2010; Franklin County School District, 2010)⁴. The school that does include sexual orientation in its non-discrimination policy is a private school (Hampton School, 2010). There are also no protections in place by state law for LGBT students. There are general anti-bullying laws, but nothing that specifically protects for sexual orientation or gender identity (Human Rights Campaign, 2011).

Interview Methods

I based my interview structure on the interviewing methods discussed by Seidman (2006). This interview structure was originally intended for phenomenological studies, but was also be useful to me as I learned about LGBT teacher identities in elementary school settings. It is intended to go in-depth about participants' experiences with the topic using open-ended questions. These open-ended questions allowed for the participants to share their stories within the interview space, but also allowed for me to engage with them and to share my own experiences where appropriate. This interview technique used a series of three separate interview sessions with the participants in order to establish and build off of the context of their lives, which allowed for the interviewer to learn more about the participants' lived experiences because it goes more in-depth than a survey, focus group, or informal interview (Johnson, 2002).

⁴ School district names have been changed to protect the location of the participants.

The three interview sessions were: a) a focused life history, b) the details of experience, and c) reflection on the meaning. During the focused life history interview, the interviewer has the participant discuss their life up until the present time as it pertains to the topic. The second interview focused on the experiences occurring within the present as they pertain to the topic of study. During the third and final interview, the participants reflect on the meaning of their experience, including the intellectual and emotional connections between the participant's life and work (Seidman, 2006).

Seidman (2006) recommends the interviews last ninety minutes each and are spaced three days to a week apart. This allows for the interviews to remain connected to each other without losing the information that has previously been established in the other interviews. This will also allow for the conversations to continue without too much being forgotten by the participant or interviewer and will allow for the interviews to build off of one another. With the exception of one participant, who had two interviews due to a time constraint, each participant took part in three interviews. The interviews ranged from 20 to 60 minutes. Some of the participants were more open and forthcoming than others, explaining the amount of time it took for each interview. For a list of interview questions, see Appendix B.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study are about the experiences of gay and lesbian elementary school teachers. The questions were: a) What are teachers' perceptions of their experiences as gay and lesbian elementary school teachers? b) What does it mean to the participant to be a gay or lesbian elementary school teacher? and c) How does the participant make sense of his/her identity as a gay or lesbian teacher?

Data Analysis

Data analysis was based on Seidman's (2006) methods of analysis. There are two parts to this analysis, thematic analysis and interpretation and crafting of profiles or narratives. First, I transcribed each interview in its entirety using Dragon NaturallySpeaking transcription software. After transcribing the interviews, using Nvivo 8, a qualitative data analysis program, I began to code the data. My initial coding represented words, phrases, and concepts that continually emerged from the data, which had a higher frequency of occurrence. I did not only code for frequency, but also for importance. I based the idea of importance off of each individual participant's interviews. I also included ideas that seemed to have strong impacts on the participants or concepts they had strong reactions about. I also formed these codes as they related to my research questions. From these codes, themes, subthemes, and categories began to emerge. As ideas began to emerge, I organized them around the concepts of queer theory, performativity, and positioning theory. In the end, this allowed me to examine how speech and actions informed each other to allow for the participants to shift their identities in various contexts.

The four main themes that emerged from the interview data were those of the shifting identities based on context, the use of language to position the self in relation to context and to manage identities, private versus public identity management, and the subversive nature of religion in the schools. The shifting identities theme included not only shifting identities related to sexual orientation and gender, but also included how the participants perceived others, as well as stereotypes of how they might be perceived. The participants also discussed themselves and their identities related to being a teacher.

Participants also discussed themselves as wanting to be role models within their schools and how students seemed to seek them out because of the possibility they were gay. The fear of working with students and danger narratives also emerged within the theme of shifting identities.

Within the theme of the use of language to position the self in relation to context and to manage identities, language as a positioning tool is related to the strategies the participants use in masking their LGBT identities at school, including changing partners' names or the pronouns they use, the language they use with others, including changing the subject, and the role of silence with others. The third theme to emerge was that of private versus public identity management. Private identities versus public identities emerged as ways the participants employed to manage their identities. This theme is in regards to how the participants keep the private and public spheres of their lives separate, but also the contradictions that occur within this space. The fourth theme to emerge from the data is the subversive nature of religion in the schools, which includes the role religion plays in the schools the participants teach in, but also the role religion plays in their individual lives.

It is also important for me to tell the participants' stories and to keep them within context, as opposed to breaking them up into thematic chunks. Seidman also allows for analysis to be done in narrative form through the crafting of profiles. These narratives are to be situated in time, place, scene, and plot and allow for the stories to stay intact because it gives the reader a complete picture of the participants' experiences. It also allows the reader the opportunity to see how different events influence and effect the participants throughout their lives and how early events may impact the participants later

on in life (Seidman, 2006). My interview method allows for these components to be examined throughout the interviews. It is also necessary to include a description of the people and places, as well as arguments that allow for understanding the relations of social contexts in which the studies are embedded.

It was important to me to craft the participants' narratives in order to hear their voices across their individual interviews, as well as within and between the different participants' experiences. It was also important the participants' narratives be situated temporally. It is important to understand the time period in which the participants are teaching as well as the role location played in their lives. If I were to only allow the thematic pieces of the participants' narratives to come through, much would be lost, because they were taken out of time and place contexts. In order to understand the participants' experiences, they must be presented in their entirety. I chose to share the narratives before my interpretations so the reader could get a sense of who the participants were and how their lived experiences affected their lives and the roles they enacted as teachers. I wanted the participants' stories to be read in whole in order to honor their experiences as they occurred. If I were to include interpretations in this part of the narrative, it would break up the story, taking away from the individual experiences. Although it was important for me to share the voices and stories of the participants, I also wanted to share the similarities and differences across experiences, and thematically analyzed the data across the participants. In editing the interview transcripts for the narratives, I also interpreted what I deemed to be important and representative of the participants' experiences.

In order to craft the narratives, I identified information that was important by relating it to the research questions of my study, but also included the information of the participants' backgrounds, coming out, current teaching situation, and plans for the future in order to paint a picture of who these people were and how their experiences framed their current identities. Some of the information included in the narratives included information from the participants' pasts and lived experiences that set the context for their thoughts and perceptions now. From there, I crafted the participants' individual narratives, which add rich context to the thematic analysis already completed. This also allows for voices in the margins, which have traditionally been silenced, to be heard. The teachers in this study are able to tell their stories so others can hear what is occurring in their lives and within the schools. The narratives are juxtaposed against each other, allowing the reader to hear the shared experiences across the participants, but to also see where there are differences in their lives. The use of the narratives also situates the analysis of the data and discussion in context, because lived experiences do not occur in isolation from one another.

The participants' narratives are written as individual stories and although each participant took part in three interviews, each narrative is written as one continuous story. The narratives are arranged temporally in order to allow the participants' stories to flow naturally, even if the interviews did not always unfold in a temporal way. Arranging the stories temporally also makes it easier for the reader to follow because the events do not jump around in time. There were instances when information was omitted because it was not pertinent to the narratives or because it was repetitive. These omissions are signified by ellipses. Included at the end of the narratives is a preview of the themes that

run through the stories, which will be discussed further in chapter 10. Brackets around the words indicate information that needed to be clarified or expanded upon from the interviews.

Seidman also stresses the importance of keeping the profiles in the words of the participants, telling their stories in first-person (2006). Because of this, the participants' narratives were presented in their own words. Words such as "um," or "like" were eliminated from the profile because they interfered with the flow of the narrative and were not pertinent to the participants' stories. Other people and places were changed in the crafting of the profiles in order to protect the identities of the participants.

Validity

In order to build validity in my study, I completed three interviews with each of my participants, with the exception of one participant who was only able to participate in two in-depth interviews. These in-depth interviews allowed me to get a thick and rich description of the participants' experiences across the shared experiences of being a LGBT elementary school teacher (Golafshani, 2003). Seidman (2006) also discusses the importance of recognizing that meaning is built through the interaction between the participants and interviewer and how the interviewer can affect the meaning of the interviews because ultimately, it is the interviewer who is interpreting the participants' experiences. In order to account for this, I asked my participants to take part in two rounds of member checks. The first member check was at the completion of the transcription process. At that time, I shared the raw transcriptions with my participants and asked them if there was anything they had questions on, anything I misinterpreted in my transcription, or anything they would like to expound upon. During the second round

of member checks, I asked participants to respond to analysis and discussion of their experiences (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Golafshani, 2003). I also completed a peer review of some of my transcripts in order to see if the coding that my peers saw emerge was similar to mine, which they were (LaSala, 2009).

Data is also validated through the series of three interviews participants participated (Seidman, 2006). The use of three interviews allows the participants to place their lived stories in context. In some cases, situations were discussed more than once, allowing for further validity of their stories and experiences. The interviews were based on memory and experience and because of this, represent the participants' ideas of what occurred during that time.

Another way in which validity was assessed was to look for consistencies between the different interviews. Using the three-part interview structure placed the participants' interviews in context and through that, consistency was established (Seidman, 2006). To further add to the validity, consistencies across the different participants' interviews were identified because they did share some similar experiences. I also looked for negative cases or discrepant evidence in my interviews (Creswell, 1998; Maxwell, 2005). In doing this, I did not expect all experiences to be the same and honored the idea people have different experiences as LGBT elementary school teachers. I also looked for similarities and discrepancies within individual participants' interviews.

Conclusion

This study focused on identities of LGBT elementary school teachers. Specifically, it focused on how these teachers perceive themselves in schools that represent societal norms of gender and heterosexuality. This study examined how LGBT

elementary school teachers construct, reconstruct, and deconstruct themselves in order to accommodate the parameters of the context in which they work as professionals. In addition, I examined how they represented themselves in light of the legal precedents that conform social expectations and prescriptions of a “normal,” “moral” teacher. A series of three interviews were completed with the study participants. These interviews discussed their life history, details of their experiences, and reflection on their practices. These interviews were analyzed using Seidman’s (2006) notions of phenomenology. The data analysis was framed in queer theory, performativity, and positioning theory in order to examine how speech and actions informed each other to allow for the participants to shift their identities in various contexts. I also used this framework when examining the themes that arose from the data.

The upcoming chapters are comprised of the participants’ individual narratives. As previously discussed, each story is arranged temporally, even if the information in the interviews was not presented in this order it is written. Each participant is given their own chapter so their voices and stories can be heard in their entirety, honoring their experiences and also to place the thematic findings in context of the lived experiences.

Chapter 4

“Alright God I’m gay. What are you going to do about it?”

MJ’s Story

MJ and I met and did our interviews over coffee at small coffee shops in the city. Each interview was very relaxed and MJ was very open with her story. MJ has short-cropped brown hair. She would wear polo shirts and khakis, her work clothes, to the interviews because she would go to work after we spoke. Her appearance suggests a more traditionally masculine performance based solely on society’s creation of what masculine and feminine look like.

MJ is 31-years-old, White, and while born biologically female, she identifies as gender queer. She teaches in a private school for students with language-based learning disabilities and is the after-school director there. She works with students between the ages of 5-14. She has been at the school for almost two years. Her experience before that was in AmeriCorps and Outward Bound. MJ is getting ready to start her master’s degree in school counseling in the summer.

Early Life and Coming Out

In order to talk about my sexual identity, I have to talk about my gender identity too. I identify gender queer, if people call me a lesbian, that’s okay, but I don’t feel like a woman all of the time. You know the big queer movement, nobody wants to say lesbian anymore...I knew about being gender queer in the fourth grade. I had no language for that though, no concept of that. I knew in fourth grade and even actually in first grade, but I didn’t think about it until fourth grade, I was the girl chasing the girls around in PE...In the fourth grade, I realized that I couldn’t wait to get the PE everyday because

there were two girls that I loved picking on. One day I looked around and was like, the only people picking on these girls are the boys, they are doing exactly what I'm doing.

I started having dreams where somebody was my girlfriend. I would look over in my dream and be like, that's a girl. What's going on? I was freaking out, and then I think through high school I was aware of this extra thing that I had going on. I was like, "Okay that's there but that was extra I'm sure of it, I'm sure I have a crush on this boy over here," and I would try to have a crush on a guy and I'd be like, "I definitely have a crush on him." Then there'd be this girl over here, who was on the swim team and I'd be thinking about her all the time. I was in love with my best friend. It was awkward...

I was religious, I was a good Presbyterian, a dry Presbyterian, and I came out to God. It was at the end of my senior year on a retreat. I was like, "Alright God I'm gay. What are you going to do about it?" Then when I got to college I got involved in a very conservative Christian group called Intervarsity. I dove in with everything that I had. I completely put it [being gay] away, but at the same time I met this junior in Intervarsity, we made a very intense, emotionally codependent, best friendship, where I was sooo in love with her, and I'm sure she was in love with me...I thought about her first thing when I woke up, I thanked God for her every night before I went to sleep, I lived to see her...

I was closeted all through college, I worked at a conservative Christian camp for three years, fell in love with an engaged woman there, and she fell in love with me. We had a two-year secret affair. She got married and divorced in the process. I withdrew from my Christian community my junior and senior year because of that relationship, because I knew, it was like this really turmoil time where I couldn't stop myself. She was

in another state while I was in Florida. There was just no stopping it. It was like, "No, we can't do this, and blah, blah, blah. Oh, but what about God?"

My religious life made it take me a long time to be okay with myself. I don't think I really let it all go until I was probably 25. I came out when I was 22. I came out to my family and friends because I started dating another woman. It was so pure and amazing and good. I couldn't see how there could be anything bad about it. I couldn't see how God would not like it because it was so spiritual and amazing...

My family is amazing...They all are within 50 minutes of here and I still see them every week. I told my sister first, I said, "I have to tell you something." She said, "You have a boyfriend?" "No." She said, "You have a girlfriend?" "Yeah." "Oh that's great." I told my dad, while we were on a two-week trip in Colorado. I told him in the car. He said, "You know, MJ, I haven't heard you talk about any guys, are you dating someone?" I was like, "Well Dad, I do have somebody special actually and what would you do if I told you it was a woman?" We talked about it; we cried in the car, it was great. I told my mom and we cried. They both said, "I totally love you and totally support you. I'm crying because I can't believe you been going through this, all of your life, and we didn't know." I told him I'd known since fourth grade. They said, "Our little baby was under our roof, but we didn't know she was going through this?" I was like it's okay, it's cool, I managed. Things like, "It breaks my heart because I know the world is not going to be okay with this, or the world is going to be harder for you." I was like cool, but things are hard for everybody at some level. Yeah, I'll have to watch my back a little bit, but that's cool. Even when I told my stepdad, we were going to get ice cream in the neighborhood

and he said, "Get out of the car." I was like, "Okay," and he got out of the car he threw his arms around me and we cried. It's been pretty dreamy, I'm not going to lie...

My family did not have problems with the religious piece after I came out. My dad's not religious, my sister's not religious, so that was a non-issue. My dad is the number one devoted dad in the whole world. All he wants to do is love his daughters and wants us to be happy. I think he had to deal with it in his own way.

If my mom had a process with religion, I don't know about it. She is not one who shares her feelings, she is very loving and everything, but she is completely like, a huge wall. If you ask her what's going on, [in] her heart she says, "Everything is fine." She and my stepdad are Presbyterians. They are pretty socially liberal Presbyterians. Not like super, super liberal, if you met my mom she is very, her values are old Southern values. She wants to be very refined, but she's also amazingly open in a lot of ways. If there was a process, she didn't reveal it to me. It was very soon after that she would buy a book and say, "Look at the book I bought," or really appreciate Christian writers. We would read Anne Lemott at night together. Lemott was great and feminist and irreverent and all these wonderful things. There was a book that one of the Indigo Girls wrote with her dad. My mom and I read that together. I made her an Indigo Girls mix. Actually, Emily Saliers led worship at my mom's church about a month ago. It's a very wealthy, White church, but it's also an alright place. I feel comfortable there. My mom said, "Emily and her dad led worship at my church." My mom and I really connected that way.

I do discuss my gender identity with my parents, which is amazing to me. I started really thinking about it or really using the language in 2006. I had sort of been

isolated at Outward Bound. I lived in Attaway for a winter and got involved with a woman and really sort of broke into the queer community in Attaway. I was hanging out with some folks and there weren't any transgender or gender queer identified people at Outward Bound, but I was hanging out with a lot of transgender folks, folks who were just starting T⁵, so I was really thinking about it and I was having the hardest time reconciling feeling so masculine in a woman's body. It was really hard on intimacy and everything. In 2004 or 2005, I read *Stone Butch Blues*, and I thought, "Ah, I know where I fit in the world, that makes so much sense."

As I started to hang out with that community, I learned the language. I hadn't heard the word gender queer before. I heard it and was like, "Ah, that's how I feel," and having a partner who really supported that, who totally supported my exploration of my gender identity. I wondered if I was trans⁶, I wondered if I would get top surgery⁷, all these kinds of things. It's been in the last four years that I've really been exploring all of that stuff and seeing where I fit in, just being open to it. I feel like when I was in Asheville, there was this big push, like almost this expectation that you're super butch, so you must be trans and you have to get top surgery. I felt like it was this group movement where this person did it, and all of a sudden this person wants to do it, and then this person wants to do it. For a while, I would think maybe I want to do it. Then I stepped back from it and I was like, I don't think I am trans, I'm pretty comfortable gender queer. I don't want to take T. I don't want to pass as man in this world. Well, I like to pass as a

⁵ Testosterone supplements

⁶ transgender

⁷ surgical removal of the breasts

man sometimes, but I don't want my inner workings to change, watching how my friends have changed when they start taking testosterone.

With the parents, I think around that time, around 2007, my mom was visiting me and I was talking about my friend Oliver, who used to be Bridget, who had just gotten top surgery. I know my mom cringed at that a little bit. She was really open to hearing about the gender identity part of it, she was really scared about the surgery part of it. I know she was thinking, "I hope you never do that, my baby going and altering her body." That part would be really hard on all of them I think.

I felt strangely comfortable discussing my gender identity with my parents. My mom asked, "Where do you feel you fit in on this spectrum of gender?" I was like, "Well Mom, thanks for asking." It was a little awkward because my mom is very prim and proper, but I was like you asked so I will tell you. My dad is always asking me where I am on my journey. He asked, "Do you want to talk about...? How are you feeling about...?" My dad helped me tie a full Windsor tie knot. Actually, my stepmom, I went to buy my first suit with my girlfriend a few months ago, my first real suit, and the folks at the store fucked it up and I was really pissed. It was going to be amazing, they didn't tailor half of it. I said, "I called you today," and they said they would do it again and I said "Fuck y'all, give me a refund. I put a lot of money into this." I went to my dad's house that night, and he and my stepmom were there and asked if I got my suit, and I explained what happened. They looked at each other and looked at me, and Judith my stepmom said, "Come here, I want you to put something on. My ex-husband left a lot of his really nice suits here." My dad and my stepmom were putting a suit on me...My dad is getting teary, he said," Go put this tie on, you look so handsome." My stepmom said,

“It's amazing, I'm going to take you to my tailor, we're going to get it done.” They were completely supportive. Sometimes my stepmom will say, "You're the cutest little boy I know." I can't even believe it. I'm so lucky. They are great. I talked with them openly about it. I don't talk about sex with them, that just makes me so uncomfortable. I can talk about the gender identity piece.

My sister is pretty great with my gender identity too. She's three years older. She and I are very different. She will always vote Republican because my dad would...My sister says all I care about is my family. I just want to support my family. I need them to be safe. She's kind of conservative in ways because people tell her stuff and she doesn't really think it through on her own. She is really comfortable with it. I think sometimes things blow her mind a little bit, but she's not like "Don't talk to me, or this is fucked up.” She's like "Okay, cool, alright.” Pretty much anything I tell her blows her mind. She's not getting it from anywhere else. She's very supportive; she's a personal trainer, an aerobics instructor. My girlfriend and I went to her class. We went to her sculpt class and she was like, "Everybody, my sister and her girlfriend are here.” She's very proud. She's fiercely loyal. I think they're all good with it. They'll at least let me know that they're comfortable and they figure it out on their own. They're not putting their process on me, which I've been really thankful for.

Other parts of my identity that I am aware of are my race and that's important to me because it helps me to be more aware of all the ways that I'm privileged and my class. I grew up *very* privileged. I went to Catholic school for high school in Southern City, USA, and I grew up with lots of money and they told me whatever college I wanted to go to, I could. I just expected all of that.

Being aware of all of that helps me to be a better educator, and I think if you ask me what I think the most important responsibility I have as an educator is, it is to be aware of which dominant groups I'm in, which target groups I'm in, and where all of my kids are going to fit in, how to be really on my own journey with that stuff so I can be a better ally to them and see them better. I think any educators who aren't doing that, that's another subject. It just kills me.

Outward Bound Experiences

Outward Bound was the first job that I was out, and I've always looked real gay. It was the first time I talked about it. I went there specifically, I didn't start Outward Bound because I was feeling really passionate about outdoor education, back then, I didn't feel like I was qualified at all, but my best friend said I should come, there are a lot of lesbians here, and you can do logistics, and that's totally fun and easy... When I came back that really appealed to me because I knew there were dykes in the community and I could be really helpful for me through my process. It does seem like a safe place to go, and I really wanted community. I went. I didn't want to be an instructor. I came out in that first season, but it didn't have to be like, "Everyone I'm gay." It was, "Of course you are. You have a pink buzz. Whatever." It took my first two years there. I stayed there so long. I worked there four seasons before I became an instructor, because I didn't have the confidence. I felt like the kids are going to think I was a freak. I was like, I know that I am gifted with children; I know that. Now that I'm out, I completely put all that away. I had no confidence anymore that I even should work with children. All of this internalized shit. I just stayed there because the community felt really safe. I loved them.

I could be super gay, I was the super gay. There were rainbows everywhere, super campy, I just felt really good. I felt really supported. It was actually my first diversity training that I went to in my fourth season when the clouds parted. I didn't know what my drive was anymore, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, and all of a sudden I went to that training and was like, "Oh, I didn't know anything." That was the moment I was like, this is what I want to do. I really want to start my own journey and this is what I want to do for work. This stuff makes sense to me. Learning about racism and learning about classism and all of this stuff. It was like, "Oh my gosh, this is incredible." I found my voice again. I have something to offer. I have something to offer again. I want to be out in the field, I want to be with kids. I want to be planning courses and having a really strong, diversity curriculum. I want to be out...

I was afraid to be an instructor at Outward Bound because I thought that they would say hateful things to me, not listen to me, be scared of me. I would've internalized it at that point. There was a piece of me that thought, is it okay for me to work with children, you know? Should I be their role model as a gay person? I didn't know if it was okay. I hated that I actually thought that... That is my *passion*, working with kids, I love it. It gives me life. I can't believe that for three or four years, I would say I don't like to teach... Yeah that stuff was in my body, sitting here thinking deep down I shouldn't be the one to work with your kids. Like parents are going to be disappointed if they meet me and be like why would I send my child to Outward Bound and have this kind of person with them. I almost believed that stuff. It took four years of everybody at Outward Bound being, "You'd be an amazing instructor." I'd say, "Shut up." [They'd say,] "You'd be great." And then one day somebody said it and I thought oh, maybe.

At that time, there were other out instructors, but most of them can pass. I would also hear that they wouldn't necessarily be out on the course. They would say, "While that is a part of me, that's not important, that's not what I'm doing out there." I just have a different view of it. I find it to be a responsibility to be visible. I'm thinking about all of the queer and questioning kids who are going through courses and this might be the only opportunity for them to have somebody to talk to. I'm thinking about all of the straight kids going through the courses and this might be the only opportunity for them to see this in a positive light and have somebody there in the woods with whom they trust with their safety, their emotional safety and their physical safety. To know that queers aren't these scary, fucked up people...and just because just because, we're all different kinds of people. Why should this be the only thing on the course you're not supposed to talk about? It's so stupid. I knew that some of them were very intentional about being out on [the Outward Bound] course and some of them would say it's not important, which is how the straight people feel too. I don't know any straight instructors who would say "It's so important for me to talk about my girlfriend on the course or to let them know that I'm straight," but some people say it's my business, it's not their business. It's the instruction styles.

There were some [kids] who never said anything but were really always right by my side. I knew [they might be gay]. We didn't have to talk about it. There was this one kid, oh my God, there were two boys, I had this one course that was called a Unity Course and...two boys on the course were both Latino, and both of them almost came out to me. They were the two that would say being gay is an abomination. When we were doing an activity they would be like it's an abomination, and they are crying. I'm having

one-on-ones with them later and one of the boys would never talk. He revealed some painful things to me and he said I have to tell you one more thing, he had this little grin on his face. I said, "You can tell me anything." He wouldn't do it and he never did.

Another kid told me that Satan was whispering in his ear and telling him things, and I had already come out. He was super religious, super Catholic, and he and I sat together for an hour and a half and talked about it. He was like, "I know where you are and that we just have a difference in that. I know you're not going to sit here and try to..." we would just sit and talk. That's my moment. That's the moment when I was like I have to get out of the woods. I can't leave him. I still think about him and my heart breaks. It was this classic case where he's just holding onto his religion so hard. It made me feel like, I really feel like he's gay, and maybe he's not but there were so many signs that he was just struggling, struggling, struggling and thinking it's completely wrong, but still seeking me out quite a bit and being even more engaged with me after I came out.

It wasn't like a formal thing [coming out], one of the girls, we were cooking dinner and asked if I was married and I said no. She asked, "Are you dating a guy?" and I said, "I don't date guys" and she said, "You have a girlfriend then?" I said, "Yes, I have a girlfriend." She's like, "Oh my God, oh my God." I find out later that five girls on their crew are either gay or bi, and all of them had girlfriends. I was like, "Are you kidding me?" One of them was very out on course and the rest didn't talk about it. It was no big deal at their school. All the girls are like totally I'm bi. Everybody's just exploring it, at least the girls are...I was like, "Wow, I wonder if this is happening around a lot of different high schools. It's 2010, and it's really comfortable for girls to say they're

exploring their sexuality.” I am really interested in that. I have no idea but at their school, it’s no big deal.

When I would come out to the kids in Outward Bound, there wasn't a lot of verbal freak out. Overall, they were really awesome and there wasn't kids reacting really badly. There was the I can see it in their face, and they're not sure what to do with me afterwards, but for the most part...I'll never forget my first boy who said something after we had had an activity the day before. It was a take a stand activity where you put a statement out there and the kids decide if they agree or disagree and have to tell you why. He was like, "Well, if we let the gays get married some people will be marrying animals," he was saying exactly what his dad tells him and then the next day we did an activity called cross the line, where everyone stands in the line, I read a statement, and if it applies to you cross the line and turn around and face the group. We had all kinds of things, it was really wonderful. I think it was a sexual orientation one. I identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other, and I knew there were a couple of kids that I was really wondering if they would cross the line. I was the only one who did so I cross the line and face my whole group and saw his eyes. His face turned really red, his eyes got really huge and he wasn't sure how to interact with me for the next 24 hours, but then he came back and at the end of the course he ended up saying some really amazing things about what he needed to do and learn about compassion and things like this. When I say freak out, it's a very internal process. Nobody said anything awful to me or acted out towards me. I don't feel like I lost the trust of anybody. It was amazing.

That whole process was a really big conversation among the staff that year. There are a lot of queer folks at Outward Bound...so we have a really strong community there.

We kind of had to fight for that [coming out to students] a little bit, we were getting questioned, like, "What's the educational objective about coming out on the course?" I was like, "What's your educational objective for randomly talking about your boyfriend?" It was a big conversation that year, it was sort of the big buzz around. It felt extra important to just have it out there for a lot of reasons. It was hard to field that question by the higher-ups of our organization, but it was a good educational opportunity for them too. When we sat down with them we said, "This is why." I think they started to get it and they started to support us...

I came out of the woods, and I wasn't going to pursue school counseling because I was scared of schools. I would think, "I know I have this made up in the woods, on my turf. If the kids are coming in the woods, I'm in charge. Nothing can take that away from me. I'm very comfortable here." But then I was like schools? I don't know. I will do professional counseling and try to work at Youth Zone⁸ or something. When I came back, I just randomly met a queer woman who was also working Outward Bound. We hadn't previously met. She was doing Outward Bound Professionals, working with more corporate groups. She drove two of my friends down to Southern City, USA, and dropped them off at my house. I was like "You're queer, why haven't I met you?" That's basically what I said, like who are you and why don't we know each other and you live here, and we should have coffee. I don't usually just have coffee with people I don't know at all, but we had coffee and realizing that were both gender queer, and talking about top surgery, and loved each other. She was like, "I just kind of piece together my work, and I do some work at this school and it's really cool."

⁸ An organization in Southern City, USA for queer and questioning youth ages 13-24.

Teaching Experiences

A few weeks later we were talking and I said I hadn't found work yet and she said I should call the school, they're always looking for substitute teachers. I called them, I went in the next day. I've only had hair in the last two months, this is the first time the last nine years that I've had any hair. I had a nose piercing I took it out for school because the head of school asked me to. I've had it since 2003. It broke my heart. But I needed a job. I was like, "I'll never take out any of my piercings for any job. I shouldn't sell out." I remember walking into the school and being like, "I know I'm okay because Madeline worked here and she has really short hair and she's queer, I know I'm okay." Everyone looked like really straight, married pretty people. I was like, "It's okay, it's okay." The HR woman came to get me and I was like "She's such a dyke." She's not, but we ended up...talking about outdoors and she was really cool. I need to just not assume that people are going to be uncomfortable with me. I didn't see any other queer looking folks around, but I got the job to be a substitute.

When I went to work there, everyone was super sweet to me. Some of the little kids would ask if I was a boy or girl and I would say, "That's a great question." It was weird. It was just a non-issue. The teachers were cool, the kids, they were cool. I still had that confidence that I found at Outward Bound. I was the middle school music teacher for three weeks, I was the sub, so I had to work with middle schoolers for the first three weeks I was in the school. I met every single one of them, 100 kids, I learned all of their names. I was teaching them West African drumming. It's so gay. It's so lesbianic. We're going to do West African drumming, everyone. Even middle schoolers were not giving me a hard time and being total weirdoes.

Right now I work our afterschool program, so every day, I have a room of about 20 to 30 kids from ages 5 to 14. It's lower school and middle school, we only have about 240 students total, K-12. I will most likely be teaching first grade next year with another teacher. I'm hoping to work with a teacher next year who is a great ally. I have been there for a year and a half now...

I got to the school and pretty soon after I got there, I sent an email to our lower school principal who I felt I had a good connection with and had a ton of questions like, can we sit down and talk about this, this, this, this, what is the faculty talking about? What are the teachers talking about with students in terms of race and class and sexuality and religion, and all this type of stuff? What does this place look like? In the afterschool world I'm pretty isolated, I don't know what's going on in the classroom so much, and she didn't get back to me.

Then at the beginning of the school year we got an e-mail that said we are going to have a diversity conversation. There is no plan for the conversation; we're going to talk about what we should talk about. I was like well that's a start. It was not a mandatory thing, soon were probably 20 of us who showed up. That is maybe a third of us and that would be generous, it might be less than that. It's just the folks who are either just curious, because they don't know how intense and uncomfortable it's going to get, or to the people who are already thinking about it, or the people who are in high enough places at the schools that they have to be there, like the head of school has to be there, or the principals have to be there, or it just looks really bad. Our HR person led it up and was just like, "Well, what would everyone like to talk about?" It was very circusy and nobody wanted to say anything, so really what it ended up being for quite some time was

us talking about when one of the teachers said, "It really bothers me when people comment on my hair all the time." It was a Black teacher, "Or comment on my hair and ask me how it changes so fast, or why I have a different hairdo so often, that bothers me." That was the first sort of comment put out there that somebody was uncomfortable with something. Then we had all of these White people who were like, "I had no idea, I am really sorry." Just like this diffuse, diffuse, we're very sorry. That was the only sort of even lightly emotional moment. It was very intellectualized. I did say a few things but I didn't just want to talk about sexual orientation stuff. I don't like when all of the representatives from all of the target groups are like, "Can we just talk about my issue?"

We've had two conversations, the second one was much better because we started talking about how we can make the school a safe place for kids. If somebody is struggling with this, you know, like struggling with being a Black kid in a really White culture school, where are they going to go? Or if one of the scholarship students is feeling really out of place, who are they going to talk to? How do we put it out there? We can't just put it out there that we are all safe, because we are all not.

It was still the tip of the iceberg. I was like, "I would like to put a safe space⁹ sticker on my door." I wanted to since I got there, but I'll be really honest in saying that I needed a job so bad and I didn't want to get fired, but I didn't know if that was okay to do. I hate saying that, I hate admitting that. That was one of these moments where I need this job, I need the money. I love the kids, I never thought I'd be working in a private school, but this is what opened up to me and I'm so in love with the kids already, so all I can do is the best job that I can here. There is at least a start of that and there's been some good

⁹ Safe Space stickers designate classrooms that have an LGBT-friendly individual or ally in the room.

energy after these meetings and people will be like, "I'm so glad we're talking about this stuff." We had one teacher stand up and say, "I need to tell you all, I don't know what I think about homosexuality. I had two great friends who got married, but I did not go to their marriage. I love them, but I'm not sure I support homosexuality, so I didn't go because I didn't want to put my negative energy in their space, and I love them, so MJ," everyone always points at me in the meetings like, we know you're gay, "I'd love to sit and talk to you sometime." I was in a place where I was like "That's cool," I could have easily also been like educate yourself. I don't have to put up with dealing with your homophobia, but I felt pretty open. I said, "That's great, we can talk anytime you want to." I'm waiting for her to set up that meeting. I'm not going to go searching out for her. I thought that was a great honest moment that could inspire some other people to be a little more vocal. That's about as far as it's gone.

People who do not attend the meetings do not get the information. I can understand how the information is not leaving in some ways, because it's the whole confidentiality thing, but I think it would be good for somebody to be taking some notes and saying we discussed these kinds of issues, we discussed the importance of creating a safe place for the students at this school, we discussed the importance of moving forward with this. That would be great and that is not happening. They're saying we will have another one of these in a month. Cool. Monthly meetings are awesome, that's a start, but I think we need to have diversity training with facilitators to come in. I think it needs to be mandatory, I have very strong feelings about this, but at least we're starting. That feels exciting and I definitely feel like I'm a valuable member of our community because of the things I can take from all of the trainings that I've been to in Outward Bound and because

I'm the queer perspective there, at least the out, queer perspective. That feels good about being at the school. There is always times were I find myself working with lots of privileged ...and being like, "Why am I here?" Well, at the end of the day, this group of 14-year-olds with the shit ton of money and a race privilege are going to be in power when they are adults, so you might as well try to make them responsible.

I'm with parents all of the time, parents picking up their kids from aftercare. There are some that don't talk to me, but I don't make any assumptions about it. There are tons that love me and I love them. There's never been any kind of question of them being freaked out that the queer is taking care of their kids every afternoon. I think because of that, I talk about it with some of the parents. They know, we talk about it, it's really cool. I'll say, "My girlfriend is coming tomorrow," and they'll say, "That's great." I think that really surprised me. I think that's when I changed and decided to do school counseling. I know that this school is a little bubble. It's really, really, really sweet. In terms of kids' behavior, if a kid got in a fight they're definitely suspended. They don't put up with a lot of behavioral stuff. In that way, it's very sheltered too, it's just a very happy little school. That gives me enough confidence to feel like I could go into a different kind of school as an out person and knows some stuff might come back at me.

My school is a private school. It's one of those places where everyone thinks that it's really a sort of hip, groovy, liberal, progressive sort of place, and the teachers think that it is too. They're like, "Oh yeah, we're super cool, we're really open." I think it is in some ways, but I also think there's a lot of denial about how conservative it is. We've got a really conservative head of school now, which is different. I've heard a lot of grumbling about it. I think it started as a sort of hippie school, so now it's feeling a lot

more like you can't wear jeans anymore and stuff like that. Folks are really cool, we're all doing that thing, like we're all open anything. But when you hear what's being taught in the classroom. Sometimes it's really shocking. It's a little more traditional than I thought it was going to be. There is a lot of money. All of the teachers are really pretty. We talked about that the other day. Everyone is really pretty, mostly White. The student body is a little bit more diverse, but there is this thing going on, we've got the kids who are not on scholarship and the kids who are on scholarship. There is a huge gap, but the culture fits the kids who aren't on scholarship. Just in terms of you walk in and it's a very, sort of middle, upper class, White kind of culture. That's kind of how I see it. I also love it. When I talk one-on-one with teachers or any kind of faculty, everyone is super cool. I don't see a big culture of feedback. It's very, this is how we do it in the south, we're we all put on happy faces and then we talk about each other behind our backs and people don't get fired when maybe they should get fired, stuff like that. I think it's pretty typical of nonprofits where people stick around a lot longer than they should.

Religion does not play a role in the school. Our new music teacher did have the kids singing that Amen song where they just repeat amen over and over again at one of the first invitationals or little music shows and a lot of us were like, "Gasp, I can't believe she just did that." I mean personally there are folks across the range in terms of what they practice themselves, but religion doesn't really play any more role than your typical Christian is all over everything type role. There are not moments of silence in the morning and they do not say the Pledge of Allegiance.

I'm very friendly with most folks at the school. Most folks I would say are acquaintances, there are a couple people who I would call good friends, but I still don't

end up hanging out with them outside of school...Now if I wanted to, if I was at a place in my life where I needed more friendships, I would feel really great about some of the folks there and really try to develop that. The folks that I really spend my time with there and choose to spend my time with are folks who kind of have similar standpoints that I do, the same grumbling about the same stuff at school. We just get along because they're great. I've got people that we definitely try to keep getting together because we enjoy each other's company so much. We're the ones who end up going out after these diversity discussions and being like, "What you think about this?" I feel like it's the people whose wheels are turning the same way that mine are.

There's one other queer person who works there and it's just because it's one of my friends that I brought in. She is not out at school. She's a lot more private than I am. She kind of says like, "Whatever, if people know that's fine, but it's kind of not their business." I'm like, "Okay, for me it's like a lot more I *want* to be out because I feel it's important to be visible." That's completely just how I see it though. She's like, "Yeah, I'm not afraid to be out or whatever, my life is nobody's business," and I'm like, "Alright."

Everybody on the faculty and staff know I'm gay. When we have those diversity conversations they'll ask, "MJ, what do you think about blah, blah?" I used to have this little rainbow strip on my bag. I was very intentional about wearing it around school just because there is nothing said about any kind of queer safe space here, so I needed to be putting it out there a little bit. Everyone's pretty cool about it.

I've never said anything to any students. This is the part that's really hard. I don't want to be like, "Welcome to aftercare, I'm gay. If you have questions, come talk to me."

That's the part that is eating away at me. I'm bringing it up at our diversity conversations. I would like to put a safe space sticker on my door, and I'd like kids know they can come to me and if kids have no idea what that means...some kids are going to know what that means, they talk about it. The day I had my grad school interview I wore a tie and everything and went to school like that afterwards. I've never worn a tie to school, but it's not like, I'm not afraid to, but I was like "I'm going to wear my nice outfit with my nice tie to school." It was totally great. One of the kids asked, "Why are you wearing a tie today? You look like you're in charge today." I thought that was interesting a tie equals person in charge. A couple other kids asked me, and usually younger kids ask me, "Why are you wearing that?" Then a couple of 10, 11-year-old boys were like, you look really nice today Ms. M. I was like, "Cool, thanks." I got nothing but tons of compliments from the other teachers, so that felt really good.

When students ask about my gender, I would like to say it depends on the day, and I think I have said that before, maybe to one of the younger ones. That was mostly in the beginning when I was a substitute teacher. I'd tell them that I'm a girl, and mostly I think it was because I was just starting there. I told you I had a buzz until recently, and one of my kids said, "No offense but your hair looks like man hair," and I was like, "I'm cool with that, that's fine by me." Or when they mention my tie, I said, "Yeah, I like to wear ties." But when they ask me if I'm a boy or a girl I tell them I'm a girl, I cringe a little bit because everyone calls me Ms. M. Maybe I should push it, you know. Maybe I should push it and say well, you can decide if you want to call me Ms. M. or Mr. M. My teacher friends call me Mr. M. now. At least four or five of them do.

I've had a lot of really short conversations with students about my gender presentation. One of them said to me just the other day, "You sure do wear a lot of collared shirts." I said, "I sure do." She asked if I wore blouses at home and I said, "No way. Never..." They usually end up being little bits like that, but I love to engage it. If they are talking about my clothes, it's usually my hair or something in particular that I wear. I'm happy to talk about it. We talk about, why do boys have to have short hair and girls have long hair. We talked about lots of that stuff, especially with that kid who is dead set on me being a man. He was eight years old at the time, he has Asperger's. We were leaving the classroom and he was like, "Excuse me Mr. M.," and I had been in the classroom for over a month when he called me that. I thought that's interesting, but I feel like I should say something about it. I said, "It's actually Ms. M.," and he said, "No, you're a boy." He is very serious. He's not engaging in a playful way. It's like, wait a minute, very serious, you're a boy. I said, "No, I'm not a boy, it's Ms. M." "Mmm, no." Every time I saw him for a week, we would have to talk about it. He would say, "But you have short hair, you are a boy." We would have to talk about it, and at the end of it the Mr./Ms. discussion, he said, "I'm just going to call you by your last name." I said, "Great, that's totally fine." That was one of my favorite things. So he asked, it happens some. I would've thought that it happens more than it does though. I don't know if it's now a days, kids seem so open to stuff or it's just that I'm a teacher and they're self-absorbed and they've don't really care. Maybe it's some of both, or maybe they think it would be super awkward, whereas I'm so comfortable with myself I would be like sure, but they're like I could never ask about that.

What's interesting is halfway during the school year, I started wearing a binder¹⁰ and the kids didn't really respond. I mean, it's not like a huge difference. To me it is, I'm like oh it's so much better, but my teacher friends will say, "Oh, you've lost weight." I'll say, "I don't know, maybe." "You look different. What's different about you?" I'll say, "I don't know." They don't seem to respond.

I am currently in a relationship...I brought her to school once, my teacher friends knew who she was. I didn't say like, "Hey kids, here's my girlfriend." They didn't ask. It's so funny they never asked. She just kind of dropped in towards the end of aftercare one day...I'm pretty sure I introduced her as my friend, but it wasn't a really formal introduction like, "Hey room, here is my friend Amy." She just kind of came in and the kids were like, "Who are you?" I would love to say this is my girlfriend Amy, but we have a very conservative head of school and it pains me to be holding back...I'm very aware of how the straight folks talk about their relationships and can drop the boyfriend/girlfriend bomb anywhere. It hurts me...

I would love to bring my girlfriend to school events if she were a little bit more available. I've got three more weeks left in the school year, she has just come to school once to pick me up at the end of the day. I'm like okay, what do we have left that I could possibly bring her to? I'm going to see if she will come sit on a blanket with me at Battle of the Bands. I hope she will be able to...It's complicated. I really want to bring her to school. I'm really dying to.

There are kids that I know are questioning [their sexuality] in middle school, and they've sort of found me, or I've found them. We don't talk about it, none of them has

¹⁰ A piece of clothing similar to a sports bra that is used to bind the breasts tightly to the chest

ever said anything to me like, "I'm struggling, blah, blah, blah." You know, when you can just tell when a young person is drawn to you, because whether they know it or not you have something in common. I feel like that's happened quite a bit. Our head of school, she said some interesting things in our meetings about, there is this "please the parent" mentality. "Our parents are paying a lot of money to send their children here and we need to make sure we're not upsetting them." I think that's just awful. Someone even said at one meeting, we were talking about a middle school student who is trying, she's kind of coming out, she's from an Orthodox Jewish family, and what do we do with a kid who's questioning, coming out? Do we send them to the school psychologist to talk? I was like wow that there is a real stigma there. Why don't we have a school counselor? Why don't they know that they can come to talk to any faculty member or know which faculty members they can come talk to? Someone asked, "Is it our responsibility if the students are coming out to call the parents and tell them?" I was like "Gasp, no! This is not a problem." It's clear that of course not everybody is going to be a safe person to talk to. Anyway, that's the real issue. How no child has ever asked me, I've had a couple people ask me if I married, if I have kids, if I have a boyfriend. If I say, no there's nothing else beyond that. Sometimes I'm shocked that nobody has asked me.

There is some bullying, but it is cut off very quickly. They are really good about that. There is probably a below average amount, at least that's being seen. Kids are pretty good about coming forward with stuff and then immediately there is a huge process. It's pretty amazing though. It's not villain/good kid. It's like okay let's meet with the bully and find out what's going on for them. Why are they acting out like this? It's pretty compassionate, so yeah, that's one thing I love about this school. They are

seeing everybody as a whole person. It ends up being that most of our bullies are the most high anxiety kids who used to be bullied. I don't know what kids are saying to each other in terms of the gay stuff. I share an office with one of our PE/health teachers. I talked her into buying a movie, *Straightlaced: How gender's got us all twisted up* for the school so now she shows it to all of the health classes. There's another documentary about bowling. It's not all about sexual orientation stuff, but the *Straightlaced* movie is about gender expectations and it's a series of short interviews with tons of high school kids and they are all over the spectrum. You got the macho, macho dude talking about which colors he's never going to wear as he goes to the store to the 16-year-old trans person who is being completely out and fabulous and talking about how hard that is. I know that the bullying film is being shown and I know the faculty is being very proactive whenever it does happen. That's all I know.

Nobody's said anything negative about me wanting to put a safe space sticker on my door, but a lot of people don't talk either. It was brought up at the next meeting, "Last meeting was brought up that MJ wanted to put a safe space sticker on her door," our HR person, our head of school, neither of them came up after to me to say that would be just fine. I've had moments where I thought maybe I should just do it, and then I kind of just don't, and I hate myself. A lot of the parents know that I'm gay. I ran into a mom and her son who's in my aftercare as I was walking into Youth Zone the other night to host movie night. I said hi to them and they were like, "Hey what are you doing?" and I said "Volunteering at Youth Zone. I'm hosting movie night." I have no idea that if they knew what it was but that felt really good. Several of my parents who I know are super cool, I

talk with them. They are adults; they probably get it. Some don't, some don't think about it, some are completely oblivious.

Parents who are homophobic have been homophobic for a long time. I find a lot of times if the kid is homophobic, it's because the parents are homophobic. When they actually learn something, or actually see real people, they're like oh, whatever. Especially with younger ones, if they're throwing stuff at me I can deflect that pretty well. When that happens, it's pretty easy to engage and be like, "Hey, let's talk about this." It happened to me yesterday at school. I had a conversation with two teenagers about it. I think they're both gay. They were hanging out with me. It's definitely more about the adults. Even if I was working with high school students, I still feel like kids are getting...pretty groovy with it. They're like, what's the big deal? They might be a little bit uncomfortable, and then ask a lot of questions because they're really curious.

Yesterday, two of my middle schoolers, they're both in eighth grade, it's homework time, and they said, "Ms. M, can we go out in the hall, we need to work on some superlatives for class." I said there were two guys working on their homework assignment in the hall. They asked if they could go in my office, which is right across the aftercare room. I said, "Yeah, we can go," they asked if I could help them and I said sure. I sat at my desk kind of helping them and kind of working. They were sitting there. They're both very drawn to me. They both totally date boys, but it's just that gut feeling, that they might end up being queer in some kind of way. They both love me. One of the girls hugs me a bunch, one of them told me sort of offhand the other way, that I was her favorite teacher. They were going through their list of classmates, and Sarah said, "Oh, she's so gay. She looks at me all the time." I sat there and said, "Sarah, why don't we

talk about that? You had a lot of aggression and how you said that. Can we just talk about that?" She said, "It's just so weird." Then she whispered a little bit. I don't even know what she whispered to Leslie. She wasn't whispering about me, she was whispering to this girl and not wanting me to hear. She said, "I don't know, it's just weird." I said, "What's weird about it?" "I don't know, I don't think being gay is weird, but I'm afraid it will turn me gay." I said, "Ohh, ok, like you're going to catch it?" She said. "I don't know." The other girl chimed in and said, "It's not a big deal, gay people are like normal people." I didn't soapbox them, but I try to let them be aware of some of the language that they were using about gay people. I used lesbian, bisexual, transgender. I threw some words out there that they are not a separate category than normal people. It was mostly to try to be aware of the language you're using right now and explore why you have this argh feeling about it, this threatening feeling. They were both like, "Okay, cool," and we moved on. I was like, wow should I come out right now? I sat there and I didn't. I wondered if I should say, "I'm gay." That's what I would've done at Outward Bound and I didn't do it. I just sat there and thought, "Shit, I can't believe I just had a conversation about this." It doesn't have to be about me, but I have mixed feelings about it for sure.

We have several gay parents at the school. When I say several, I'm thinking of like four or five couples. One of the parents, who is a celebrity, is apparently very active and has done some very cool things. I think some stuff for AIDS stuff. She's come and taught some classes for mini-mester things about being on TV and the 80s. I think her daughter is probably queer too. I know we have two dad couples. I know of another

lesbian couple, one of them works of HRC¹¹, and that's totally cool. I feel like they come to things, as they should and there shouldn't be any difference if I'm bringing my girlfriend. There is my little hint of what if somebody said something to me? Or what if that's not okay? I was like whoa that's just the rest of the shit that I need to get out of my system. I feel if someone had an issue that's their problem, even if it was the head of school.

I want to say I've never felt pressure to conform to the expectations in the school, but I'm trying to think a little more like subtly and deeper than that. I felt pretty comfortable there. They made me take out my nose ring, or they asked me to, which I was not happy about because two other teachers had nose studs and they were wearing them. I had a ring, and a shaved head, and two piercings in my ears, so I could not help but think there's something else going on there. I would ask why those two middle school teachers would have their pretty little jewels, their nose studs still on, the shiny little bits and I have to take my rings out. They had been working there longer. Both had longer hair, pretty standard....other than that. I've been enjoying my individuality there. I feel really comfortable there.

I'd like to think if I worked in a public school, I'd be able to individuate more. I feel like I would have a hard time working somewhere I couldn't, just where I am now, I feel like I fit in pretty well. There's nothing crazy about me. I don't know, because the last time I worked in a public school, I still had short hair and a pretty masculine way of being, I don't think I had any piercings or anything like that, it seemed pretty comfortable. I just don't know what it's like to be in a public school now. If this school

¹¹ Human Rights Campaign

has a spot open for me after I graduate, it would be hard not to take it because I already know all of the kids. It's such a comfort zone. I love it. They are talking about opening up a counselor position. They said they may do it next year, so I may be out of luck. Other than that I would like to try to work in a public school for sure and probably in a progressive area in the city. Somewhere where I know there will be some support.

Actually when I had my interview for this [master's] program, one of the professors talked about that quite a bit. She said that they are pretty intentional about making sure, at least for internship, that you go somewhere where you feel supported and that doesn't feel too dangerous to be queer, where the faculty and people in charge there will support me. That felt pretty good. I would love to work in a public school. I don't want to be a private school counselor all of my life. I would be pretty happy with elementary or middle, and wouldn't be surprised if I ended up doing a little bit of both. I think in the terms of counseling I'm a little bit more drawn to middle schoolers because so much is stirring up at that age. I feel in terms of connecting with kids, I kind of like that maturity level and the issues that are coming out middle school. I don't want to teach them, I want to counsel them. I want to teach little ones, I'd rather counsel the middle schoolers. I'll probably toss around different levels. I love high schoolers, but I don't want to be figuring out how to get them in the colleges and all that kind of stuff. I feel like that's what ends up happening. The little ones are still figuring it all out, and they still like adults. Sometimes they're a little bit more willing to engage, especially with queer people. They aren't thinking about that as much, they haven't decided who you are, what you are. Sometimes they don't have any clue, even if they do. I don't feel like they tend to be as hardened and sarcastic or mean. I feel like that's part of what drew me to

that age group too, because of my experience in Outward Bound and the school. You aren't feeling scary.

Vision for the Future

I hope to be able to be out to my students as a counselor. I think that would be really hard on me emotionally. I feel like it doesn't feel right to be like I'm a counselor, I'm here to help you through your processes, but I'm not comfortable being who I am. To me it feels a little bit irresponsible. It is kind of along the lines of what I said before; I feel pretty strongly that it's not something that needs to be hidden. There might be issues with parents, there might be issues with kids themselves, but I feel like that outweighs how shitty it would be to be a school counselor and be in the closet...

At the elementary level, I don't see myself having a kid come to the office and being like I need you to know that I'm gay. If I'm just working with little ones, yeah, I don't know, I'm not sure how to go about doing that, whether it's just up on the walls that had a lot of things on them and some LGBT stuff, and if people ask, if kids ask, being really honest with them. There's this whole thing that it's not age appropriate. I hear people say that a lot like a kid shouldn't know about that until an older age. I think that's really fucked up. I think there's a general homophobia going on, like there's something inappropriate about it. I think they're thinking a lot about sexual practices, and if you talk about your sexual orientation that you're going to be talking about what you do, or making them think about what you do and that's not appropriate. That's only because everybody so used to talking about heterosexuality. When somebody says I have a boyfriend, a six-year-old isn't thinking about what they do in the bedroom. I think it's just because it's not out there as casually. Maybe I'm being naïve, but I'm willing to deal

with parents as people. I'm not going to lose my own integrity in that kind of way for my career. That just doesn't make sense; I wouldn't do anything like that.

I think coming out would depend on how much power that principal asserted in the school. I feel that there were enough people in the administration who were very supportive, that I might be able to deal with that. I've thought about that. I need to feel pretty supported. If something went down, some kid said something to the parent, who said something to the principal and the principal agrees, that would be pretty awful. It's kind of like at this point in my life. I'm not really willing to hang out with a lot of homophobic people in my social life. I don't want to be around it, I don't want to be answering ignorant questions. I'm willing to answer some ignorant questions, but not the ones that have hatred behind them or those that have a lack of openness.

If sexual orientation was protected by law, I would be more willing to be out. If I knew that was all set and good to go, I might have the energy to engage and try to set a good example, not like I'm here to change the principal if I knew my job was protected that would be a little bit different.

Deep down administrative fear [kept me from coming out to the students]. That's the only reason that I'm not doing it. I put it out there to the people in power and they have not specifically said that it's totally cool for me to do so. I feel like I need to take that chance. I keep thinking I'll do it, and then that happens when I least expect it and I'm like, I'll do it next time. It's that total fear of losing a job. It sucks. I don't think that would happen, but I don't think that's been tested at my school yet. I know there have been gay faculty members in the past, I've heard about it before. We had a lesbian

schoolteacher, and she had a partner and they got married, isn't that wonderful? It's that total fear that I'll be breaking the rules.

In an ideal situation, at the school I end up at, I would love to be the faculty advisor to a Gay-Straight Alliance or something like that. I would love that. I would love to be able to facilitate some diversity stuff and be really out in that context with them. Make sure that the students knew that there is a safe space, and not be like hey, if you're here you're gay, come talk to Ms. M. I'd love to have stuff up in my office. I don't want just the one little sticker, if you notice the rainbow in the corner of my door, come in, do the secret handshake and you can come in. I'd love for it to feel really casual. I look at my friend who works at another private school. She's the service learning coordinator. She has all kinds of neat books in her office. She goes and talks to classrooms about being gay. She's just a resource. I think that's incredible. That's what I'm striving for. I don't want everyone to think that this is the reason that I'm here, to be a big gay resource and that's it. I don't want it to be one-dimension that everyone thinks that I have. I just want it to be a part of it and not be seen as a taboo thing. That would be pretty amazing. I think I can find that here. I might have to work at it a bit, but I think it's possible. I don't know if it's quite possible at the school at work. They just put out a job announcement for a part-time counselor for the first time ever at my school. Maybe we'll be full time in two years. I have to think about it, but I feel like somebody has to do something at that school. Here I am, here's my mission, I will gay you up and then go to public school.

Initially, MJ positioned herself as unfit to teach because of her sexual and gender identities. This occurred in both her experiences with Outward Bound and in her current teaching position saying, "I felt like the kids are going to think I'm a freak" (Interview 1). She initially struggled with feeling othered because she did not fit the expectation of teacher (Colbert, 2008). She had to remove nose piercings upon being hired at her current job, while other "prettier" teachers were not asked to do the same thing.

MJ does trouble gender expectations through her expression of gender queer. She has short-cropped hair and dresses in a fashion more traditionally associated with masculinity. She does not, however feel comfortable being out to students in her after school program because of the institutional power at play within her school because the head of school is conservative (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999).

Chapter 5

“It becomes clarity in that I am at peace with myself.”

Carter’s Story

Carter and I met for his first interview over his lunch break in his classroom. Our second interview occurred in my car over lunch, and our third interview occurred at his house over dinner. The second and third interviews were much more relaxed than the first interview. This may be due to the fact we were in more relaxed settings. Carter and I taught together for four years, so I was a bit surprised when our first interview did not go as long as planned or as deep as I thought it would due to our previous relationship. Carter was dressed professionally, in a shirt and tie, for our first interview because we met in his classroom. For the other two interviews, he was dressed more casually because of our meeting places. His mannerisms could be called more effeminate than other traditional male mannerisms, suggesting a level of performance of being a gay male because of the associations with those mannerisms and homosexuality.

Carter is a 35-year-old African-American male. He is in his 13th year of teaching and currently teaches fifth grade at Anderson Elementary School in Franklin County. The school he teaches in is a Title I elementary school with a predominantly African-American student population. This is his first year at this school because it is the first year the school has been open. He has been in a relationship for two and a half years and is currently trying to adopt a child.

Early Life and Coming Out

I identify as gay. It does not have an important meaning to me. I really only identify myself as Carter and not get into the whole label, I'm this, I'm not. I'm Carter. I

date guys, but I am who I am. I guess I have always known I was gay, since I was a kid. I dated girls for a while, but I started dating guys and never really got into the whole heterosexual dating thing. I was in college when I came out, around 18 or 19 years old...My family was alright with it. They didn't like it, but they said, "You know you're our child," kind of thing. I didn't really have a big hard time with it.

I was an elementary education major in college. I wasn't worried about coming out during that time because there aren't a whole lot of men in elementary education anyway. I talked to some people, my friends already knew, so it wasn't anything major. It never became an issue in relation to be becoming a schoolteacher and being gay. I've always liked working with kids and I knew I wanted to teach. I never made a correlation with it outside of the fact that I just wanted to teach.

Teaching Experiences

For my first job, I taught preschool for three years in a private setting in Southern City, USA. It was interesting being a male teacher with such young kids, especially when I taught pre-K. The parents were concerned until they got to know me. It was more gender issues in that I was a male teacher with such young kids, they were afraid of abuse or something like that. I vividly remember one parent saying, "I used to ask my daughter every day, did he touch you in a bad way?" I was like, "Why?" She would say, "I was just worried because you are male teacher with my little girl." Typically it's a female teacher in that age range, and she was just worried. That made me aware that probably others were concerned too. That's when I decided to teach higher and go to elementary as opposed to staying in preschool with young kids. I really haven't had a problem with it with the older kids.

Then I moved to teach in the public school setting, and I taught fourth grade. It was fine. I dealt with a lot by keeping my personal life personal. Who I dated and saw had nothing to do with work. Everything was just professional.

There were some close friends at school that did know I was gay, but for the most part it wasn't talked about. I think people assumed, but it wasn't discussed. Some were work friends that I met there. I knew one person before I came, but the rest were people that I met at work and became friends with. I didn't have to formally come out to them. I think it just came in a conversation. It never was, "I'm gay," it was just in talking.

I never really changed my stories around other teachers or in the teachers' lounge. I guess conversation varied on who was around and whether or not I discussed something personal, or if I left out the gender, he or she, or left out saying the name, just talking about somebody in general. I never publicly would say my boyfriend. It was just very generic.

The climate at my school is okay. It's a brand-new school so this is the first year. There are no traditions, no patterns, so things are being set. Our boss is not a big communicator with us, so for the most part we describe the school as running on autopilot. You do what you are supposed to do when the school is running because most people know how schools are supposed to run, but there's no direct leadership or guidance for what to do. When the school opened, there were groups. It is two main schools that merged and became a staff. The AP [assistant principal] came from one of the schools with most of the staff and our principal came from a completely different school and brought a couple of his folks over. For the most part it's like a dictatorship, because even though he presents it as a democracy, ultimately it is, "This is what we are

going to do.” I think people interact with people they knew already... There is a little blending, but for the most part, you go back to who you are familiar with... As far as the climate with diversity and LGBT issues, it isn't really discussed because it is an elementary school.

I don't think religion plays much of a role in the school because of the whole no religion in schools thing. I think, because it's a predominantly Black school, or African-American school with an African-American staff, the talk of religion, and most of the kids are probably Baptist or some sort of Christian. In my class if the kids talk about religion, I will talk about it but if they don't talk about it I won't bring it up. If they ask a question that I feel is okay for me to answer I will answer, but usually I will try to refer them back. I remember during testing, the kids would say, “Mr. Draper, we want you to lead us in prayer.” I would say, “I can't lead you in prayer, but if you guys want to pray, you can go ahead and pray before the test and I have no problem with that, but I can't be the one guiding you through this mini-prayer service.” It plays that kind of role. I think it's just because traditionally most African-Americans are big in the church, so the kids are. It just comes out as natural for them.

Some of the students attend the same church I go to. It's really weird. They will say, “I saw you in the choir stand,” or they'll see me in church and wave. It is in the same community. I go to a large church, but there is another one not far away that a lot of them go to. It just varies, but I see them all the time. Religion is a big piece of my life because I have always gone to church, believing God. I was raised Baptist and the whole Christianity piece, so it has been a huge part for me.

I think there's always a struggle for any, I shouldn't say for any, but I know for most Black men who are gay and were raised in the South, the Bible Belt in the sense, it becomes, you have to find a point where you are content with yourself and that this is who I am and God has to love me for me. Of course you were raised that being gay is not right and homosexuality is a sin. There so many ways that you have to look at it, so I think everybody has to find their own peace within themselves and trusting God and trust in what they believe in and pray for the best. This was and was not difficult for me. I just kind of accepted that, okay, it's not ever any full clarity because you morally don't have an answer to say yes, your life is right or it's wrong. It becomes clarity in that I am at peace with myself.

In Southern City, USA, the Black gay community is huge. They are everywhere. The levels of openness vary. I think you have a lot of DL¹² men here in the city, so they may be married, and sneak on the side, or they lead a straight life and they are single, but they don't want anybody to know they are dating guys on the side kind of thing. I think you see a lot of that and then you do have a lot of guys who are just openly gay. I think it's progressively gotten more noticeable, but it's definitely been here.

It is important that people get to know me. I don't let being gay be the important thing of my life. Some people want everyone to know that they are gay, oh I'm gay and you have to accept it. I don't feel like it's anyone's business, especially at work for me. I am always taking the standpoint that I'm here to do a job and my job is to educate my students. Typically, I don't build a whole lot of friendships at work because that's not my purpose for being there. My purpose is for work. I don't have to deal with a lot of issues

¹² Down low

of being gay because one people don't ask and two, I don't particularly go to tell because it's my personal life. A few have kind of made a comment about it or there are ones who try to find out about it. My general responses is I don't go around asking you about your husband or wife or what you do sexually in bed or what you do when you leave this building, so it's really not any of your business what I do. I kind of leave it like that because I want you to know me for me, my profession is teaching, so I want you to judge me on my teaching, not on who I'm sleeping with or who I'm dating or what I do in my personal time in my personal life. It's fine for me to keep those pieces separate because I have my friends outside of work. I do have some friends at work that know. It's not that it's a big secret, I think it just depends on really how a person approaches me determines whether or not I tell them or talk about it. I have a few close friendships. I tend to keep it very limited and talk about work, how was your weekend, vacation, etc. I really don't get too personal. We are not friends, we are coworkers. I typically don't talk about my weekend, or I may say *we*, or use pronouns. I don't necessarily give, or say Raheem unless I'm talking to my friends.

My relationship is not a secret. If someone were to ask, "Are you dating someone?" I would tell them, "Yes, and we've been together almost 3 years." It's more just the way I am. It's never really been a problem. My boyfriend doesn't come to school or school functions because again, it's the line between personal and work. He has been at my house and coworkers have been there, or vice versa, we have gone out and met some of my coworker friends out. There has never been a reason to come to the school. He doesn't have kids, so when I am at a school function I am typically there for work, for the kids, not to socialize and hang out with him. It's not like, "Hey, let's go out

to the school picnic or let's go to the school carnival.” What is he going to do besides stand there and look at me? There's never really been a reason to have him there.

There is one other gay teacher at my school that I know for sure, and maybe one other. It's not openly talked about. The one I've talked to, we have mutual friends. The other I am pretty sure as well. She has made some comments to me about certain things that would lead me to believe, but she has never said. I can't really say she's a lesbian but I would probably say she's bisexual, because I've heard her have conversations about dating guys as well. I know last year, at one time, she said something to me about her partner, so that led me to believe. I'm not really sure, but again that's personal. If she wants to volunteer personal information, fine I'll talk to her, but she doesn't, so I don't typically ask.

The other person, he knows. I've invited him to functions to hang out with my lover and I. He does not necessarily speak of who he is dating, typically our conversation is “Hey how are you doing?” “What are you doing this weekend?” kind of thing. We say that we are going to hang out every now and then but we never have or really see each other outside of work. I definitely don't talk about it with my students' parents. I do have good relationships with my parents. I talk to them frequently over email or the phone...

There are a few problems with bullying at the school, but not a lot. I have heard, “That's so gay or you're so gay,” as a putdown in the classroom. I generally, I guess because I am gay, address those issues very quickly. I always address it in the sense that we are all human, we are all different and there is something we can pick on for someone about anything...I always address it as there is a fault with all of us, including myself, so

let's not pick on anyone because if we start picking and calling names or “joneing” as they call it, then we can jone on everybody about something...

After the suicide of the student last year, there wasn't anything really spoken, I think the word was sent out that bullying is not tolerated. In the handbook this year it was definitely clearly stated, no bullying allowed. Everybody was clear that it's not going to happen. I think other teachers address the issue of bullying, but there just hasn't been much of it because there's no tolerance of it. It's automatic suspension.

We do not question the curriculum, more so because we don't have the time. I teach fifth and there is already so much history to teach in just the regular social studies curriculum, to where I really don't ever finish that. You just don't have enough time to go into other issues, not in elementary.

I just try to lead an average life. I'm not one to be a huge gay advocate or anything, I just try to do what I enjoy doing, hanging out with my friends and if you know that I'm gay, that is fine. If not, that's fine. It's not the end-all be-all. I've gone to some gay pride events. I don't go a lot because I don't like being stereotyped or being put into groups. I may make contributions on the side...I guess by being a teacher and not wanting to set the wrong image for my students in the sense of if they feel that being gay is wrong and then they see me. I don't necessarily want to be seen on TV. I always give a prime example of the one time when Joshua [another gay teacher we worked with] was at the Southern City, USA Pride and he was on the news. That night, I had phone calls and the next day at work everyone was like, “Did you see Joshua on the news?” I just don't want that type of publicity. I don't want you to talk about me. Again, my personal life is just that, my personal life. I think everyone knew he was gay, but I think that put it

in their face, like, “Ok, I’m gay, accept it.” I don’t believe you should force your lifestyle or your personal choices on someone.

Vision for the Future

In the next five to ten years, I plan to teach only one more year and then definitely be done with my doctorate, so I plan to look at some administration positions or try to get into a teacher development or training program, but definitely to look at getting out of the classroom. I will probably look at the university levels, but preferably I would like to do one-on-one direct teaching with actual teachers right now at the county level. If not, then I will go to teaching on the college level.

[Would being gay prevent you from getting a job at the administrative level?]

That is a Catch-22. I would ultimately say yes, but of course you never know if that is the reason you don’t get the position or if it’s something else. Ultimately I would probably say it would be hard, but you never know.

The term gay teacher doesn’t mean anything. It means I am a teacher and I’m Carter, so the fact that I’m gay is personal. That has nothing to do with my teaching. The only time I can see it coming into effect is if I’m teaching older kids, if they are picking on each other and they call someone gay or call them a faggot or something like that. I may tend to react and talk about what they’re doing to that person and kind of break stereotypes and talk about that, but definitely not making it a big issue as to me personally. If I did teach middle or high school, I don’t think I would be willing to be out. I probably think I would be the same. I feel like kids are kids and my job as a professional is to be a teacher, not to talk about my personal issues or what I do on my private time. I guess if I taught high school and develop some type of friendship or bond

with my students and they asked, that's different, but I don't think it's something that I would just openly tell them.

Everyone is pretty supportive [about my attempt to adopt a child], they say they hope everything works out. I'm sure they question why I am trying to adopt instead of having kids on my own, but they never ask me. Again, what you think or may know, they are not making it personal. They don't ask me about my personal life, so we leave it at that. In explaining it to my students, it would just be more of I've adopted, just in the sense that there's plenty of kids out there that need homes, not necessarily going into the reason that I'm gay, I'm not married to a woman, I can't have kids that way or that type of thing. It's more I adopted because I wanted a child and there were kids available...

If I were to come out, I don't think there would be a loss of legitimacy or credibility as a teacher. I think it becomes harder when you take more leadership positions, because of course people have stereotypes of what they expect out of their administrators and people in charge. I think as teachers, especially on an elementary level, you don't find a whole lot of men teaching elementary school, so most of the time, most people assume that he's probably gay if you're single just because you're teaching elementary, you're not married, you don't have any kids. That's their first assumption. That assumption doesn't bother me. My job is to teach so I go in with the mindset that I'm here to teach your child, what I do in my personal life or anything, I leave that personal. If we're not friends, there's no point in discussing it.

I really can't imagine merging my gay identity with my teaching identity. Even if I was heterosexual, I would be the same in that I don't believe in discussing it. I think work is work. I have always been like that. I guess as far as merging it together and

being open, I don't know how to explain it. I guess in the sense that for holidays or Valentines, my partner sent me a box of chocolates to work, which is fine for me. There wasn't an issue of who sent you this or where did that come from? Simply, it's really none of your business, and all you have to say is you have a delivery. I think it would be the same if I were straight. I guess they would probably know who my wife was or whatever, I guess it was merge they would see him or I'd be more apt to invite him to functions and things. Outside of that, I think it would be the same. I don't really feel any loss at not inviting him to functions. What would be the purpose? We don't have kids, so outside of him going to a work function just to go with me, there's really no purpose of him going, other than if we are having a faculty function or something and inviting him...

In the African-American community, having two moms or two dads is one of those things that's not really discussed. Obviously, if two men come with a child on the first day of school, clearly okay, it's a gay family. It's probably the typical assumption. I firmly believe as long as you don't throw things in people's faces and force them to be comfortable with something they may not be comfortable with...My child's education is just that, my child's education. Who is raising him or her is not the issue, it's more of we are here for the education.

In order for it to be ok for teachers to come out, I would probably say it would have to start high, like federal and then state. Just having the parents or principal at a school, they do run the school, but it's still governed by the state and it's a system, so I think those rules and laws and things to protect positions would probably have to start high, much higher, start federally and then look at each individual state setting their own rules and then down to the school systems individually setting their rules. I definitely

think it is more difficult in [this state] because of the political climate around gay marriage. It would definitely have to start with the feds coming down on the state, which would in turn come down on each school system.

For Carter, it was very important to keep his professional and private identities separate. "I want you to judge me on my teaching, not on who I'm sleeping with or who I'm dating or what I do in my personal time in my personal life" (Interview 2). He will choose which he topics he discusses with others based on the company he is in. "Conversation varied depending on who was around and whether or not I discuss something personal or I left out the gender or saying the name..." (Interview 1). He reflexively positions himself within the conversation he has with others (Davies & Harré, 1990). He also purposely does not "build a whole lot of friendships at work because that's not my main purpose for being there. My purpose is for work" (Carter, Interview 2). He positions his professional world as separate from his personal world, each of them having different purposes in his life (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Chapter 6

“I’m much more comfortable with don’t ask, don’t tell at school.”

Jamie’s Story

Jamie and I met at a coffee shop near her home for her interviews. Although our interview was shorter than I expected it to be, Jamie supplied me with a rich picture of her past. Because it was after school, Jamie was dressed in a casual manner. She had a shorter, feminine type of haircut and presented in a more traditionally feminine manner. Because of her traditional feminine look, she could pass in the performance of straight if she wanted to.

Jamie is a 33-year-old White female. She has been a teacher for 11 years. She was in the seventh year of teaching fifth grade and is a math specialist in Dallas County at a low-income, Title 1 school, and most of the students in the school are African-American. With just two weeks left in the school year, Jamie is preparing to leave the teaching profession to become an educational consultant, saying she is burnt out and needs to do something new. Due to this change, we only had the opportunity to meet two times for our interviews. She has been in a relationship for seven years and does not have children with her partner.

I identify as lesbian. It probably makes me a bad queer, but it is really not that important to me. It is a part of who I am, but only a small part. So, while it is how I identify and how I have identified for a long time, I don’t introduce myself and say, “Hi, I’m Jamie the lesbian teacher.” [The parts of Jamie’s identity that are important are] that I used to be a teacher, but I’m no longer a teacher tomorrow. It’s important to me I’m Kel’s partner, that’s my partner’s name. I am a friend to all of my very good friends. I’m

very close to one of my sisters, and being a partner, that's important to me. Educational consultant now falls into that category, which is exciting, and then lesbian is kind of grouped in there with all of that.

Early Life and Coming Out

I grew up in a very small southern town. It had one stoplight, seven churches, and I graduated with a class of 71. Around about middle school, I noticed things weren't quite the same. I think it was pretty common. I grew up very southern Methodist, which is very similar to southern Baptist and I heard about homosexuality and burning in the fiery pits my whole life, but knew that something wasn't quite right. Then my best friend Connie moved to town, you know how that goes. We played softball and started hanging out, then started making out. We even dated twins in high school. We would go on double dates with the twins and they would drop us off and then we would go make out after we had made out with the twins. It was all very lovely and small town.

My mom and I would fight a lot. She wasn't really fond of Connie, she was the new girl in town, she didn't go to the right church. She didn't seem like a good Christian girl and folks in town started talking. It was a small town. I ended up coming out to my mom because I was *angry* with her. We were yelling and screaming and in the midst of one of the fights about me hanging out with Connie and spending too much time with her, and I came out to her. I actually left home because in essence, if I was going to be that way, I couldn't be in her house. I left home for about three weeks and lived on a friend of the family's couch. I was 15, living in a small town, had no money, had no car, and didn't have that much to do so I kind of went back into the closet. My mom and I agreed I could move back home if Connie and I would attend pastoral counseling. We

did, we went. Connie would come and pick me up and we would go, “Yes, yes, bad, wrong, burn in hell,” and then make out and go home. We did that for a while. I came out for the first time when I was 15, but then went back in for self-preservation and then decided at that point I would just wait until after college. This is probably wrong, but I let my mom pay for college and she wouldn’t have done so otherwise. She paid for college and I came out again after college when I was 22. That was a huge battle and it still continues today. My partner and I had a ceremony last year and she didn’t come. None of my family came.

In college, I was a member of the Presbyterian Student Association. For some reason, it was very queer. There was a small group of us that got to be friends and I didn’t date any women in college because I went to college in [another state]. There weren’t any LGBT organizations that we were a part of. We were very small and quite honestly, there weren’t many people I was interested in dating at school. There would be people during the summer and that sort of stuff, but I didn’t have a long-term relationship at all. I definitely identified as queer outside of my house, but not to my mom.

I grew up going to camps and then I worked as a counselor at camps. My mom was a teacher, my dad was a teacher; my whole family, they were all teachers. That was the only schedule that I knew and I loved working with kids. I started as an accounting major my first two years, and then worked at camps in the summers when I was at college. I decided after my sophomore year that I couldn’t sit in office and punch numbers and while I like math, I’d rather do something with it so I switched to education, working with kids is a family tradition. I always worked with little kids. I’ve always done upper elementary and so that middle school group...My first teaching position was

a middle school position and that was kind of what I was looking at going into it. At the college that I went to in South Carolina, when you get certification it's three through eight with elementary or early childhood was one through three. So I was certified three through eight in South Carolina. I've mostly done upper elementary and middle school when I moved [here] and through reciprocity, I was all of a sudden certified to teach pre-K through eight.

What's funny is that I really didn't think about my identity as a lesbian because I was so used to around being around my friends, and I've always lived like this around my friends. There's my personal life, but even in my classes at school, I didn't consider my classmates my friends. I really didn't hang out with them socially. I would go to do class projects...but then I was completely out and open with my real friends, kind of the way I do with work. The people that need to know, know and the people that have figured it out know. I've always kept those two cases separate.

Teaching Experiences

It's always been that way for me, especially the first two years. I was 21 when I got my first class. I was teaching sixth grade in a small town in South Carolina. I specifically got a job that was almost an hour away because I didn't want to mix those two worlds. It was the same in Alton, the city school in Alton wouldn't have been a big deal, but the school system I ended up in, which was down in the valley, was very rural. They would pray every morning on the loudspeakers. They are definitely two separate worlds. It's just the way I've always done it. I'm very much a professional and good at what I do at school, but that's totally separate from when I'm away from school. I just

keep it separate. There are people that know, but are we friends or are we work friends?
Are we colleagues or friends?

I grew up in a small town and it [teaching in a rural area] makes me feel edgy. They are typically conservative communities. The community I taught at in South Carolina was fine. It was a middle school, so it was a lot bigger setting than the elementary school. You're kind of to yourself. You have your planning time and you have your classes. It's a lot less communal to me than the elementary school setting, so that wasn't so bad. In the school I taught at in South Carolina, the principal would pray every morning on the loudspeaker and we would pray before every faculty meeting. It was all very Christian. He actually left the school the year I left to be the principal of a private Christian school. It was just a very conservative setting.

[An example of the Conservative nature of the school is when] I got called to the principal's office during Black History Month. We were doing a lesson and the KKK came up and I was saying negative things about it. The principal called me up and told me I needed to watch the pushing of my liberal views and *that* was outrageous to me...

My image of a teacher is probably my sixth grade math teacher, who also happens to be related to me. It was a small town of course. I knew her outside of school, so I know she was laid back and nice, but as far as being the teacher went, she didn't care about the issues, she just wanted to make sure that it was...which is evident that it was very important that we learn the concepts she was teaching. She's very passionate about teaching, but she would get up and do silly things in front of us. I wanted to be that type of teacher. I can remember getting upset with her because she would fuss at me, but

being that type of teacher I look back and understand why she was so strict. She was my picture of a teacher...

Overall, LGBT issues are not appropriate to talk about at school. Last year, we had a situation. It's pretty comical to me, but we had this lesbian drama going on in the fifth grade. Two of the girls were in the bathroom fooling around. Once we reported what was going on, the principal handled it hush-hush and the counselor handled it. We don't talk about it and it's not appropriate to do at school...

There are not any LGBT parents or other teachers at my school this year. At another school I worked at, there were three White teachers and we were all queer. We just decided those children would have it in their mind that all White teachers are gay and have short hair. Two of us worked in the same grade levels. We worked together closely and got along well. When I was hired, I was the last of the three of us to be hired and the principal took me around and showed me the school. I wasn't going to be teaching second grade, but she felt like she needed to take me and introduce me to the second grade teacher. It was like she wanted to introduce me to the other queer, White teacher...

The only time diversity is really brought up [in the classroom] is when we have issues of bullying and the counselor may come into the classroom and do a session with the kids, but it's not part of the curriculum at all. Last year, the bullying was, "You're gay, he's gay, everybody's gay." I don't know if you heard about last year, but a child in Dallas County killed himself and since then anytime the word gay comes up or name-calling comes up, it immediately goes to the counselor. This year it's more of the with the girls, "I'm not going to be your friend. She's not going to be your friend." For the boys, they play the punch game. Not a whole lot of name-calling goes on this year and I

think it's because of the zero tolerance. The first couple of weeks, every time there was name-calling, I had to refer to the counselor and after that we haven't had much of an issue...

[When the "You're so gay" stuff would come up last year] I would say that's inappropriate, we don't call names, etc. I would treat it as I would any other derogatory name-calling, whatever the kids would call each other because they meant it in a derogatory sense. It wasn't, "You're gay! That's so great! You're happy to be here!"

I thought that [the district response] was asinine and I thought the teachers saying they weren't *aware* of what was going on was a bunch of bullshit. I think it's a bunch of PR that went out and took control of that situation in the school image and some people made up some documentation to make sure their ass was being covered, but I think it's a bunch of bullshit. I think if the kid went home to kill himself because he was being tortured that day, I think it's been going on for a long time and was extreme. I mean, the teachers see it. I see it. I know who the kids like and who they don't like and who they try to ostracize.

I always feel pressure to conform to school norms. I saw *we* whenever I talk about what I did over the weekend, "We went to the mountains. We did this." The first school I was at, where there were several other gay teachers and those on my team that I was close with, knew about Kel. We would all get together and have drinks after school and that was fine. But this year at the school I'm currently at, nobody's asked. I say *we*, but other than that I think everyone just assumes that *we* is probably he. Maybe they don't, maybe they don't care. I don't know. No one asks who he *or* she is. The fact is, I think a lot of them probably know or probably suspect. I mean a lot of the kids do

already. The school I was at was actually in a neighborhood that Kel and I lived in so a lot of the kids knew. Sometimes I would hear comments, (whispering) “She's gay, she's gay,” and I just didn't address it. I guess there is pressure to conform because it's such a touchy subject, especially when you're working with children. I mean, I don't want anybody to think I'm trying to recruit their children, but I think, I guess I do conform.

[When kids are whispering in the hall], I really wasn't concerned about it. I had been in the county at that point for seven years, I mean, I have really just reached a point where if it's an issue and somebody's going to bring it up, then I'm going to be upfront and honest about it. I wouldn't acknowledge it with the kids and none of them confronted me with it, but I did overhear them and I know there were some kids in the neighborhood that would see us and yell, “Hey Ms. M!”

I also suspect people may know [I am a lesbian] because last year when all of the lesbian drama would start they would all come to me. I don't know why that was, but maybe there was some sort of vibe that was being given off. So the girls would come to me to talk about what was going on. While one of my homeroom girls was one of the girls who came out to me and the other girl, her girlfriend, was in another class. The other girl actually came to me to talk about what was going on and that she had come out to her mom and the girl who was in my class wouldn't come out to her aunt and didn't know what to do about it and I was like, I mean fifth grade. I'd say, “While that's a difficult situation, etc. Why don't we call so and so here and we'll find out what's going on and how she feels about it?” So I talked to both of them about it. I ended up referring it to the counselor because again, I don't want to be...I just wanted to do my job. I was also concerned about what could happen if I handled it more or the fallout from it. I'm

much more comfortable with don't ask, don't tell at school. Also, I've found I've always worked in majority African-American schools with a majority African-American teachers and honestly, a lot of times, especially in the South, maybe not especially in the South, but in the schools, those climates are very conservative. The principals thank the Lord every day for various things. I mean they don't openly pray, but it's very obvious, and some of the comments and things, so I would just rather not pursue it. We have moments of silence in the mornings. I don't think religion plays a large role in the school, but I think my principal makes it very clear point that she's a conservative Christian.

Up until last year, [it hasn't really bothered me to leave parts of myself out or to keep things separate]. Last year was a little frustrating because our ceremony was last year, so all during the spring I was busy planning and doing flowers and doing all of that stuff. One of the other teachers on my grade level had gotten married as well and that was what we talked about. She got this great big shower and blah, blah, blah, so that was like mmmm. So again, I always keep my work colleagues are my work colleagues and my friends are my friends.

[If protected by law], I would come out at school. I am not sure about what the reaction would be though. At the school that I'm at right now, I think my principal would probably encourage me not to talk about it or talk about those sorts of things. That's not appropriate here at school. But I would definitely come out to my colleagues and instead of saying we would say me and Kel...The job protection would make it okay to come out. I just wouldn't worry that I would lose my job. I need a paycheck. That fear would be gone.

Kel's never come to school. She's funny, she's scared to come to school. She's very androgynous. She'll say, "I'm like a walking billboard of gayness," so she's never come. I poke fun at her sometimes and tell her she needs to and just look at my classroom, but she's never actually come into the school at all. She also really doesn't like children very much, so that plays a part in it.

[If she could merge her LGBT identity and her teacher identity], I don't really know. Like I said, it's all kind of part of who I am. I think I would be kind of relieved in some way, such as the kids asking me if I'm married, if I have kids, that sort of stuff, because I really want to say, "Yeah, I am," but if I say, "Yeah, I am," I have to say who I'm married to, or at least I feel like I would and I don't feel like I can do that right now, so it would just give me the opportunity to be a little bit more open about personal stories. It would be good just to be a positive role model, like for the girls last year. Here's a nice normal gay person that teaches me every day. She's just nice and normal and she doesn't seem to be all dressed in leather.

I do get the opportunity to trouble the curriculum though, especially last year with the elections and first African-American president. We were going through our social studies curriculum and it kind of glazes over, and "African-Americans were not allowed fair treatment during this time, etc." Actually, we just finished World War II, and "It was so great because during World War II for the first time, African-Americans were able to get jobs in the factories where the White man had gone off to war. Isn't that just great?" I was like, "What do you think about that guys?" looking out at a sea of brown faces. So you know, I do try. Diversity issues that we do talk about are all about race and I'm very comfortable at this point. When I first started I wasn't, but I'm very comfortable at this

point. Bringing up how White I am, things are different with the way they grew up and the way I grew up, but that it's okay to talk about these issues, and it's okay to talk about skin color and diversity in that sense. So we do question the norm, especially with the race relations and that sort of stuff. The kids respond well to this.

My first year was the only time I actually had real issues with race. I had a parent come up who was upset about grades because her kid wasn't getting an award or something at the awards program. I had to pull the grades, and during the conference, she said, "What do you mean when you say to the kids, you guys?" I mean, "You guys, get it together, helloooo." But she took it as I was saying, "You, Black children, listen to me, the White teacher." The second year I was at that school, there were some issues about I was being racist, and so we actually had a whole fifth grade meeting where I met with my three African-American colleagues and the whole class and talked about, "Now, let's talk about behavior and let's talk about racism and what it means." So we started talking about I'm just a stickler for behavior, and I'm not picking on you because you're African-American, all of the children in the classroom are African-American and you're not darker than this child, let's look at what's different about why I'm riding you and not riding this child or whatever. So, that's the only issue I've had with that.

Vision for the Future

My ideal teaching situation would be a truly diverse classroom. The classrooms I've been are not diverse, they're all low-income, they're all African-American with a small bit of Hispanic thrown in, but I would like a truly diverse classroom with unlimited funding to buy supplies, and a Smartboard, and computer workstations. Just a varied set

of kids, even varied levels is fine with me, where I would love to be out and open and where we all could be out in the open and new projects and learn fun things.

Jamie kept her personal and professional lives separate, being more comfortable with “don’t ask, don’t tell at school” (Interview 2). In her early teaching, she physically separated herself from her work by working an hour away from where she lived, having a mountain to separate the two parts of her life. In doing this, she physically positioned the professional and personal as separate. She sets up two very separate storylines for herself (Harré & Slocum, 2003).

Jamie also employs silence as a strategy to interact with coworkers and students, excluding the personal part of her life from discussion. Jamie, however, wished she could be a positive role model for her students, to be seen as “a nice, normal gay person that teaches me everyday. She’s just nice and normal and doesn’t seem to be all dressed in leather...” (Jamie, Interview 2). This statement positions gay in relation to straight as abnormal to normal or good to bad (Harré & Slocum, 2003).

Chapter 7

“I want people to accept me for who I am.”

Ansley’s Story

Ansley and I have previously known each other. We met six years ago while I was a facilitator for a women’s discussion group at a queer youth organization she was a part of. Ansley and I met in her classroom after school for all three of our interviews. Before the first interview, she had an in-service, so she met me at the school. She self-describes herself as “looking like a man sometimes.” She has short brown hair and is dressed in a gender-neutral fashion, wearing khakis and a school polo shirt. Her presentation and dress suggest the performance of being more traditionally masculine and the performance of lesbian that is associated with that look.

Ansley is a 29-year-old, White female. She has been teaching in Capsas County at the same school for eight years. She has taught fourth and fifth grade in this school, and is currently teaching fifth grade. It is a Title I elementary school and the majority of the student body is African-American.

I identify as lesbian. It's important to me in a way, but it doesn't define me. You know what I mean? I don't have rainbow stuff or display it in any way. You wouldn't know in any way that I was a lesbian if you went to my house or looked in my car. That's just the way I am, but I really don't think it's anyone's business. I don't try to go around trying to flaunt it or represent it or anything like that. It's important in a way because of course, that's who I am. I want people to accept me for who I am. I don't try to hide it. If someone wants to know about it or if I know somebody, they're going to know that's how I am. It's important because that's who I am. So of course my relationships, my

friends and things like that are basically based around that. So my life is based around it, but I don't go around just representing it all the time.

Who I am? I say I'm just a friendly person who's trying to help people out. I love teaching, I love working with children and working with other people. I used to be really shy and introverted, but now I'm pretty outgoing and more like an extravert...I love is music. I'm a family person. I think I'm a good person. I don't think me being gay should cause anyone to change their opinion about me or cause them to think I'm not a good person. That never has happened to me. I've never had anyone who found out I was gay say, "You know, I don't like you anymore," or anything like that. I've had a pretty good experience on coming out. I've never had any problems at all. It's like a miracle, right?

Early Life and Coming Out

I grew up in central New York, went to college in Florida and then moved to this city, where I moved to start teaching. When I was in high school, I kind of realized that I liked girls, so then of course I was on America Online, because I really didn't know how to tell anybody. I was really shy back then...I would go in the chat rooms and talk to other people that were gay. I had some friends that I met off of there and then I actually met a girl who lived near me, so that was my first girlfriend...after meeting her I found out yup, I really do like girls...

When I was growing up, I went to church all the time and I was Lutheran, and when I was about seven my mom actually married a pastor, so that brought us even more into the church because we were there all the time. We were like the pastor's kids. Then all through high school I went to church and in college I was in one of the church groups and things like that and then when I came here and my mom and brother also moved to

Southern City, USA, but we just didn't find a church. We didn't go to church or maybe four or five or six years and now my brother has found a church that he started going to so my mom and me started going to it to. We've been going there for about a year. It's a church where their music is like a rock band...it's basically like being at a rock concert, so I love it...I'm glad we're back in church and everything. I don't feel like they discriminate over there. They accept everybody, I mean, you can wear whatever you want, you can wear a hat, it's whatever.

I didn't really have a problem with it [religion and being gay] because I think God accepts all people. It's not like I think there's a problem with that or that gay people go to hell or anything like that. I know some people do, but the people that I've met in my life growing up in a church, I don't think that they would ever feel a different way toward me and I don't really talk to any of them anymore, but if I were back to my old church today and told everyone, "Hey I'm gay," I don't think they'd be like, Oh, you're going to hell...I think they know me well enough as a person first, and they wouldn't think anything of it.

I decided to become a teacher when I was in the fourth grade. I actually had a really good teacher, she did a lot of hands-on activities, and I just really enjoyed it. I loved school all growing up, but she actually reached out to my family because my mom and my stepdad had just gotten divorced and my mom just had a part-time job and were living in this tiny apartment and we had no money, and my teacher that I had in fourth grade kind of reached out and helped us out. She took us to her camp on the lake on the weekends she took my whole family and stuff like that, so I thought wow this is something that I really want to do and affect children in the same way. That's why when I teach I kind of go along the same guidelines. I try to help the kids with things other

than just school. I pick them up sometimes and take them places and make sure everything is good with their families and stuff like that. So that's when I decided to be a teacher...

I was out in college to my friends and everything. Well, at first I wasn't, maybe the first couple months I wasn't, my roommate didn't know, or I didn't really tell anybody. But of course, you know, once my roommate found out, then it was cool with her and she liked girls and boys anyway, so she was like cool...I think I was out to my friends, but say when I was in class, like in teacher education courses and things like that, I wasn't really out to them. I think they knew, because I wore a hat every day the class and I wore big baggy jeans and I think they kind of figured out, you know this girl either she just likes to dress like a boy or she is gay, one of the two. I don't know, I think they knew, but it never really had an effect on anything. I got along with everyone. But like I said I was really shy back then, so I wouldn't really go up and talk to someone in the first place, so I'm not going to go up and tell them hey, I'm gay. You know. It just never came up, I was just a really, really shy person back then...

During college is when I finally told my mom. That's the main person that I would really care what she thought...I told her and she was like, "Duh, really? I kind of figured, but I wasn't going to say it either," and then of course I told my brothers and they were like, "We've been knowing that since you were like 16." So I was like okay, cool. Actually I just really came out to my dad this last summer, he lives in New York, and I live down here so I see him once a year and talk to him on holidays. I thought my stepmother and stepfamily might have a problem with it so I really never said anything. It's not like I made up I had boyfriends or anything, but I would just not say anything at

all. It was basically like I've been single my whole life. So finally I just decided I'm just going to tell him. My girlfriend that I have now actually wanted to go to New York with me so I took her up with me and told my dad my girlfriend's coming and he was like, "Oh okay, your girlfriend's coming?" and so he was fine with that and everybody was nice to her and everyone was cool with the situation. So I think it worked out pretty well. That was the only one I was ever really too nervous about was I didn't think my stepfamily would like it too much, but they seem like they're fine with it...I know my dad doesn't have a problem, he'll love me no matter what...

[Talking about my sexuality with my dad] never came up that much. I guess that's why I think part of him knew the whole time, "Okay, my daughter's never talked to me about having a boyfriend or anything else. You have to figure that after 20 something years maybe she just doesn't like boys." It just never came up. Really. Every once in a while he would ask me, "Do you have any boyfriends?" or anything like that and I would just say, "No I don't have any boyfriends," or I would just say, "I'm too busy or I work too much," or something like that. I would just make up little excuses like that, so nothing major, really.

Teaching Experiences

I didn't really think really what it meant to be a gay teacher, but of course I was always worried the kids would think I was a boy or something, because sometimes kids, you know how kids are. Sometimes they say, "Are you a boy or a girl?" You know? I know even in college one time when I was doing my student teaching somewhere and one of the students asked at the end of my student teaching, "Are you a boy or girl?" And I was like, "I'm a girl," but I guess back then when I was in college I didn't really

have a lot of dressy clothes and stuff so I just wore jeans and a T-shirt to go on my student teaching, not student teaching, but my teaching observations that we had to go do and stuff, so I guess that's why the kids couldn't tell. I don't know, but that was a little bit, I was like, "I've been working here for how long and you still don't know?" So I was like that's kind of crazy. But you know how it is with people asking if you're a boy. I guess you know how it is and calling you sir. Of course I get it all the time. It's all right, I'm used to it now. I used to get pissed. While I used to get mad, first of all why would you call something out if you were not sure? But now I guess, I think it's kind of funny like before, I used to be kind of embarrassed like man, this person actually saw me and thought I was a guy. But now I just think it's funny if someone calls me sir and I tell everybody this little boy called me a man or something like that. [The shift in thinking began because] I think I was just more comfortable with myself like in college and maybe my first two years of teaching I wasn't really comfortable with myself, I had lower self-esteem...So anytime somebody said something to me that I thought was negative or could be negative, it would hurt me and make my self esteem worse. But now my self-esteem is higher, and I'm like oh, whatever, I don't care if they think I look like a boy because I look like a boy, especially when I'm out wearing a hat and wearing boys' clothes. So how can I get mad if someone calls me a boy?

I think the [shift in self-esteem] just happened as I got older, and then as I started teaching, and then I had to talk in front of other people and I had to get along with people who weren't the same as me, maybe they had different personalities and different hobbies, and they liked different things and they dressed a different way...Since I've been teaching I've been friends with people that if I met or seen them in college I never really

would've talked to them...I think that's when it changed was when I had to talk to more people and realize that people are just people...

I haven't had any students ask me if I'm a boy or girl, but the kids, when I get my hair cut, then when I come in they're like, "Oh Miss L., you got your hair cut again you look like a boy again," and I'll say "I don't like my hair long, you know, it gets in my face and everything like that." So I just act like I really don't care. It doesn't really bother me because like I said, honestly it is like a boy's haircut and kids seeing it are going to say that's a boy's haircut. When I see it I think that's a boy's haircut. But I'm not going to sit here and have long hair, so the kids don't say you look like a boy, I'm like no, because I want short hair...Sometimes the kids will say, "Ms. L., do you ever wear skirts or dresses?" and I'm like, "No I never wear skirts or dresses. You'll never catch me dead in one and this and that." They don't really question it, though. They're just like, "Oh okay." I think they're young enough that they're still cool with it. They, I guess, just don't really get into it. They do say things like me looking like a boy with my hair, and they of course say things about Miss L. why don't you have a boyfriend and you know, oh, we should try to get Miss L. a boyfriend and all this stuff and I'm just like okay, whatever you want to do. It's just kind of funny to me.

[When kids ask about a boyfriend] I tell them, "Oh I'm too busy, I have too much stuff going on with school and stuff like that." They are usually like, "Oh okay," or they say, "You need to get a boyfriend," or something and I tell them to go play or get out of here or something and they just go. So sometimes I just have to cut it off when they start asking too many questions. That's what I normally do when they ask when they start

asking. You know, go play because normally it's when we're outside when they have time to talk to me...I just cut the conversation off. We don't need to get into it...

A girl was in my class last year and her mom was gay and her mom had a girlfriend, and so I guess the girl because she had been around lesbians, knows how her moms look at how they act and stuff, basically, she knew I was gay. She decided that she wanted to be gay and that she wanted to have a crush on me. I was like, this was kind of weird. This is never happened before. She would send me notes from a secret admirer, and every day there would be a note from your secret admirer or you're looking cute today or something like that and I'm like oh my gosh this is crazy, you know. Then she would always ask me, "Did you get anything from your secret admirer?" and I'm like, "Yes, I got something from my secret admirer, whoever it is tell them to stop," but she would just keep doing it and keep doing it. Eventually I had to go and talk to the counselor and my principal because I was like a little bit uncomfortable. I mean, I wasn't uncomfortable, I thought she was just a kid having a crush on a teacher or whatever. But I was like, Okay this is kind of weird because I can get fired for being gay. If there's this girl that send me little notes and all this stuff. I need to tell somebody about it before..." Who knows what might happen, so I went and told them and stuff of course, when I told them, the counselor was acting like she didn't know I was gay and I'm like, "You know I'm gay," but she was trying to act like she didn't know or something but the principal knew, so she said, "Do you think the girl knew that you were [gay]?" and I said, "I guess she does because she's around her mother and stuff." Then they were going to take the girl out of my class. They never did end up taking her out of my class, so she stayed in my class. I told her, "I know you're the secret admirer. You've got to stop sending me

notes and stuff like that, because it's inappropriate,” and that was it. She stopped sending notes and stuff like that. She was a nice girl and everything and she was a good student, but I just was just kind of weird. She was one of my favorites before that, but then after that I felt like I can't act a certain way toward her, I couldn't act like she's my favorite anymore, or give her more attention because what if someone thinks something weird? So that was kind of weird situation for me. That's the only time that ever happened, but it's one thing I always think of when someone says something about being a gay teacher. It's the first thing that comes to my mind is that girl...

That was my one experience that kind of freaked me out because like I said, you can be fired for being gay, and I told my principal that too, “You know I can be fired for being gay,” and there's this girl writing the notes and I'm like something's got to be done because I said, “I'm not going to lose my job for something crazy like that.” She [the principal] was like, “Well, that's true.” She knows I am and everybody knows I am [gay]. I don't think I would really lose my job because of that; they all know I'm a great teacher, so why would they fire me for something like that?

[A situation with the girl's moms occurred this year] when the mom was going to come on a field trip and both moms came, but there was only space for one mom because I told a girl one mom can come and one can't. I guess the connection got crossed and both of them came and it turned out that one could go or neither of them could go. I don't know, I still feel to this day that it was a little bit maybe, they didn't want the moms to go, like if it had been a mom and a dad they might've said, “Okay we can make space for two,” but the girl's actual mom looked like a boy, I mean, I couldn't even tell she was a female after I was sitting and talking to her. I think possibly that's why they said only

one could go or neither...I felt like if it was a husband and wife or a mom and a dad that they would've maybe said okay we can add an extra to chaperone or we can make space, but since it was the two moms, I just felt like maybe it was some kind of discrimination in it that they tried to get away with there. But of course I wasn't going to say anything because I like my job and I don't bring up anything that's going to get me in trouble or anything like that, so I just left it alone...

[If there was job protection] I would possibly say something, but I can't be sure. Most of the faculty, they know that I'm gay. So it's just the kids, of course I don't tell them. I kind of keep it a secret from them. If it were cool to tell them I would tell them. I wouldn't care. I would just say I'm a little different, you know. I'm sure they would still like me, just the same that's what I think they might cut down on the gay comments and talking about gay people all the time. Who knows?

I came out to the other teachers over time. Teachers would find out about it or they would think about it, but most of it would find out about it because I go to a school party or something and bring a girl or something. It's not like I'm trying to hide it. I talk about it all the time...The teachers will sometimes ask me questions like, a couple weeks ago one of the teachers asked me, "Are you born gay? Or do you just decide to be gay?" Are you serious, you never heard someone answer this before? So I told them, "Well you're born like that but sometimes you just don't realize it until you get older," well that's my belief. Then one of the other teachers made a comment about, that she didn't believe you were born like that or something that she thinks the environment causes it and stuff like that and I'm like, "Well you've got your beliefs, and I've got mine." I don't try to argue, I don't try to force my opinion on someone...I know there are some people

who get kind of flustered or something, they can't, if I'm talking about girls or something, they can't be there. You know what I mean? They just don't want to hear about it. So I just don't talk about it with them...

I don't remember anything about feeling strange about being gay for my first year teaching or anything like that. I probably just don't remember because I was so like trying to do everything perfect, and everything, and trying to get through the year and really just getting used to teaching in the first place...My second year of teaching I went out way too much and I was out on weekdays, and I would get four hours of sleep and come in and teach. That was horrible. I can't believe I ever did that. It was the worst...I never really had a group of lesbian friends who are like let's go out, let's do this, let's party, let's talk. I was like oh, this is awesome. I think that was something for me, well I had to go. I didn't want to miss a single night. I was like well Wednesday night, I have school tomorrow, I still have to go. If they're staying out until 3:30 in the morning I have to stay. I can't leave early. That's kind of messed up, but I think that's what it was.

I think the acceptance is pretty good here. The teachers here accept all different types of people. We've got gay people, straight people, Black people, White people, you know, all different, Indian people, so we've got a variety of different types of people here. I've never heard anyone make a negative comment about anyone else based on that so I don't think that it's really a problem. I've heard comments people have made about somebody's personality, but never oh you know it's because she's gay or because she's Black or something like that. I've never heard that. Now with the students, I think a lot of the students do have some racist views. They might have some homophobia just because of what they see at home or what their parents say. I think when kids are that

age they really don't know any better. When I was younger I used to think being gay was nasty too. I think nowadays they have a lot more tolerance and acceptance of it than they used to, because now there's actually kids in the classrooms that actually have two moms. It's like okay, they're exposed to it and they know because there's a girl that does have two moms in the other fifth-grade class, and the kids will say something about it. Like oh, she has two moms, and I can't tell if they're making fun of her or if they're just saying it. I think the acceptance here is pretty good...

I know when I first started working here and where you teach health, it specifically says homosexuality is not to be portrayed as an acceptable alternative lifestyle or something like that. I was like, "Wow, are you serious? You have that in the curriculum guide?" That was the only thing I thought was kind of strange about the curriculum. Other than that it's just your basic reading and math everything else... The reading books that we have has all different ethnicities in it... I think the books are helpful for race and ethnicity and stuff like that. Now of course you're not going to see a story about *Heather Has Two Mommies*¹³ or anything like that.

I don't think [the school library has gay-themed children's books] because I just feel like I would have come across it because I feel like I've checked out every book in the library. I haven't ever actually gone and looked for it or to look up *Heather Has Two Mommies*. There are books on stepfathers and stuff like that, but there are no books on two mothers or two fathers. Well, now that I think about it I think there's actually a book, it's about different types of families, and it says two mothers or two fathers is a type of

¹³ The first lesbian-theme children's book published.

family...If it was here my kids would've checked it out and showed it to me like, "Look at this."

The girl in my class checked out a book called *Gayneck* it's about this pigeon and she just thinks it's so funny. She thought it was so funny and so cool that she checked out the book that had gay in the title. I don't think she did it to get a rise out of me. I think she saw it and thought, "Oh my gosh, this book has gay in the title." She even came up and said, "Don't get mad at me for checking out this book. I hope I won't get in trouble," and then it was *Gayneck* and I just started laughing because I thought it was so stupid that she checked it out. It's not like she was going to read it. I would never say it [there's nothing wrong with that]. If I said there was nothing wrong with that she would probably say, "Why, are you gay or something like that?" I don't even want to have that question brought up. I would just say, "Just go sit down." That's what I do when they start talking about that. "Go sit down or stop talking..."

I think [the staff] all do [know I am gay]. There might be a few teachers that don't actually know it just because I've never said it in front of them or maybe they've never hung out with me outside of school, but when I hang out with them outside of school, I wear clothes, I mean of course I wear a hat, everyone's seen me in a hat. I wear baggy jeans or a boy's shirt, so I look like a guy when I go out after school...

I think I've had really good relationships with the parents in the past. I think it's just as a teacher, you have to put forth a certain amount of effort to get a relationship with a parent...One family that I had their son in class four years ago...I helped them out a lot. I'm still friends with them...I think they know I'm gay, not because I told him, but they figured out because back when I was with Deandra [Ansley's ex-girlfriend] she was

always there. I think they just kind of just figured it out because they came over a lot and did a lot of stuff with me. I know that they know not just because they came out and said it, but just because of some comments they've made. Not negative comments, but comments that let me know, "Hey, we know and it's cool." I think that's pretty cool that some parents actually *did* find out and they were cool with it.

My girlfriend came [to school] one time and the kids were loving her and they were all happy and they were talking to her and having a good old time, but then unfortunately the principal came in, and I think she knew that was my girlfriend. I don't know if it was because she was my girlfriend this happened or not, I don't really know, but she came in and basically told me, "You can't have visitors, she's going to have to leave." I said, "Well, she just wanted to come in and see what I do for work." I was teaching and doing my regular day; we were doing what we normally do...After that she'll come every once in a while like at lunch time or come after school or something to see me, but she won't come during the day. Another teacher next door to me her brother used to come, but he was going to school to be a teacher so I don't know if that was different because he was going to be a teacher...Now my mom comes, she used to come every week she used to come and volunteer with the class and go to lunch with us and stuff like that and there was never a problem with what that, so when this happened and there was a problem, I felt like possibly it was because of that [being gay], but I think more the principal thought I was going to be distracted or that I was trying to talk to her or hang out with her, whatever instead of teaching the class. I don't know, you can only guess...

[Being out] just means people can know the true me and I don't have to try to hide something and people can accept me for who I am. My girlfriend, she's not totally out, she's out to her parents and friends and stuff like that, but if we were out walking around or something, it isn't like we hold hands or anything like that. Now I would, it doesn't really matter to me as long as it's not near the school, if it's in the city, but she won't because she feels like people are going to look at us and people might make comments and things like that. Of course, I like being out because I don't have to try to hide anything or make up lies, because for so many years you have that tell lies all the time, if you have a girlfriend you have to, you can't tell that you have a girlfriend...

I don't really have to hide anything from the staff...it's just from the kids in the class. Just yesterday a student said, "Ms. L., why aren't you married?" and I just said, "Well, I'm not. I'm just not," and the student said, "Why not? You should get married," and all this stuff and I didn't feel like going into all the "you don't just get married."

Every day it happens, [students calling each other gay or saying "You're so gay" as a put-down] I just tell them to stop calling names or you've got a check, because that's what I do for behavior. I don't really do anything major like say there's nothing wrong with that. It's just basically the same thing as every other name like if they call someone gay or if they call them ugly. I just categorize it altogether. Just because I'm gay, I don't want to put more emphasis on someone calling someone else gay...We have a no bullying policy, but if you send a student to the office for calling a name or bullying someone constantly, they might call home, and then send them back, or they might not even call home. They might just talk to them...Every day somebody's calling someone gay are telling them to shut up or saying a cuss word, there is something every

day...Bullying does occur and nothing is really being done about it. I think there's a fair amount [of bullying]...

The teachers are the main ones who intervene and talk to the students and make sure it stops...it's kind of just talk to them and trying to get them to realize that they're really hurting someone else's feelings. There's too much bullying in the school. That's one thing I don't really like.

[Since the previous interview, an incident occurred with another teacher]. We were sitting at lunch, and I told him that I was getting interviewed and he was like, "Oh, what for?" I said, "My friend is getting her doctorate, so she's doing her dissertation on being an elementary school teacher that is gay or lesbian," and he kind of looked at me weird. I was like, "What?" He kind of questioned that like, "Well what difference does it make?" It does make a difference because you can't share certain things; you have to hide certain things from the kids and certain things from the teachers and things like that. He said it just seemed like he didn't really think it was something you would do a dissertation on. He even said, "Oh, they let people do dissertations on anything nowadays." I said, "Well, Mr. James, a teacher here did his dissertation on being a Black male elementary school teacher, so that's like the same thing," He said, "No, not really because if you're a Black male people can see it and people, as soon as they come in the classrooms, are going to see a Black male." I said, "Well that is true, especially kids when they come in, they don't see me and think, "Ooh she is gay." If I was teaching middle school or high school, I think they would. If they came in they would say, "Oh, our teacher's gay," or they would know within the first couple of weeks, because they would figure it out, but in elementary school they don't really ever figure it out. The only

time actually was one year when I taught summer school and some of those kids, they were kids from other schools, and they were asking me, “Are you happy?” and stuff, you know those silly questions kids ask like basically are you gay? So I just try to ignore them, but that's the only time I've really had kids ever actually think that I was gay. I've never heard kids say anything about that before. That's what I told him about that but he was saying he thought it was different because it's not something that you can definitely tell just by looking at someone. I'm like it's still a difference; you're still in a different category than other teachers that are straight because it's a totally different lifestyle. Of course he doesn't know that because he's not in it. He's just a straight male, and they don't know anything. He's Black. He said Mr. James actually interviewed him for the dissertation and I was like oh okay so you *really* know about it...

You can't really tell by looks all of the time [if a teacher's gay]. If someone's gay, you can sometimes look at them and say I'm pretty sure she's gay. If a female teacher has really short hair or wears boyish type of clothes to work, maybe I would think they were gay. I don't really think as a teacher that it really changes the way they teach or the way they interact with the students, or interact with the parents, or the faculty or anything like that. I just think it makes it a little more difficult...that you can't really let any of your personal life out to the students...If there was a more feminine gay teacher I wouldn't know, I mean, you wouldn't know unless they told you.

I don't feel pressure to conform in school. I wear khakis and a school shirt every day. Of course now that we have the uniforms that's what everybody wears now...Everyone always says, “You never dress up;” if I dress up one day it's a big deal...I just wear khakis and a button down shirt like the polo shirt, and then I usually wear

sneakers like black sneakers with the outfits, so it's not like I'm trying to be girly, you know. When I first started working here, I think I did because I used to wear black pants and nice black shoes, and more dressy shirts. It still was not extremely girly, but they were girl clothes, and it looked more girly than now.

I switched to khakis and polos because more teachers knew about me and I just felt more comfortable wearing that, so I just stopped trying to dress up. I think when I first started teaching I thought, oh, you know, you have to dress a certain way as a teacher, but then once I realized you really don't because you just teaching and you're in a classroom with a bunch of kids... That's when I realized you can just work khakis and a school shirt...

I think [teachers who present as more masculine have to tone that down]. You don't want people to ask are you gay or ask do you like girls and this and that. Even kids, you don't want them to ask you that because it might lead into something else and they might say something to this person and who knows. I don't try to tone it down so much, I wear my school shirt and khakis and black pants or whatever like that, but the kids are just so used to it that if I do wear something different then they get freaked out... They're so used to me dressing one way.

If I had to change schools, I think it would be the same. I think I would act the same way, dress the same way, I think I would come out to the teachers at the new school within the first maybe a month or two. I think possibly sooner than that who knows. If were just talking and they seem like they're cool and everything, I wouldn't have a problem. I wouldn't really hide it from anybody nowadays except for the kids in the class and the parents. That's only because it has to do with my job. If it was cool for me to

say, "Hey, I like girls," I would tell them, if I didn't think I was going to get fired if I tell the kids that. Some students that I've had in my class in the past who I still do things with, like the boy who I was telling you about who comes to my house to work on projects...sometimes I think it would be easier if I just told them I was gay. I wouldn't have to keep hiding and saying this is my roommate. It just seems strange to me. But then I'm like no, because if I tell him, he lives in the apartment complex with my kids now. You don't know if you can really trust him. I think that I would be able to trust him, but you can't take that chance. I just keep it away from all of the students and parents. I just let everybody else know.

It is important to me [to be out to coworkers] because then I feel like if they're talking about their boyfriends or husbands, I feel like I can be in the conversation and stuff like that, so I don't feel as left out...

I live about 15 minutes south of here. There is a chance that I might run into somebody at the store or somewhere, but usually if I'm coming anywhere near the school, like a 10 mile radius around the school, I try to wear a certain type of clothes, which sucks too because I want to wear these baggy jeans and a hat and a hoodie when I go somewhere, but if it's around the school maybe a 5 mile radius around the school, or right around the school, then I tend not to wear that...I don't want to meet see me wearing different types of clothing because of the kids are going to come back to school and tell everyone I saw Ms. L. and she was wearing boy clothes. Then the whole thing is going to start up of "Is Ms. L. gay?" They know what it is. They know what females who are gay typically look like, so that's why I don't do it. I still wear a hat, no matter what. I just might wear more regular jeans. They're still boy jeans, but they fit me more, and then a

T-shirt, but I won't wear something that's crazy. I like wearing long baggy shorts, with long socks under them, but I would not be caught dead, I would die if the student saw me in that. I would just die. I would never wear that unless I was going into the city or to stay at my house or going down south somewhere.

If I told the kids, “Hey, I like girls, I'm gay and that's just the way I am. God made me that way, and it's not going to change and I'm still the same person and the same teacher,” I don't think the kids would care at all. I think they would still act the same way. I think they might ask a million questions like, “Was that girl your girlfriend?” but I don't think it would change the way they acted toward me. I don't know about parents if they went home and told their parents, would a parent of a little girl be like, “Oh, well I don't want her looking at my daughter,” while straight teachers don't look at the boys. There's always a thing the same thing with male teachers, it's like I don't know why they think a male teacher is going to look at the girls wrong. They don't say anything about the female teacher looking at the boys or because I'm a gay teacher and going to look at the girls...Unfortunately some people do and that's why it's mixed everyone else up. I honestly think that they'd be cool with it.

I think I'd be less comfortable [being out] at the higher level because I think may be there might be a gay student that might want to try to talk to me about being gay or might try hitting on me or something like that, I don't know. I think that would just complicate things way too much. The higher up the level I would feel less comfortable. If it's the younger kids, I know they think, “Ewww, you're gay, and gay people are gross.” I think for them it would actually be a good thing because they'd be like, “Oh my gosh Miss L. is gay, she's cool, there's nothing wrong with her.”

Vision for the Future

I don't think that far in the future [five to ten years]. I think developing as a person, becoming more outgoing, and maybe becoming less, materialistic...When I'm 35, I want to have a baby...At first I was thinking about adopting a baby and then I was thinking about maybe my girlfriend or somebody else getting pregnant and having a baby and I was like well I kind of feel like well I'm a woman I want a baby and I kind of think that maybe if I had my own baby it would be more special...Everyone [at work] gets a huge kick out of it and they're like all you're actually going to have a baby? Then they're like, "Wouldn't your girlfriend have a baby because she's the girly one?" This other teacher, who works at the school too, she's a paraprofessional and she actually used to be my roommate and she knows my girlfriend too and they're like, "Your girlfriend's the girly one," and she's like, "No, not really. It's really the opposite." She had tried to explain to everyone that no, she's [Ansley] the one who would have the baby and stuff like that...If I look at you [Allison], you look like you are the boy in the relationship and when people look at me they think, "Oh, you're the boy in the relationship..." There's other lesbian relationships where the person that looks like the girl really isn't the girl. I thought that was cool. I think having a baby and having a family and my girlfriend, she knows I want to have a baby, and she's cool with it and everything...So I figure if I'm still with her when I'm 35, okay and if I'm not, okay. I'm still having a baby, even if I'm by myself. It doesn't really matter either way.

I'm going to be pregnant and then they're [the students are] going to be like, "Where is your husband? You're not married? You don't have a boyfriend?" or something like that...I don't know what I would say. I'll have to think about that before I

actually do get pregnant... Yet I can't sit there and say I don't have a boyfriend all year, when I'm pregnant. It would seem kind of strange. Maybe I'll just have to start calling my girlfriend, my boyfriend instead of Kennetta and Keith or something like that because he loves playing video games all the time. If I described her, she would be a guy anyway, I wouldn't have to lie, I would just change the name... I don't want to lie and that's why usually I don't say anything about it at all. I'd probably slip up or something, and they'd be like, "What? Why'd you say that?"... I wouldn't change my last name or anything like that. I guess I would just have to say I just got pregnant. There's no boyfriend...

For teachers to be able to come out, it would probably have to come from the state or even higher. I know if my principal said, "If you want to tell the kids were gay, you can," and I'd be like, "No thanks. Are you trying to get me fired? Did I do something wrong?" If the superintendent said it, no, sorry, I wouldn't. Maybe if the state said it was now okay for teachers to be gay, then I might. As far as what I already do [being out] is the furthest I'm going to get, because I'm basically out to everybody that I can be out to...

It's not like I have it separated. I do in a little bit, in a little way how I don't wear certain things around. It's just like if I were female, girly teacher I wouldn't wear my hoochie outfits where the kids might see me. I think it's just a certain dress, there's a certain unknown rule, whatever rule for teachers. That's like you don't dress like a hoe when you might see your kids. You don't dress like a complete boy when you might see your kids. I guess there's not really much else I can do to join it together.

Ansley would position herself as a teacher through her dress. She was careful not to wear certain clothing that would stereotypically position her as gay if she knew she was going to be near the school or might run into students. By actively changing her dress and appearance, Ansley is conforming to the idea of what a teacher should look like through her dress (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Ferfolja, 2007).

Ansley is out to other staff members at her school but not to her students. When asked about being married or having a girlfriend, Ansley will change the subject so she does not have to discuss it with her students. She exercises her own agency by not being out to students, but is also sacrificing some of herself in order to do so. She positions herself within different storylines when talking to staff versus talking to students or parents (Harré & Slocum, 2003).

Chapter 8

“I had to lead a hidden life in some way.”

Mary’s Story

Mary and I met for our first two interviews at her home in the early evening and at her home for the final interview in the early afternoon. She has a haircut that suggests a more traditionally feminine appearance. She was dressed casually for our interviews. Her appearance suggests a performance of femininity, implying an ability to pass as straight in the performance of sexuality. Throughout the interviews, her dogs would sit near us, sometimes interrupting the conversation. It was a more relaxed setting and I think because of this, the conversation flowed easily.

Mary is a 31-year-old White female and has been teaching for five years. Currently, she teaches at Anderson Elementary in Franklin County, the same school Carter teaches in. She teaches elementary art, K-5 and it is her first year at this school because it just opened. She has also worked in neighboring Dallas County. She enjoys teaching in Franklin County because it is supportive of the arts in the district.

I identify as bi. It is not important to me because I usually don't label myself at all. The parts of my identity that are important are being a female, first and foremost, a humanitarian, animal lover. Those things, I think are more important to me than my sexual identity...

Early Life and Coming Out

I always thought about it [being gay] and then in college I came home one summer, and I worked with a girl that I ended up having a huge crush on. Things just kind of opened up for me after that. Being in Southern City, USA, I was able to be open

about that and explore that. I went to school in [the Northeast] at a very small, it was a public liberal arts school, but conservative in many ways. I was definitely not out there. I didn't even really talk about it, but when I was here I was free to do as I please. I kept my life pretty closed from that group of friends, but here, I had no qualms about sharing that with anybody, even people I grew up with. Nobody really had an issue with it, because in Southern City, USA, with the way we were raised, it was pretty open-minded. I started dating women, and I moved back to Southern City, USA, and that's when I started having relationships with women. My first crush was 19, and I'm 31 now, so I've been dating women; I've dated a couple of guys between there, but I guess my significant relationships have been women over the past 11, 12 years.

I didn't date women in [the Northeast]. I guess I could have, I knew there were lesbians on campus, not very many of them, but it just didn't fit into the lifestyle I was leading there. I played sports, and I would definitely look at people and say, "Well they are gay, they are gay," but I wouldn't say anything to anybody. Growing up here and having my gaydar¹⁴, if you will, I felt like I could label people pretty well. I don't know, it was one of the reasons that I left. It just was not a comfortable environment. Even if I wasn't dating women, it was very close-minded, and I didn't like the feel of it.

I don't know [about stigma attached to being bisexual in the straight community]. The people I'm friends with, my closest friends, first of all, I hate, I hate bi, I don't know why but I would never introduce myself to somebody and say, "Hi, I'm bi." Maybe there is a stigma there, maybe I have a double standard, but there's something weird about

¹⁴ "The ability to identify subtle mannerisms and enactment of body that may indicate that one is non-heterosexual" (Farr & Degroult, 2008, p. 430). For further discussion of gaydar, see chapter 5.

it...The whole bisexual thing seems greedy or something, like you pulled from both pools or something. It seems selfish, so I don't really like, I really just hate that label. The people I'm really close with, my friends, really could care less if I can explain that to them. It's usually the guys that are like, "Oh, so who are you dating now?" I'll say, "I dated this person or I dated this person," "Oh, okay." Most people want to compartmentalize people, and I understand that. I just have to say this is where I'm at and this is what I want to do and I like this person or I don't like this person, or I like boys and I don't like girls or I like girls and I don't like boys...Most of my friends really don't care. I don't know about the straight community. I've had people say to me you're not really gay and I've had gay people say you're not really straight. People like to compartmentalize, it's easier for them to understand and figure you out, they want to put you in a box. I don't know if I can make a generalization about that.

Coming out to family is a different story. My friends here, it really wasn't an issue at all. It was like I have a girlfriend and they would say okay. There were definitely questions, but nobody walked away from me, nobody said this is not okay. My family is a little different. I talked to my mother about and it she wasn't happy about it. The irony there is my mother is a lawyer who does gay/lesbian adoptions. They met girls I was dating, but it wasn't something that we talked about. It wasn't something, they didn't ask me about it. I also grew up in a family that was very southern. They didn't even ask about my boyfriends in high school, so it's hard to tell. I don't think they liked it but my father was nice, he was respectful if I brought somebody around, a girlfriend, he was very kind to them. It wasn't like, "You can't be a part of our life." It's not something that I think they, what's the word I'm looking for, they don't embrace it fully.

With my mother, I don't know if it's okay for other people and not my daughter type of situation, that's a category I put it into...I don't know why, why that is for her. It's very odd...I'm sure if I wanted to adopt, and I would like to, that she would be my lawyer and she would help me get the kids, not a problem at all...I think actually my father is open-minded and he's more conservative of the two. I don't know why. My parents interact with me differently when I am dating men. My mother is much more, not necessarily asking me about how my relationship is going, but if I said I want this person to come to dinner, my mother is much more agreeable to it than she would be if I was saying I'm bringing a woman to dinner...

Our art ed department [in college] was great. The good thing about artists is that they are so open-minded about most things. We are teaching multicultural things, and I felt very free if I was dating a woman at the time, being like, yes, I'm dating a woman or this is my girlfriend. I never had any sort of negative feedback from that at all. A very dear friend of mine, we met at State in photography classes, and she's also gay and we hit it off and it was finally nice to have a friend in the community, because I was coming to Southern City, USA and I didn't really know anybody and the idea of going to a lesbian bar by myself was a little uncomfortable. That's not really my scene anyway. It was nice to have a friend who is like me. She had dated guys too, so that also made things more comfortable because there's definitely some negative attitudes in the gay community.

I thought about my sexuality very little [becoming an art teacher]. I mean, it definitely crossed my mind, but then I thought, "I'll teach inner-city. I'll teach in Maryville schools and the Central Lakeland area where I grew up." I just never thought it would be an issue. I don't know, I just didn't. I definitely thought that I couldn't share

my life completely, but I thought I could be out to everybody, colleagues. I didn't think I could be out to students and parents. I didn't think we had progressed that far yet, but I definitely thought with my colleagues. I could be open about who I was. It was the same thing thinking about teaching in city schools. I think at the time, I thought I could be out, because I was working at Starbucks or Caribou Coffee, and I could be out there, because they are so gay supportive and half the people I worked with are gay. I didn't really work in jobs, even if they were part-time, where I couldn't be out. I guess I kind of had in mind, had that I could, at least to the people I worked with.

Then I got my first job and realized I couldn't be [out]. My first job was in North Franklin County, very affluent communities. While there were several people that I worked with were gay, it was never talked about. One of my principals, I know he was gay, but he lived nowhere near the school he was principal at. People would say come to church with me, come to my singles group, it was very churchy. That almost offended me more than not being able to be out because I had grown up in such an accepting community and religion just wasn't a focus of my lifestyle or my friends' lifestyle. I had to go to church every Sunday, but religion did not dictate, it definitely was not a part of my identity, if you will, but up there it was. I have some major stereotypes now about those communities and churches that are up there. And even for women, I have friends who literally believe, they go to these churches where they are taught and told that they should be home serving their husbands.

I don't attend church, I'm a C.E.O. which is Christmas and Easter only and I haven't done that lately. I do enjoy mass, I was raised Episcopalian with a touch of Southern Baptist and I never had any negative experiences with religion until I became

older and met people who want to put their values and beliefs on me. I was raised in an Episcopal church, and I was forced to go to church every Sunday because my parents believed that it taught values and morals. In the summers I would spend a week with my grandmother going to Vacation Bible school at a Baptist church in a tiny town and we would go to church there once every month or two, and even there I never heard negative... nobody told me to hate people or fags were bad, or I never had hatred towards any group or person. I never heard that growing up in the church, so for me, the church... I like religions in general, I don't necessarily see... I shouldn't say that, I like the way I was raised in my religion and if I don't like it I leave. I made my mother leave the church I was christened in and because they went with the sect of the Episcopal Church that believed women couldn't be ministers...I have nothing against it and I don't know if I would make my children go to church. I think I can teach morals and values apart from the church, but the churches I went to are great.

I don't have anything negative to say, but the things that I hear about from other people... a friend of a friend who I know from hanging out considered herself a lesbian until the last year when she joined a church and now she is not and she essentially thinks that we have a bad lifestyle and we can be changed. It's a horror story, you used to only see on Oprah and Donohue, but I'm like that really happens. It's really here. That's a little freaky to me... Then there are all these churches now that say that they accept anybody, but it's still don't ask, don't tell, like what you do in your own life is fine, but we want you to come to church, just don't talk about it.

We have a Christian club that meets Thursday mornings. The principal asked the group to come and they do it before school starts, so I guess that's how they can get away

with it. It takes place on school grounds. The fact we had Christmas trees in the lobby and we didn't have Menorahs or any other holiday that is celebrated. We didn't even have Kwanzaa. One of my very good friends, who is a special ed teacher is Jewish, and our principal calls her up to the front office in front of other people and says, "Do you have a problem with Christmas trees?"...She responded "No, it's fine." Apparently he made a comment about, "I'm Christian and this is my school, so if I want Christmas trees I'm going to have Christmas trees." I have an issue with that. I'd rather fight that battle right now than the gay issue, because I want these kids who live in a Calloway Place bubble to realize there's more in the world than Calloway Place. That means there's more than one religion, and there's possibilities for so many other things than what they see at home or at their school. Why don't we have some Muslims come in, or why don't we have some Buddhist monks? They go to church every Sunday. They get this already, on Thursday morning with the Christian club. Let's have something that's not in their life and open their eyes to something else.

Teaching Experiences

My first year [teaching] was really eye opening about the real world. A couple of my friends, I told [I was gay]. I felt like I had to tell somebody. I couldn't lie *all the time*. I even felt like oh I could lie as long as somebody knows, at least I can go to somebody to talk to sometimes. I had a friend here and a friend there that knew everything. One was an art teacher and one was a second grade teacher, and everything was fine. I knew her [the art teacher's] boyfriend. He had gone to State. At State, everybody knew me as dating women. I think at the beginning of the year I had dated a guy and so I talked to her about that, and then I met somebody, a female, and I started

dating her. It was pretty significant. She said later, "I went home and told my boyfriend and then when you told me about the girl he was kind of like, 'Yeah, I wondered about that...'" She was completely fine with it and she still is a good friend of mine.

In Dallas County, I didn't tell anyone. Then I ended up dating a guy for a little bit and of course then I could talk about that. Then I left Dallas and when I came back to Franklin, I was in a pretty significant relationship with a woman, and actually became engaged. This was a year and a half ago and I was not out at all. Most people just thought I was engaged to some guy. Now the other art teacher was a lesbian, so of course she knew everything. We could talk about that. We worked together five days a week. Then I kind of confronted a fifth-grade teacher who I assumed, he was gay. I just said, "Oh, you're family¹⁵, right?" He was completely caught off guard. I'm thinking, "Dude, you know, it's cool." I was just like, "Yeah, I am too." And he was like, "Okay." Then he came back to me and said I needed to be careful saying stuff like that and I was like, "Well, you're the only person I've said it to and I just assumed you were. If you weren't, you would've had no idea what I was saying by that comment." He was like, "Yeah, you're right." We just left it at that. We're not any closer, there's not some special bond... This year, a couple of my friends that I work with know, the other art teacher, the music teacher, and that same fifth-grade teacher's at the school with me.

My theory [about why he didn't want to talk about it] is it's an African-American community, 99% of my kids are African-American. This is an African-American male. He is effeminate in a lot of ways, but he goes to church on Sunday with the African-American community that all goes to church. I mean, it's so church oriented. I don't get

¹⁵ Family refers to being part of the LGBT community. In this instance, it was assumed the language would only be known if the other person was gay.

it. I still try to understand it but I think the church has a huge thing to do with why they're not accepting of gays and lesbians. That's my theory as to why he doesn't talk about it. I also think that's not a main part of who he is. He's so many other things, that his sexuality it wouldn't make a difference if he was out or not, to his colleagues. He is still an amazing teacher. There is another teacher there and I asked him, "Is he gay?" and he said yeah and I said okay, but I've never said anything to him because he's very quiet. I mean, we have a good rapport with each other, but I wouldn't want to make him uncomfortable. He's just not the same personality as Mr. Draper, who's the other teacher that we know about each other. I just leave it at that. I keep a lot to myself, but I would keep a lot to myself. I feel like I'm in a church setting again, just like North Franklin County. The gay issue is even under the other issues. It irritates me that I get religious e-mails at a public school. So I'm not even going to deal with the gay fight.

There's probably four White teachers out of 40 to 60 teachers, 40 teachers, 60 employees. I've grown up in Southern City, USA my entire life and in middle school and high school I was the minority, so that has never been an issue for me. I think that's how my parents wanted me to be raised, or at least my mother, because they very easily could have sent me to Dale City Schools, while that was pretty diverse, I guess I could've gone to any private school if they wanted to pay the money. They didn't and so I feel very fortunate. I feel in my education I was taught to be very open-minded. It's not even the gay thing. We weren't taught that in school, but we were definitely taught civil rights, especially being in a majority African-American school and in Southern City, USA, which is home. I mean MLK. It's hard for me to now teach and deal almost with reverse

racism and deal with ignorance and deal with people who aren't open-minded. That's really hard for me. It's just on a public school versus private school level.

The gay issue is way far down. I have my friends I can talk to about it and for me that's good enough. I don't want to live at my school. I don't want to have my personal life at my school. Even if I was dating a man, I wouldn't be telling everybody I work with that business anyway. I do not identify with that school for sure. If I felt a sense of security and openness, I definitely would be more comfortable telling teachers I was close to. It wouldn't be something I would walk down the hall and just tell whoever, "Hey, guess what, I went on a date this weekend with a girl."

[When Mary talked about women she was dating] it was he, instead of she. That was the biggest, or I would say my friend Andrea instead of my girlfriend. I hung out with my friend Andrea, we did this. I think I finally felt what all my older lesbian friends dealt with. When I first was starting to come out, my mother's neighbors were a lesbian couple. I would take care of their dogs sometimes in the summer time and I got to be friends with them. So I had that older lesbian crowd that I would hang out with sometimes and it's very different in that generation. These were women in their 40s, when I was in my 20s, so there is a 20-year age gap. They didn't walk down the street and hold hands and I didn't get that because I always felt like I could do that, in Southern City, USA at least. Most of the places I went I felt comfortable walking down the street arm in arm with another woman and they didn't. We would talk about that. They were also of a time when you still looked like a woman. There wasn't this expression or if I don't feel feminine, then I don't want to dress feminine, or I don't want to have that look, whereas I think in that generation there's more of that I still want to look like a female.

We had those conversations a lot too. They didn't really understand the idea of a butch woman. I guess I kind of started to feel maybe what they had always been around, where they never felt like, that wasn't acceptable in the time that they were raised. All of a sudden I was realizing that I had to live a hidden life in some way.

Like I said I love my job and I love what I do, but it doesn't control, I don't...I think if I was in a committed relationship with a woman the rest of my life, it wouldn't really matter too much. I think it would get exhausting, but I wouldn't care as a teacher either way, if I couldn't be completely who I was. It would be uncomfortable, but I think I can deal with that...Sometimes I do get sad thinking, "Gosh, nobody would celebrate a baby shower." Then it's like gosh, everybody knows a gay person, maybe I'll be the gay person somebody knows at school. Why can't that person be me?"

I think it has to, especially with the school that I'm at now. I think it would have to start at the top. I feel, if the principal is accepting of who I am then it wouldn't really matter about the teachers...I wouldn't mind if colleagues talk behind my back, but if my principal wasn't supportive and I felt the person that I look to for affirmation even in my job, I would feel uncomfortable if he wasn't supportive...I don't think he [the principal] thinks anybody is gay at that school, even the gay, effeminate teacher. I just don't think that's a part of his community, so he's not aware of it...

No, I don't [worry about being seen on television at gay pride events]. I think if a colleague asked me about it, and it depends on my relationship with that colleague, I know so many straight people, the two friends I brought with me to pride this year were straight, so I think that's what I like about Southern City, USA's Pride Parade, at least, there's so many straight families there that I would be like, yeah I was there I went to the

Pride Parade and...I don't know that I would necessarily have to come out of the closet to my colleague to deal with that situation.

It can be draining sometimes [to keep the personal and professional separate], it can be draining trying to say he instead of she if I'm dating a woman...I keep my personal life pretty separate from most of the staff, there's always a couple of friends that I've had in each school who I've been really close with, at least one person that I can confide in everything. If I didn't have that I think I would be, I would be really uncomfortable, if I couldn't be open with one person. It would get to be a burden.

They would've [shared my engagement to a woman with the school], I didn't say anything to anybody but if I wanted to I would've told the hospitality committee and they would've thrown me a party. When people saw the ring and asked me about it. I just said, "Yes, but I'm a private person, it's not something I need everybody at the school to know about." They would say okay. My personality is kind of like that anyway, when I was leaving a school, they always make you come onstage, that's not my thing, I'm kind of a behind the scenes kind of girl. I'm never the actress, I'm always props...

I don't think [I've ever felt pressure to conform at school], just like when you start dating somebody new, and you become interested in the things they are interested in, to me seems very normal. Oh you like Indian food, okay, I'll try it out. I think that's just a human thing. I certainly did not start going to church more when I started teaching in North Franklin and they were all these crazy church people, I almost rebelled against it. I think. I wouldn't say the first schools that I taught at I conformed to all. The school in Dallas, no, no I don't really think I'm a conformist at all. I'm more about fight the power, if something irritates me I'm pretty vocal about it, maybe have an attitude, which is in

really good, but no. Being an art teacher, you can kind of hide under that, well she's the art teacher. Most everybody thinks I have tattoos and smoke dope every weekend. I'm like no I don't.

I try to respond to things like that [“you’re so gay/that’s so gay”] with humor or I will just ask, “Do you know what gay is?” A lot of times they're so scared that they got in trouble and they'll say no and then I'll say, “Why you talking about things you don't know about?” and just kind of respond to it like that. I think on occasion I've said things like, I want to say one time I said, “I know gay people and what they are saying is really hurtful.” It doesn't happen that often, it really doesn't. Maybe it's just because I'm not around it enough to hear it, but I say, that thing too. I'll say that's really gay. It's usually around my gay friends and I can joke about it. They'll make mean comments to each other every once in a while, but it's not very often...

Vision for the Future

[In the next five to ten years] I'll be deciding if I want to stay in education or I want to move onto something else. I will be applying to grad schools in the next year and I don't know what type of graduate program I would like to do, if it's going to be in the arts or if it's going to be in something completely different that I would leave education and move onto something else. I'm open to leaving, I love Southern City, USA and my family's here, I'm an only child and I feel some sense of commitment to them because they're older than most people my age parents. I'm a big fan of Austin, Texas, so if I move anywhere it would probably be there. I already get their relocation magazines. Otherwise, Southern City, USA is a great city, so I'd probably stay here.

[If protected by law to come out, I would]. I would feel like there would be no repercussions with who I was. For example, I already know that our principal is über Christian, if you will. He's already made comments that they don't understand, meaning people that don't go to church the way he does and practice faith the way he does. I can only imagine the comments he would make and the unprofessional way he would handle the situation if he's already doing something on that level. I can only imagine the gay issues, how that would be handled. I can only assume that it would be negative and bad...

It's hard to say, I don't know if I can fathom, if I can actually comprehend or understand what it would really be like to be open about who I am [if being out was protected and the principal did not support it]. It would be hard to say. I would think that I would stand up, and I would feel comfortable, maybe not with this specific principal, maybe with other principals. I know last year. My coworker who was a lesbian, her principal knew everything and when her and her girlfriend broke up, they'd been together maybe five or ten years, he said take the days you need to. I went through a divorce a few years ago and I know what it's like. While she was not out to the entire staff, she was out to him. I know that if I taught under him. I would be able to, even now without that law. I would feel very comfortable.

Like most things, I think stuff like that [laws changing] happens locally first, on a very small level and then it grows. Gosh, I have no idea. I think if anything maybe Southern City, USA Public Schools would be the first ones to step up and say we're going to protect these employees and were going to offer benefits to their partners. I think it would have to be an inner city system, either Southern City Public Schools or Dale. They

[inner city systems] tend to be more open-minded, even in what they teach, they go outside of the core curriculum, and they brought in, at least in my personal experience, shared so many other things that were not always in the textbooks. Not a negative way, not saying this is wrong and this is wrong and don't listen to what this person says, but saying hey, think about this idea, hey you live in Southern City, USA, the Civil Rights movement is huge here, I don't care if you're White, let's do with Civil Rights mural...I think inner cities tend to be more progressive and open-minded...and so I think they would in turn be more open to thinking that it's okay to have a gay relationship and still be an educator.

Franklin County who I worked for, I don't think would ever [will be less Conservative], well they are considered inner city in some areas, you have this other part of the county that is primarily African-American, and they are very church-going people, if you will, so that's a huge part of that community and that's not going to be accepted there. Then you have the northern part of the county that is church going and Conservative in the same way. It's based on religion. The further out you get, the more Conservative it is, at least in an open way. I hear people who say I know a gay person. I love to hear that when I go to work somewhere and people say that they have no idea about who I am. They'll say I know a gay person, I know a Black person...I think in [this] state, religion has a huge part in the discrimination of gays and lesbians.

I'm sure that some would try to discredit me [if I came out] because I'm gay or lesbian or bi, I'm sure that there are people out there that think I am less because of it, just like there are people out there who think African-Americans are less educationally just because of the color of their skin. I don't think it's a huge group of people, but there

would definitely be a group of people. I don't necessarily know if would be from my community or from the community at large, like the state, or a group, a church somewhere that would have followers in various places. Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure that they would try to discredit me and I wouldn't put it past my principal now to find a way to get rid of me on another basis. It's a cool sociology experiment. If I won a lottery it would be interesting to come out and see what would happen. I've had perfect evaluations for my entire five years, let's see what happens now. Let's see if things would change.

I plan on adopting [when I have kids]. I'm adopted, so I always thought I would adopt... Probably people would talk behind my back because I would probably adopt an African-American baby and people would not agree with that, a White person cannot raise an African-American. I don't know, adoption is a weird thing, I didn't realize people still had hang-ups over it. I met a woman who subbed for me and her son was adopted, and she would tell me stories. I was just dumbfounded. I was like, really? They look down upon him or you, I don't understand that. I don't know. At the same time, though, I heard when the earthquake happened in Haiti, I overheard several colleagues talking about adopting children. It was something that was talked about at their church. So maybe they would be open to it. I don't know...

My sexual identity is not in the forefront of my head every day, so I would just want to be able to be open, not to be an activist, but just to be able to say, when somebody asked me what I did this weekend, my partner and I, if that was the situation and not feel uncomfortable or feel the need to hold anything back. My teaching would be the same, I would just be able to be a little bit more open.

Mary positions herself differently based on who she is around. She will change names or pronouns when discussing her girlfriend. "It was he instead of she" or "My friend Angie instead of my girlfriend" (Interview 1). If Mary was dating men, however, she felt free to discuss who she was dating. When Mary dates men, she is able to fit into the normative heterosexual storyline and because of this, feels comfortable discussing her relationship. She reflexively positions herself within the conversation she has with others (Davies & Harré, 1990). She also participates in the heterosexual matrix when positioning herself in terms of language (Butler, 2006).

Mary keeps her professional and personal identities separate when at school, but finds it necessary to be out to a few select staff members. "If I didn't have that I think I would be...I would be really uncomfortable if I couldn't be open with at least one person. It might get to be a burden" (Interview 2). She positions herself through her speech actions by not discussing her personal life at school when dating women. She was engaged to a woman at one point, but let others assume she was engaged to a man, allowing others to position herself within heterosexual discourses (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Chapter 9

“When I’m on my time, I’m not a teacher. I’m a person.”

Susan’s Story

Susan and I met for all three of our interviews after school in her office at the school where she teaches. During our interviews, Susan wore polo shirts and khakis. She wore her hair in a short, brown bob, tucked behind her ears. Her appearance suggests a performance indicative of being a part of the lesbian community because of stereotypical ideas of what a lesbian might look like. Her clothing suggests comfort in the classroom as well.

Susan is a 31-year-old White female. She teaches in special education in a full inclusion¹⁶ kindergarten classroom in Casper County, the second largest school district in the state. She has been teaching at this school for two years and has taught for ten years total. She is currently in a long-term relationship and at the time of the interviews, was trying to get pregnant.

I was talking to our art teacher...she did a general paper for a class on gays and lesbians within schools and issues that they face within schools, and she and I sat and talked for a long time about it. She said, “If you could do anything in the school, what would it be?” I said, “Ideally, out, but this community is just going to fall apart.” I said, “Our little [community] is going to freak. It’s not as bad as it used to be,” but I said, “there’s a pretty Conservative population here, I’d be real careful.”

I said, “Ideally, I can think of four or five different students who are in same-sex families and they have nobody to talk to in this building. There are no resources in our

¹⁶ As part of the least restrictive environment for students in special education, students in special education are fully integrated into the regular classroom.

parent library for them, there's nothing. There's not even a safe space sticker anywhere in this building.” I said, “You know, really, why would you bother to come into parent teacher conferences, why would you show up for anything if you didn't feel comfortable?” Usually, it's one or the other [who comes in] and it's just one of the things that I say, “Yeah, I get it.” The casual walk past and it's the casual nod, don't worry, I keep my eye on your kids for you. I make sure the playground is safe, don't worry. It's crazy in this day and age. I grew up here, I came out when I was 15, what do you mean we haven't progressed? We've actually regressed, so the South has been interesting.

I identify as lesbian...I questioned that identification for a long time...I don't think it's [the label] necessarily important, I think it's more of a socially appropriate term that people understand the definition of. There's so many terms out there anymore and if you say I'm part of the gay community, they ask what you mean by that. To me it's just a very common term that anybody can understand. I think people get really caught up in the language and the semantics of it all and I'm like whatever, you are what you are, you're a homosexual or you're bisexual. Who cares? I'm a person who loves people. Lesbian works for all common intents and purposes.

I think for me that people attach religion to themselves or educational status or occupational status, and to me, what's important to me is that I'm bottom-line a good person. I'm a trustworthy person, character is what I attach myself to. I think above all and beyond anything else I could label myself, I'm a daughter, I'm a teacher, I'm a lesbian, I'm a wife, I'm a dog owner. There are so many labels I could put on myself, but to me, bottom line is, I'm a good person...

Early Life and Coming Out

I came out when I was 15. I think I always knew I was different and I could never put my thumb on it. I was just a different kid, not necessarily one of the guys but I wasn't necessarily one of the girls either. I was kind of a loner. We moved from D.C. to Southern City, USA when I was seven, in the middle of second grade...it was a hard place to fit in. I was different, I wasn't into pageants, I wasn't into frilly things, I wasn't into tennis, or cheerleading, so good luck.

I found summer camp along the way, Camp Summer Fun, it became my safe haven...A friend of mine, the same cluster of kids ended up going year after year after year and ended up being those long-term, all summer campers that were just there. We were the brat pack that was at camp every summer. It might've been my freshman year of high school and one of the girls said, "Hey guys I just want to tell you something, I'm gay." I was like, "What do you mean?" She explained what she meant, and I was like, "Let me think about that for a while. You might be onto something there." It's not that I had never been exposed to gay couples, it's just that I had never projected it or thought about it in terms of myself. When I look back on life, there were so many signs...She came out and I festered with it a little bit. I was like that might fit, I can work with that.

My mom said I started talking about this girl all the time, and one day we were driving on the road and my mom said, "I have a question ask you." I said, "What?" and she asked, "Are you gay?" I thought oh my God, I've read horror stories about this. I thought I was going to be homeless. I said, "I don't want to talk about this." She said, "It is okay if you are." I was like excuse me? What? She said, "I don't care if you are, I just want to know." I said, "I don't know mom, I don't know yet. I'm not ready to talk

about it.” My mom being a mom that she is, I'm an only child and she poured everything into me, she went and found Youth Zone and said, “I found this group for you and I'm going to take you there.” I said, “Mom, I'm not going to some support group, I'm okay with this. I'm just not ready to talk about it.” She said that she thought I needed to go when she dragged me kicking and screaming the whole way saying I didn't need it and she said I'm going to sit in the car and she was reading the book, *Now That You Know*, because she had gone to the bookstore to be like I'm going to help support her.

I think it [Youth Zone] was more of a social network and a safe place to meet other kids who were going through the same issues that you were going through. The situations may be different, may not be as accepting, we could be supportive to each other, to have a place to talk, and to feel like you weren't the outcast. Attached to that was PFLAG¹⁷ and the support that came from PFLAG and my parents got involved with that and we did a gay pride march together. Just knowing that there was somebody that you could talk to, that you didn't feel alone, you didn't feel isolated and how important that was to accepting yourself and having the self-confidence to say you don't have to like me and that's okay. It's paid off in the long run...

[I decided to become a teacher during] my senior year of high school. I never thought I wanted to be a teacher. I really wanted to go run a summer camp and play in the woods. I got to my senior internship, and they said we don't have a summer camp for you to go to internship. We have this Pre-K special ed class that you can go work at. That's working with kids. I said, “I don't want to be a special ed teacher.” I went in and sat in the room with severe or to profoundly disabled kids and this one little boy was

¹⁷ Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gays

sitting at the table. I asked myself what I was doing there. I looked at him and said, “Do you want to color?” He picked up the crayon and started coloring and the teachers ran over asking what I did. I was like, “Oh no, I just gave him a crayon I didn't do anything.” I came to find out he was a severely autistic child, that they were trying to get him to pick up a crayon and draw a picture for the entire school year and he would never do it. He all of a sudden started and they would say this is your calling, this is what you are meant to do...I did undergrad as a gen ed teacher, but there was just something about it. I would think that I love those special ed kids. They are awesome. You can make a real difference there...I would think I can relate to these kids, so after two years of teaching gen ed. I said I want to pursue special ed further so I decided to get my masters in special ed.

I was very open in college [about my sexuality]. In fact, during my freshman year on the soccer team, they nicked named me Rainbow Brite. They would say, “Oh my God, this girl from [Southern University, USA] rolled up here and she is loud and proud.” This Vermont town would think Lord, we don't know what to do with this girl. My professor who was the head of the Ed Department said, “There is something you need to understand, you can't be Rainbow Brite at school. You just can't. Whatever it is you need to do to fix *this* [waving her hand in front of her], you have to fix it.” That was hard to digest because I would think no, I finally figured out who I am and darn it I was in that state of, that stage of acceptance of yourself that's I'm going to tell the world. I would think I need to get over this stage really quick. I would say okay those are the rules, so I will follow them. I'll shut up and do what I need to do.

I have had so many different examples of what a teacher was. I had had teachers that were old and crotchety and live by themselves and were the crazy cat lady. I had male teachers who every story goes around about who they are and what they do. I had the teachers that were young and vibrant and full of life, and they were all straight as far as I knew, with the exception of Ms. Polke, the PE teacher. Teachers were squeaky clean, and teachers didn't have lives, and teachers follow the rules. They had their perfect little life. I would think, I don't quite look like that, but I can do this. [To fit in with the image of teacher] I'll grow my hair a bit longer. I tried the skirt bit for a little while and thought this isn't going to happen. This is just not me. I can't do it. I tried the whole go get your nails done, make your hands look good. I thought no I can't do this either. This interferes with sports. This isn't going to work for me and then I was just like you know what, I am who I am and I can be myself without having an open conversation about who I am. This is my work life and out here is my play life and my social life and they can be two separate entities and that's okay.

I think I just learned in college, early on, both academically and socially, and professionally that from Monday through Friday, it's business time and I'm wearing my business hat during that time. Saturday and Sunday is me time, and I wear my me hat during that time. My me hat is not going to falter if the business world starts to filter in or the professional world starts to filter into me time. When we are out in places, when I first got here, I was like Callie, this isn't [the northeast], this is different. We're going to have to watch our backs a little bit more, and we can't hold hands in public. Finally I got to the point where I said, you know what, I'm done. I'm just done. This is stupid. I haven't done this in seven or eight years, why am I going back to this. I refuse. I said

this is my work life, this is my social life, and this is my personal life. On my personal time, it's about me. I'm not holding her hand at work, I'm not calling her honey and babe at work, I'm not kissing her and doing whatever at work. This is my time. You parents can figure out what you want to do and how you want to explain that to your kids. That's your business, but this is my time. When I'm on my time, I'm not a teacher. I'm a person.

Teaching Experiences

This is my second year teaching here, my 10th year in all. [Before this job,] I did a year in [a western state] and prior to that it was all in [a northwest state]. [The western state] is very Conservative. I was out to select coworkers, but in terms of out with the parents, in fact right before I left...we got people from all of the little mountain towns, and the town we lived in Middletown, was where my partner Callie had grown up, so she knew many people and they knew about the two of us. It was interesting because some of those families came to our school. I never said anything, I was very quiet about it and the last day of the fifth grade celebration a parent came up and said to me, "I really think it sucks that you can't celebrate who you are." I said, "Thank you, I appreciate that, but now I have to go. I don't know who else heard that conversation, I just don't want to answer questions today...I'm not sure how to take that and where it's going to go."

In [the northeast], while I was never out to parents, the first school I was out at was in middle school, and I was not out initially and then my partner's father was in a severe car accident and I found out on the way to school and they weren't sure if he was going to live. I was a wreck and went into school and had to tell them that I have to leave and I have to leave now and I don't know when I'll be back. I couldn't just be like my roommate's dad was in a car accident, they're not going to buy that. I closed the door and

said, “Look, I don't know if I'm going to have a job when I come back or not, but you need to know the truth. Do what you need to do to make yourself okay with all of this, but right now my family comes first.” They were all really cool so that kind of opened the door for me and I just at that point said I'm done hiding. I'm just done.

In terms of coworkers who don't like me, fine. You don't have to work with me. We can pass, we can be cordial in the hall, but I'm not here to be judged. I'm here to do a job. Who I am does not affect what I do as a teacher. It's a parent's decision to decide how they want to explain it to a child if they so figure it out. My job is to teach reading, writing, math, some character, some culture, and unfortunately right now, the South is not ready for me to be part of that culture. I leave that out. There are select parents, there're probably three or four families that know, one being parents that I had last year. They were room parents last year and their child is on my caseload. They have been phenomenally supportive. The mom has even said, “What can we do for you?” I said, “Just talk about it to people. Talk about a nonchalantly, because if it comes from you guys and you guys are cool, then other people will learn to be cool. When Callie and me are at functions, if you casually want to point it out, you have my permission to do so. I trust you guys, I trust your judgment, but it's never coming from me, I'm not making public knowledge of it, but the more parents that know me as a quality educator can begin to embrace it.”

In [the northeast], the [job] protections came the year that I left. There really weren't any. Chatham School District, in the capital, had domestic partner benefits. They didn't have a problem with that, in fact, my administrator was gay himself. It's kind of one of those under the radar kind of everybody knew, but nobody talked about it kind

of a thing. In [the western state] there was nothing, and obviously here there was nothing...

I do [live in the community] and sometimes that's hard. Sometimes, I purposely go a little bit further to grocery shop so I don't have to parent-teacher conference in the grocery aisle while picking out bread. I also like being in the community because it makes me available to go to Sally's soccer game or Andy's karate thing or whatever. I think that's important for kids to know, that they can see their teachers outside of the school building and they are there and they are watching. Yeah, I'm going to be looking to make sure you're making those right choices that we talked about at school, because it doesn't just stop beyond our doors. I think for parents to see us in the community is nice.

[At her current school] It took me a while to even tell administration [that I am gay], I really just sat back and felt everyone out for a long time. I'm pretty sure that most everyone in this building knows, but in terms of what is talked about, the kindergarten team, I don't hide it from any of them. We have to work intimately together, and this is a part of my life. You all talk about your husbands, I'm going to talk about my wife. Granted we have a woman who was on the first grade team who moved down to kindergarten this year. At some staff meeting, there was a give out thing and I had gotten one and it happened to be travel tags and Callie's softball team goes to the World Series every year. I said, "Oh, they're her team colors, perfect, I'll fill it out for her," and it was the week before she left and give it to her to put on her luggage. This teacher leaned over and read it and said, "Who's Callie?" I said, "My other half." She said, "Your other half of what?" I said, "My life." She was just kind of like oh, oh, oh. The rest of the table was like duh, this is common knowledge.

Obviously this is something I don't speak openly with her about because it clearly makes her uncomfortable, but whatever. They're other people in this building who I'm not going to talk about that. You're going to go your way and I'm going to go my way and it's fine. For the most part, this building, I'd say it took me six to seven months to feel everybody out, so almost a full school year to figure out, you are okay, you're safe, you're okay, you're safe, the PE teacher has been awesome. He's a rock star. The art teacher's phenomenal. I know of one other person in the building, but they are not publicly out. Other than that, it's me and the other individual.

We [Susan and the other gay teacher] play softball in the same league. There's been talk, and people will say we think about so-and-so and I'll say I have no idea. It's none of my business to talk about them. Go ask that person if you think something. Why are you coming to me to ask? I'm not going to tell. It's not my business.

Our principal, she is okay, she's never said anything openly. When we started to try to get pregnant, because I'm going to carry, I went in and talked to them about it. I said, "I want you to know, because if it happens, I want you to know what is going on and know how I am planning to handle it and also so you know where I'm coming from if parents come to you with questions." As far as everybody in this building knows, parent-wise, I'm not married. That was a hard thing for her. Our assistant principal [was supportive]. He's more liberal, open-minded in that regard, and she's more Conservative, which surprises me because she's from [a liberal state in the Northeast]. Basically when I told them I said, "Look, this is what we're trying to do, I plan on being a person who carries. We are trying to coincide everything so that if things go according to plan the way that it would work is I wouldn't be expecting until next year anyway so I will take

care of a legal name change over the summer so it appears to the general public that I got married over the summer. Hopefully that will eliminate any questions or any words about an unwed pregnant teacher.” That's how we were handling that one.

I don't know [if I'd do the name change without getting pregnant]. Callie and I have always talked about the name change and originally we were going to hyphenate. Then she said something about me just taking her last name, and I had a hard time with that one at first because I was so set on just the symbolism that goes with the hyphenation, to me, was a true joining of our two lives, and it wasn't conforming to straight America's marriage. Then we have some other friends down here that it got married, two sets who had gotten married recently and they both decided to take one of the partner's last names. I talk to them about it and I talked to my co-teacher about it and said we were going to hyphenate, we are both very athletic Callie and I, her last name is Anderson and I said let's do Anderson-Westerly because if we have an athletic kid, we can say get your award lets go. It's A, it's easy, it's first. Then Alice my co-teacher said, “Traditionally if you were to hyphenate, the woman's name goes first and then the husband's name, so you would have to be Westerly-Anderson.” I said I don't want to go that way, I don't like it that way. It just doesn't flow. She said, just take her last name then and nobody will ask any questions. I think that's what we will end up doing. We talked about that for a good two or three years, we've been talking about the name change. We both had said we would take care of that when we were ready to start having kids. It would be something that we would cross that bridge when we get to it.

For the most part, we have a great school. I think coming into this building, it's a really friendly place, I'm very fortunate in that it's a pretty open, supportive community.

In terms of being gay, the people that know, know and they really don't care. There's the people that know and we just choose not to talk about it and that's okay, that's life, that's the real world. There's definitely the typical clusters of people, there's this group of people that really get along and come from a variety of grade levels, but there's this clique and that clique and that's inevitable, it's human nature, so you get the clique in there. There are some people that are very stuck in their niche and then there are other people, and I consider myself one of those people, I'm just a go with the flow kind of person. I can get along with most anybody.

I think I have to feel that out [the people who are not ok with it]. I think once, as is the world of teaching, once two or three people know, the whole building knows. I guess in that realm, they know and it's just an understood and we just don't talk about it. I kind of felt out who those people are and I learned early on, that these are the people you just don't bring it up with. You don't talk about your personal life with them, and that's fine. Here these are strictly business people...For the most part [those people are always like that]. Some of those people have befriended each other in that sense. So they are their own little cluster of people. They are the people you would never see at the social functions outside of school. They are just here to do their job, and they are rule followers, and they follow the book, and they are just those Type A personalities. They tend to be older and nothing against them, but they're just society and what they know as to be the norm is very different than what we've grown up with. They are exceptions and their tolerance is at a different spot.

I don't change the subject [talking about my partner in the teachers' lounge]. It's hard a lot of times, I don't talk about in the teachers' lounge because we have a lot of

parents who are subs in our building. With Alice, for example, my co-teacher, there was a parent in the teachers' lounge today, eating her lunch because she was a sub. She is very well known in our school and I wanted to have a conversation with Alice about something about my partner Callie and we have a code word. I just refer to Callie as Fred. I said this is Fred, and I'm sure the other person is like yeah right, your other half's name is Fred, but it's none of your business. I do Fred and they hear a boy's name and they just go about their business and it's more or less just for politics' sake. I can have a conversation about Callie and what we did on the weekend with Alice in front of the kids. I can be like, "Hey, Fred and I went to the zoo this weekend, it was awesome," and the kids don't pick up on it.

I kind of don't use pronouns, I avoid pronouns for the sake of that. It's just Fred. That way, it's really easy. We have two paraprofessionals in our room and they both know what Fred means. It's just a conversation. It sucks, I hate it [having to use Fred]. I hate the fact that to my knowledge there are no children with same-sex parents in my class, but I know in the classroom next door, there is a little boy who has two moms, and I know in first grade, there is a boy who has two moms, and to not be able to be open, to see there are other people with families like mine. For me it's not so much about myself, but for the role model that I may or may not be for those kids that really need that. I am an adult and I am secure with my relationship and I don't need anybody else's approval to relish and be happy, but kids haven't had the opportunity to develop that sense of self yet. For me, I feel like I'm saying the only relationship that's okay is a man and a woman and even when we talk about families, and Alice was really good this year in making sure that when we did our family unit when she would talk about families, she would say families

look like all different things and she purposely made an attempt to say some families have two moms or two dads. She didn't go into depth with it because it is still a very taboo topic.

Callie and I were talking about it the other day, I said, you see it in high school and middle school more so now, because kids have come to terms and our nation has finally figured out that wow, sexuality happens a lot earlier than we thought it did, so now they say it's okay to talk about sex with kids at 11 or 12, and they should be because they're having it. It's not as taboo, but it's still taboo in elementary schools, because they think you're going to influence them, that whole mentality and misconception that you're going to touch the children. It's sad that in 2010, and that thought still sits in the back of my mind at any time, because as a special ed teacher in kindergarten, I help kids in the bathroom all day long. It sits in the back of my mind to make sure the door is open, make sure you can be seen, make sure you can be heard, make sure you step out for this and that, watch who is watching you...It's 2010, and I have to think that way but because there are people in the building that know and could use that against me, I hate to think that way because I'd love to give people the benefit of the doubt and trust, but...I have to protect myself. How stupid is it in 2010, you have to watch your back like that...

For me personally, I think that is the biggest issue people's minds automatically go to sex and the bedroom. There is more to your sexuality than just sex. It's about who you love and who you are attracted to, it's not just sex. That's not what I think about day in and day out. In fact, I can think of many heterosexual people in this building who have a better sex drive than I do. I don't have time for sex. I don't think of them and think I wonder what they're going to do tonight. I don't really care. I don't want to go with you

in your bedroom and please stay out of mine. I think that is a big thing, if people would just get your mind out of the bedroom, I didn't invite you in the first place, it would be so much better. That's what people automatically think about. I think it's even harder for male teachers, because then they think the stupid, ridiculous, falsified stereotype that they are pedophile may want to touch the kids. I say no, you can be worried about your straight teacher down there more...but let's look at statistics. Actually, you need to be worried about uncle so-and-so more than you need to be worried about Mr. So-and-So or Mrs. So-and-So. I think those people are ridiculous.

I think it's [school climate for LGBT parents] nonexistent for them. They are the ones... in all honesty, until people said, because Callie and I talked about it, in Casper County, there's the flexibility that if you teach at a school you can bring your kids here, even if it's not your home school. I thought that would be great for convenience sake and then thought wait a minute, that complicates things because then I am fully out, because they're going to have classmates and their classmates are going to know about their family because I'm not going to ask for a child to hide their family. I was talking to coworkers about it and I said I don't know if I want to do this. This is a great school and I would love for my kid to be here. When we get to that point in life, but I don't know that I am ready to deal with that and I don't know that the community in the school is ready to deal with that. I have to think about that, which is stupid, but I do. They were like, "Well there are lots of same-sex families here," and I said, "Where? Because I am pretty observant and I don't see them which means they don't feel seen. If I'm not recognizing them and identifying them and I'm at a lot of school functions, I see a lot of parents. They either are coming alone and not as a couple and not as joint parents for their child or

they are not coming at all. I said, “Just trust me.” They said, “How do you know?” I said, “Trust me, how do you know, the sky is blue? You just know. Trust me, I can walk through the grocery store and be like boom, boom, boom and be like hey, hey, hey. I've never met the people in my life, but we say hi because that's courtesy, we stick together.” I said, “I don't know, you just know, it's an instinct.” I have gaydar....

I'll share with you, an incident that happened on the playground today. In regards to culture, and ironically it happened. I kind of sat back and grit my teeth over it. A little boy comes up to another teacher and said, “So and so called me gay.” Another teacher pipes in, they knew I was sitting right there and I don't know if they even knew that I heard. This one teacher goes, “It just means happy, go play.” I thought, you didn't need to go that way, you didn't have to define that term and explain it. That other child should have at least been called over and been told we don't call people names regardless of what it is. As far as I'm concerned, gay is just as insulting as a racial slur, or retarded, or stupid, or fat, or ugly. They are all the same. It is meant to hurt, it is meant to throw a dagger. If you just pass it off as laissez-faire attitude, you have failed in teaching character and you have failed in making society a better place. You have failed. Part of me says I have failed, but at the same time. You don't turn around and critique somebody in front of kids so I let this go. But at the same time, I want to turn around because it is the teacher that I worked with last year. I wanted to say, you know, you know, I was sitting there, and you still let it happen. Shame on you.

If the kid had come to me and said it I would've said bring so-and-so over here, and we're going to talk about it. We don't call names, period. Bottom line, I don't care what word you're going to use, but you don't call people names. It's just wrong. We

don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all. People look at me crazy when I say that to kids, but really, it's a good lesson to learn. Would you like to have had somebody call you that? No. While okay, you don't know who you are offending. Don't say the word. I think it's just become such a common term, and so easily used anymore. I think to a lot of kids, I don't know where it happened, but the word gay became associated with that's stupid. Since when are gay and stupid synonyms? They are nowhere even close to synonyms, but they have socially become that and I think it gets thrown a lot, and nobody thinks about it. Teachers have even said it. Somebody said the other day, that is just the queerest thing that I have ever seen, and they turn around and were shocked because I was sitting right there. I can roll a lot off of my back. I said, "You are not offending me, I get culture. I get society and the world. I don't agree with that, but I get it." They said they were so sorry and I'm glad at the same time they felt horrible by saying it. So it will make them think a little bit the next time they go to use the word, but at the same time, I think it wasn't bad enough that I'm going to get upset. Let me give you the culture and history of the word, but they're going to hate me even more if I do that, so I shut my mouth and smile...

There was no formal training [after the suicide of an elementary student after being bullied in another county]. I don't even recall it being spoken about, which shocked me. We pride ourselves in advertising all along the road coming up that we are school of character...At times, it's reality and in an era where test scores are what really count, other things get pushed to the wayside...It's [character] important because it's not being taught at home, and so it falls on our shoulders to teach kids that this isn't okay. I think they try, but you get guidance once every six days. In 180 days, maybe you get 30

days of guidance if she isn't out on your day because she's out at a meeting or dealing with the crisis or school was canceled that day were some special event happened. So there were no specials that day. Thirty days a year of character education? That's it? That's all we get? I don't know that that's going to do the trick...

We never had any problems [at staff functions]. We are very fortunate in that regard. Nobody ever seemed to have an issue. I've always introduced her as this is my partner. That seems to be, we kind of had to change your language to fit the South, because, up north. It was, this is my wife, and it was no big deal to anybody up there, nobody flinched. Here they're like, "You're what?" I will say, my partner, my girlfriend, whatever you want to call it is fine. Whatever works for you. I don't care.

We went to pride this last year. We are part of Southern City, USA softball league, we are at all of their events, we go to clubs occasionally, our softball team is our big gay community that we hang out with primarily. We went to pride last year, hung out and had a good time. I think if I were marching in pride it would be a completely different thing [worrying about being seen on television]. I would be very careful in who I chose to march with. I'd probably either throw myself in with Youth Zone or throw myself in with PFLAG because if a parent ever questioned it I can say I do community outreach that way and just defuse it that way, or make it a teachable moment in tolerance, but not have to disclose my own sexuality. Other than that, I really don't worry. We have been at ball fields and they have asked to take our picture. I say sure, I don't care. The image you portray for children is their reasoning. Heaven forbid somebody be gay and a good role model.

I think so in some regards [having to conform at school]. Nobody ever said you have to change your name and what are you going to do when you get pregnant and stuff, but I think the way that I approached, it is my feelings of needing to conform and not just like look, people get pregnant. Modern medicine is amazing, you don't need a man, you don't need to be married to do this. I think in that regard, it's a conformity kind of a thing. The whole using a male's name to have a conversation about my life with my coworkers at times is a way of conforming. Other than that, I don't know, I am who I am and I think I try to lead by example in that regard, and wish the world were a little bit different so I could be by a stronger example for those kids that need that model. You look through this building, and I'm like there are 800+ kids here. If you take the 10% rule¹⁸, that means we've got at least 80 kids in this building, who will probably identify as gay or lesbian at some point in their life. They are the ones that you look at now and go, "Oh, yes I get it." There are those kids that you look at and I just want to look at them and say I get it, but you can't say that to them or just to be a strong, out homosexual so they can see if I feel that way it is okay and there are other people who feel that way and they are still respected and successful people in the world. I don't know that kids in elementary school have a sense of that.

Thinking back in elementary school. You would think you really looked up to that person, you would think they were cool and then as you got older you would understand why you thought they were cool and it makes all the sense in the world. Even when I taught in middle school, when I talked to sixth-graders, there was one kid. You could see it, she was just sitting there in. There was something she wanted to tell you. I

¹⁸ An estimate that 10% of the population is LGBT.

could see it in her eyes, you could see it in the fact she would escape lunch to try to find me to have lunch with for a safe place to be. It was just sitting there on her tongue, I knew it was, but I can't say anything to this kid. That was [in the northeast]. This child has since graduated from high school and she's come out and she has found me on Facebook, and she talks to me and I am out with her at this point. She says, "Why didn't you ever say anything?" I said, "Because I couldn't." Every finger would've been pointed at me and people would say I put this idea in her head. I didn't put any idea in your kid's head. I was just there to support her in finding who she was. But parents will panic and say...I think until they find and come out with a study, a scientific study that says it's genetic, and this is how it is, and it is scientifically proven, parents are always going to look for that reason. They are going to look for an excuse, I feel like. You are the excuse, you're the reason, it is your fault. It's nobody's fault, it's not a disease. It's just life, it just is.

I think I could go more feminine shirts for work. I think what I would choose to work at home wouldn't work for work anyway...So of course I have to change for my professional life. I think I purposely go and pick out more feminine things. But I also think to myself that I am in special ed and I can get away with wearing khaki pants, every single day. Nobody's going to question it because I am on the floor with kids, and I'm in the bathroom with kids. I am not going to wear a nice skirt or linen pants or any of that. I think I get some leeway there.

To be out means just to be open with who you are, to be able to share your personal life and to be free with expressing who you care about, who you love, who you share your life with and do not have to hide that. In some regards, I would say I'm 50%

out here. My coworkers know, but the people who I can make the difference with don't necessarily know. There are parents that I am sure they know, they are not stupid. They know. On the level that I would like you to come directly from me, it is not there. That's something that I struggle with every day. I'm a good teacher, I am a dynamic teacher, I am a respected teacher. And I think I could do so much more if I could be 100% out and be like this is who I am. We are not bad people, we are just like everybody else and we live our lives just like everybody else.

Absolutely [religion plays a role], there is no separation of church and state. There's not in a lot of places, but not in the Bible belt. In the Bible Belt, that separation does not exist. A prime example, due to budget finances our preplanning speaker had to be cut and so we had a partner in ed. One of our partners in ed is some church around here, Baptist Grove Church, or something. The preacher came in and did our motivational thing. It started out very motivational and then all of a sudden I felt like I was sitting in church. For the sake of not offending anybody, I sat there, but I really couldn't believe that was happening. I went home and was fuming. I was like if I want to go to church on Sunday, I will go to church on Sunday, but I'm at work. I wanted to look at people and say, "How dare you? How dare you? You don't know who you are offending. I'm not going to take my beliefs and my feelings and preach them upon you, how dare you come in here and do that to me at *work*?" I don't think it was an intentional thing. I think it was an honest mistake, but still, the fact that a partner in education is a church, and then the preacher came in....I'm sure people would say, would you say that about Martin Luther King? I can take that argument and I can say yes, if you went that route. Of course I would say the same thing...The law was written for a reason...

Vision for the Future

I'm not going to hide it [being pregnant]. When they do, does anybody have good news, I will stand up and say we are pregnant, and we are expecting. I'm not even going to think twice about it. Why not? The less of an awkward, quirky deal that it is, then the less it becomes so for other people I have found. The more it is just whatever, and like everybody else, then people start to see me like everybody else, and it doesn't become an issue.

In the next five years, I would really like to get out of special ed just because the demands are increasing so significantly. Life may be very different, I may no longer be in a public school because hopefully in five years time I'll be looking at having a child in the school system, so depending on where the laws are at, where the community is at, and where we are feeling where we are at as a family, it is going to be a big gauge for us in terms of where I am professionally, whether or not I want to go do something privately, or look at a different opportunity in terms of different aspects of education...It's just a matter of sitting and staying put and adjusting the career as necessary, and more just for the sake of our kids. I want them to have the best opportunities possible and not that public education can offer that. But in terms of seeing other families that look like theirs and being surrounded by a supportive environment, I think that's crucial, especially at an early age where self-esteem is critical. I want to make sure that we put our kids in places where their self-esteem, just as a person and as an individual and as their family self-esteem can be fostered and embraced and Casper County may not be the place for that.

I think that if I knew there was 100% protection, there wouldn't be a question, because that's the ultimate goal for me, to be able to be out and to be that role model like

we had talked about. If I know I'm fully protected then there's none of that backlash that I'm worried about. Go ahead, go complain, there's nothing you can do about it, whereas they still have a lot of pull and if you say one wrong thing...I mean, I'm sure they would still have some pull, and they could still pull the strings of "My kid came home and said that you said, blah, blah," but at least I would know I would have some legal protection in that regard. They couldn't just chalk it up to that's what happened, you're gone. They would have to at least go through a report instead of just saying were going to brush this one aside. And we know that you're gay and if you just leave quietly we won't make a big deal of this and it will just be that you just left, instead of the real issue.

I think it needs to be a national thing. I think you should be able to go wherever you need to go in this nation and know that you're protected. You're protected by your religious preference, you're protected by your gender, you're protected by your ethnicity, so why are we not protected for our sexual preference? It doesn't matter, it's my job. I don't bring it to work, just like anybody else doesn't bring theirs to work. It needs to be national. You can talk about your husband and what he does for work and I don't think ooh, her husband, sex, sex, sex. It's not what it's about. It's part of who I am, it's not all of me, but it's part of me and it's an important part of me. Everybody else gets to recognize that important part of their life. Why can't I?

I think so [a loss of legitimacy or credibility upon coming out]. Not necessarily from some of my coworkers and even administrators, I don't think they care. Are there some that I think play the political role and if I came out would do the political thing and it would jeopardize me? Absolutely. It's just one of those things where I think I could do it and just not care. But I am one of those people that do care what people think as much

as I shouldn't care, I do care because I care deeply about what I do for a profession. I think that's where there's that double edge sword. I think personally, there are political lines that aren't supposed to be out there in terms of education. We got a statement like when Obama was running for office, we weren't even allowed to express who we were to be voting for. We were told, that has no place, you are nonparty person within the school. What you do outside is your own business, but you are not to be wearing Obama pins and things like that. We were not supposed to be doing any of that. It was made very clear that politics don't belong in the schools as much as they are here all of the time, it's what governs schools as far as I'm concerned. I think political views in terms of their party preference would come out and they would side with the Conservative side because a large majority of our community is Conservative, even if they themselves are not Conservative, they would take that route just to play it safe, to avoid the confrontation, the headache, the phone calls, the parents coming into the office kind of a thing. Some people look at me and think you're ridiculous, you're crazy, it's not like that. I would reply, I don't know any different. It may not be the right way, but do I really want to jeopardize my career at this point to discover which way it is? No. I've got a put a roof over my head.

[If I could merge my LGBT identity with my teacher identity] I think it would be somebody who is a respected community member, a respected educator, a respected leader where it didn't matter. This is my life and this is who I am in I can say this is my wife and I and my kids than this that the other, but at the same time, be that voice for those who aren't at that point in their life or for whatever reason can't be at that point in their life and for their kids, and to be that safe space. I would love to put a safe place

sticker on my door and said that organization the school. So there is a safe place and be a liaison and be an open liaison so that when we have parent and family night at school there is a table set up and I can be a visible person and I am there are sane, number one let me educate the rest of the community and at the same time number two, let me support those who need to be supported and recognized and be that person for them.

Susan would shift her identity based on the situation and the storyline in which she was located. She was careful to dress in a certain way or speak about her partner using the name Fred or pronouns of the opposite gender when speaking to others about her partner so she would not out herself. She does this “for politics’ sake” (Interview 2). In doing this, she feels like she’s saying, “the only relationship that’s okay is a man and a woman” (Interview 2). Susan participated in self-regulation and discursive positioning through language (Rasmussen, 2006). She reflexively positions herself within the conversation she has with others (Davies & Harré, 1990). If staff members are not comfortable with her sexuality, she employs silence as a strategy to interact with them, excluding that part of her life from them. Language can be used to exclude or subordinate and silence plays into this exclusion (Butler, 2006).

As a college student, Susan altered her appearance in order to fit her appearance with what a teacher should look like. “Teachers were squeaky clean, and teachers didn’t have lives, and teachers follow the rules. They had their perfect little life. I would think, I don’t quite look like that, but I can do this” (Interview 1). By actively changing her dress and appearance, Susan is conforming to the idea of what a teacher should look like through her dress (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Ferfolja, 2007).

Susan had difficulty with changing her appearance because she was not comfortable with it, so she would compartmentalize her work life from her personal life in order to cope. Susan was also actively trying to get pregnant while teaching and was planning on changing her last name in order to fit in with the normative discourses of teacher and morality. Being an unwed mother disrupts the normative morality discourses of teachers (Evans, 2002; Harbeck, 1997; King, 2004).

Chapter 10

Findings and Discussion

The themes of this study emerged in relation to my research questions, which are:

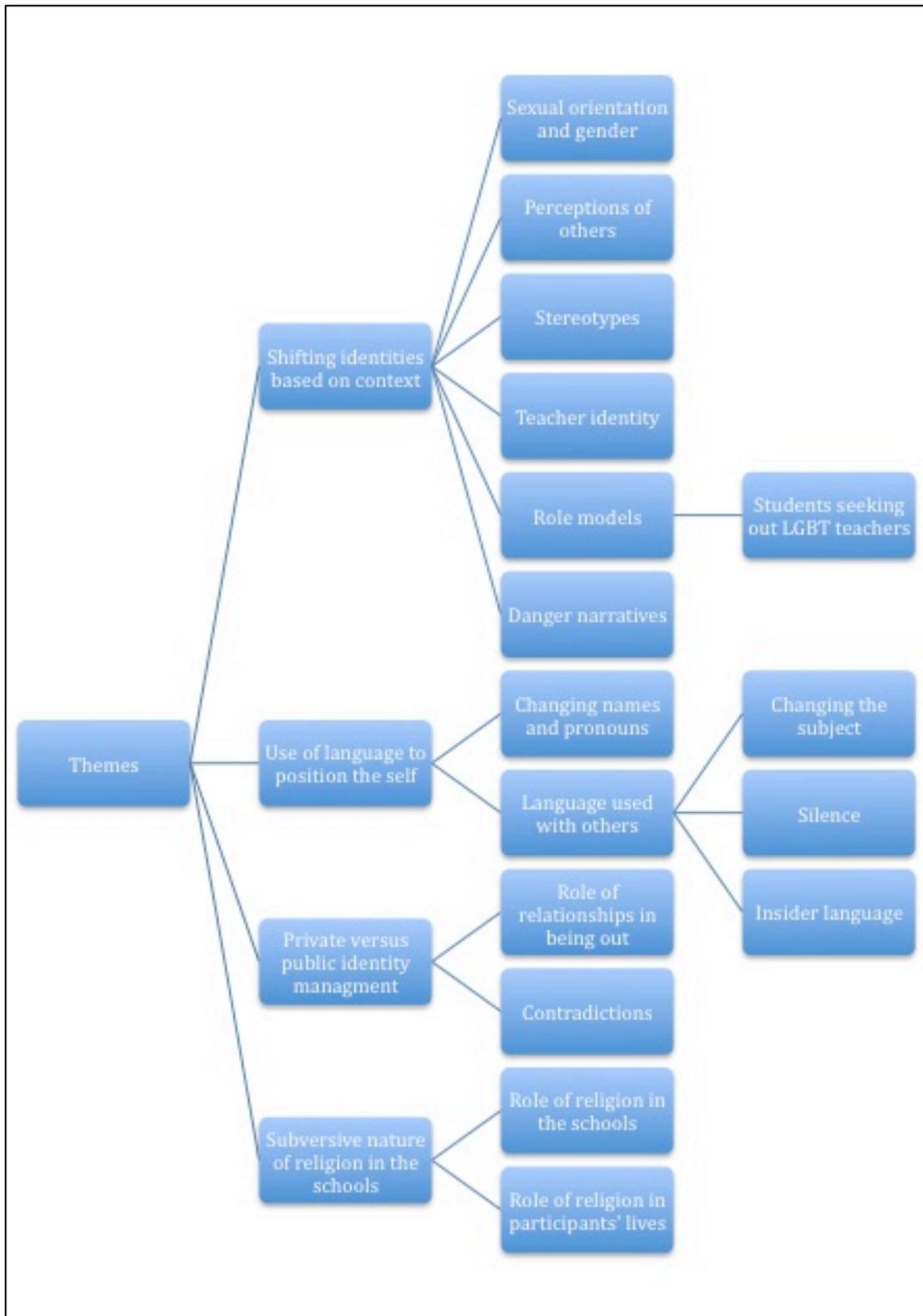
a) What are teachers' perceptions of their experiences as gay and lesbian elementary school teachers? b) What does it mean to the participant to be a gay or lesbian elementary school teacher? c) How does the participant make sense of his/her identity as a gay or lesbian teacher? and d) How do the school settings frame their experiences as a gay or lesbian teacher?

The four main themes that emerged from the interview data were those of the shifting identities based on context, the use of language to position the self in relation to context and to manage identities, private versus public identity management, and the subversive nature of religion in the schools. The shifting identities theme included not only shifting identities related to sexual orientation and gender, but also included how the participants perceived others, as well as stereotypes of how they might be perceived. The participants also discussed themselves and their identities related to being a teacher. Some participants also discussed themselves as wanting to be role models within their schools and how students seemed to seek them out because of the possibility they were gay. The fear of working with students and danger narratives also emerged within the theme of shifting identities.

Within the theme of the use of language to position the self in relation to context and to manage identities, language as a positioning tool is related to the strategies the participants use in masking their LGBT identities at school, including changing partners' names or the pronouns they use, the language they use with others, including changing

the subject, and the role of silence with others. The third theme to emerge was that of private versus public identity management. Private identities versus public identities emerged as ways the participants employed to manage their identities. This theme is in regards to how the participants keep the private and public spheres of their lives separate, but also the contradictions that occur within this space. The fourth theme to emerge from the data is the subversive nature of religion in the schools, which includes the role religion plays in the schools the participants teach in, but also the role religion plays in their individual lives.

Figure 10.1 Overview of Themes and Subthemes



Shifting Identities Based on Context and Storylines

Sexual identity and gender identity. The overarching theme of the data is that of the shifting identities the participants in the study possessed. The participants would shift their identities based on the situation and location they were situated in at the time and the storyline that went with that location. Many of the participants stated their LGBT identity was not largely important to them; it was just a small piece of who they were. Consciously, they may have thought this to be true, but in their interviews, there were contradictions to this statement because there were times when they wanted to be able to be out or speak about their partners, but were unable to for various reasons, which will be discussed in later sections. “I don’t let being gay be the important thing in my life. Some people want everyone to know they are gay, ‘Oh, I’m gay and you have to accept it.’ I don’t feel like it’s anyone’s business, especially at work” (Carter, Interview 2). Carter also said, “I really only identify myself as Carter and not get into the whole label, I’m this, I’m that. I’m Carter. I date guys, but I am who I am” (Carter, Interview 1).

I want you to know me for me, my profession is teaching, so I want you to judge me on my teaching, not on who I’m sleeping with or who I’m dating or what I do in my personal time in my personal life (Carter, Interview 2)

It is interesting in this statement by Carter that although he does not think it is important for people to know about his private life and who he is dating, he sexualizes the nature of the relationship of who he is dating by bringing up the notion of who he is sleeping with. LGBT relationships are explicitly sexualized; the acts within the bedroom are thought of, whereas in discussions of heterosexual relationships, this is not automatically discussed. One reason this is problematic is because teachers are

historically thought of asexual beings (King, 2004). Once the thought of LGBT teachers' sexuality is made explicit, it disrupts this notion of asexual and becomes problematic. It also disrupts the notion of what a teacher is expected to be. The literature also supports this notion of sexualizing queer identities and the desexualizing of straight identities (Jackson, 2006; Khayatt, 1997). The actions that occur within the bedroom are not necessarily the first thing that is thought of when straight relationships are discussed, but this does occur with queer identities. Jamie also echoed Carter's thoughts on his sexual identity. "This probably makes me a bad queer, but it really is not that important to me. I mean, it's part of who I am, but it's only a small part of who I am" (Jamie, Interview 1). Jamie refers to herself as a "bad queer" because she, like other participants, states she does not see her sexual identity as a large part of her identity. For Jamie, it was more important that she be seen as a teacher, as Kel's partner, a friend to her good friends, a sister, and an educational consultant. "Lesbian is grouped kind of in there with all of that" (Jamie, Interview 1). Jamie is positioning herself in relation to what it means to be a "good queer." Jamie is setting up the binary of good versus bad, and within this explanation, a bad queer is someone who does not wear their queerness on their sleeve, whereas a good queer makes their sexuality the topmost priority of a piece of their identity (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Like Carter and Jamie, Mary also stated her sexual identity was not important to her. She identified as bisexual, but did not like the use of labels.

I hate bi. I don't know why, but I would never introduce myself to somebody and say, 'Hi, I'm bi.' Maybe there is a stigma there, maybe I have a double standard, but there's something weird about it... The whole bisexual thing seems greedy or

something, like you pulled from both pools or something. It seems selfish. I really just hate the label. (Interview 2)

For her, the parts of her identity that were more important were that of “being a female, first and foremost, a humanitarian, and an animal lover” (Mary, Interview 1). She described herself as a “behind the scenes kind of girl. I’m never the actress, I’m always props” (Mary, Interview 1). This implies Mary does not want to draw attention to herself in the different storylines she participates in. She positions herself as a backstage presence in her activities. Throughout her interviews, Mary also discussed how being an advocate for different causes was important to her, although advocating for gay causes were not at the top of her list. In the schools, this took the form of educating her students about the world around them, to expand their worldviews.

Positioning theory sets up identities in relation to each other and other categories (Harré & Slocum, 2003). For Mary, this meant setting up bisexuality in relation to the category of gay and the negative connotations associated with identifying as bisexual. An example of how Mary employs this strategy is that she will not bring up her sexual identity as bisexual or previous dating history with some women she dates because of the possible negative reactions she might receive from them due to this negative connotation within the lesbian community of what it means to be bisexual (Balsam & Mohr, 2007).

Ansley echoed what other participants said about their sexual identities. “It is important to me in a way, but it doesn’t define me” (Interview 1). She does, however, contradict herself by saying, “I want people to accept me for who I am. I don’t try to hide it” (Interview 1). The contradiction occurs in that she wants it to be an important part of who she is, that people are open to it, and that she does not hide it. This suggests

it is an important part of who she is. This does not transfer to her classroom, however, where she is not out to her students. Ansley is out to her staff and principal at school, but not to students and tries to change the subject if students ask her about being married or having a boyfriend. “I tell them to go play or get out of here or something and they just go. So sometimes I just have to cut it off when they start asking too many questions” (Ansley, Interview 1).

Gender identity came up with only one of the participants. When I asked MJ about how she identified for her sexual identity, she said it was important to discuss her gender identity first. MJ identifies as gender queer. She is biologically female, but does not feel like a woman all of the time. I will use female pronouns when referring to MJ, because after discussing with her which pronouns to use, she said she does not ask other people to use neutral or male pronouns at this point in her life. MJ identifies as gender queer because

...on the inside I feel like I flow through the genders so much and it feels really good to have a word out there that validates that because I think when people do just call me lesbian, I’m like, “You don’t know everything that’s going on for me, you don’t know how I’m feeling.”...I feel like it’s a really big blanket term, so on any given day if I’m feeling this way or I’m feeling that way, it’s all okay. (MJ, Interview 1)

MJ is also very aware of her race and the privilege and what being White afforded her in her life. “I’m very aware of my race and that’s important to me because it helps me to be more aware of all the ways that I’m privileged and my class. I grew up *very* privileged” (MJ, Interview 1). She sees it as part of her responsibility as an educator to

be aware of the dominant groups she is in, which target groups she is in, and where all of her kids fit into that so she could be a better ally to them and to see them better (MJ, Interview 1).

Gender identity plays out for MJ when she is interacting with the students in the after school program. There was a student MJ worked with who was convinced MJ was male and would call her Mr. M. MJ felt it to be her responsibility to correct the language for the school setting and told the student “I’m not a boy, I’m Ms. M.” Because MJ had short hair, the student decided she was male. It was solved when the student decided to stop using gendered addresses like Mr. or Ms., only addressing MJ by her last name. (MJ, Interview 2).

MJ’s identification of gender queer disrupts the notions of a stable gender expression because she does not ascribe to the confines of expected genders (Butler, 2006). She feels free to express her gender and sexuality depending on the context she is in. The context of the school does not allow her to fully express herself as gender queer though. This is illustrated in her discussion with the student about her gender. When students ask MJ about being male or female, she answers female because that is the expected response within the school walls, even though she works to disrupt the notion of gender.

Susan stated her character identity was more important to her than sexual identity was. It was important to her that she be seen as “a good person, a trustworthy person” (Susan, Interview 1). She also identified as a daughter, a teacher, a lesbian, a wife, and a dog owner” (Susan, Interview 1). Being a lesbian is “a part of who I am, it’s not all of me, but it’s a part of me and it’s an important part of me” (Susan, Interview 3).

Positioning others based on perceived identities. One subtheme to emerge from the role of shifting identities was the positioning of others by the participants based on their perceived identities. Participants discussed their perceptions of others, and being able to identify other queer individuals, whether it is by looking at them or by stereotypical mannerisms as a subtheme within the shifting role of identities. Mary spoke of this when confronting another gay teacher at her school whom she assumed was gay. She made this assumption because “he is effeminate in a lot of ways” (Mary, Interview 1). In this sense, Mary is positioning Carter as gay because of her observations of his effeminate behavior. This other teacher is Carter, another participant in this study. As it turns out, Carter and Mary work in the same school, but were recruited for the study through separate people. They did not know they were both in the study and it was interesting to hear them speak of each other in the interviews. Carter is not open about his sexuality at school, even with Mary. Although he acknowledged to her that he is gay, it did not bring them closer together or help them form a sense of community within the school. Mary also sees Carter’s sexuality as a small part of who he is, like she does with herself. “He’s so many other things, that his sexuality, it wouldn’t make a difference if he was out or not to his colleagues. He is still an amazing teacher” (Mary, Interview 1). This statement is interesting because Mary implies that even though Carter is gay, he is still an amazing teacher, as if his sexuality would affect that.

This identification of others through mannerisms or participants’ self-described gaydar allows them to position others as gay within their storylines. Gaydar, a combination of gay radar, is the “ability to identify subtle mannerisms and enactment of body that may indicate that one is non-heterosexual” (Farr & Degroult, 2008, p. 430). It

is suggested gaydar is not something is inherent within people in the LGBT community, but is instead developed by these individuals through observation and interaction with other LGBT persons, in order to find like people (Shelp, 2002). Positioning of others based on one's gaydar takes those people's mannerisms and language into account in perceiving them as gay or straight.

Stereotypes. Another subtheme that emerged was the role of stereotypes for the participants in regards to others' perceptions of them. Ansley will not dress in clothes that she will wear when she is not at school on a weekend or other off time when she is near the school because her students "typically know what females who are gay typically look like, so that's why I won't do it" (Interview 3). She is afraid of being outed to her students based on her clothing in her off hours. Carter does not often attend Pride events because he does not want to be stereotyped or put into groups (Interview 2).

Ansley does not want to teach middle or high school because of her fear of being outed based on stereotypes.

One reason (I couldn't teach middle or high school) is because I know the kids would know I'm gay and the kids would make comments like she's gay and stuff like that and it might bother me. It seems like it would be too hard for me with older students. (Interview 1)

As a gay man, Carter thinks people assume he is gay because "you don't find a whole lot of men teaching elementary school, so most of the time, most people assume that he's probably gay if you're single" (Carter, Interview 3). This assumption Carter makes reflects the thought that teaching in elementary schools is more of a woman's job than it is a man's job. If a male chooses to teach in this field, he must be displaying

female characteristics (Cushman, 2005; Hansen & Mulholland, 2005). In this sense, males are positioned as more feminine because they would display more caring characteristics in elementary classrooms than their peers in middle or upper grades may display.

Teacher identity. Another subcategory within the shifting role of identity in different contexts is the participants' perceptions of themselves as teachers. Susan spoke of her success as a teacher and the pull of not being to be fully out as a teacher,

I'm a good teacher, I am a dynamic teacher, I am a respected teacher and I think I could do so much more if I could be 100% out and be like, this is who I am. We are not bad people, we are just like everybody else and we live our lives just like everybody else. (Interview 2)

Susan feels that she cannot be wholly effective as a teacher because she cannot be fully out. She does not feel that the community or school is ready to deal with her being out though because of the Conservative nature of where she lives and teaches (Interview 2). As previously discussed, she would like to be a figure for same-sex parents and their children within her school, as well as a visible out person for other parents in the schools, without having to hide who she is.

If she were able to be out, Mary would be out as well. She states,

I would just want to be able to be open, not to be an activist, but to be able to say when somebody asked me what I did this weekend, I could say my partner and I and not feel uncomfortable to feel the need to hold anything back. My teaching would be the same; I would just be able to be a little bit more open. (Interview 3)

What is interesting between Mary and Susan wanting to be out is their view of their teaching effectiveness. Susan feels that it will make her a better teacher if she is able to be fully out and open, while Mary does not think it will effect her teaching at all. Jackson (2006) found that if teachers were able to be out in their classroom, it had the potential to enrich the teaching of these individuals. In fact, Jackson (2006) found that in not being able to be out, some teachers are unable to teach to their highest potential.

Susan was told early on by her instructors what a teacher should look and act like. I was very open in college. In fact, during my freshman year on the soccer team, they nicked named me Rainbow Brite. They would say, "Oh my God, this girl from [the south] has rolled up here and she is loud and proud,"...My professor, who was the head of the Ed Department, said, "There is something you need to understand, you can't be Rainbow Brite at school. You just can't. Whatever it is you need to do to fix *this*, you have to fix it." That was hard to digest because I would think no, I finally figured out who I am and darn it I was in that state of, that stage of acceptance of yourself that's I'm going to tell the world. I would think I need to get over this stage really quick. I would say okay those are the rules, so I will follow them. I'll shut up and do what I need to do. (Interview 1)

For Susan, this meant adjusting who she was to fit in what a teacher should look like, "Teachers were squeaky clean, and teachers didn't have lives, and teachers follow the rules. They had their perfect little life. I would think, I don't quite look like that, but I can do this" (Interview 1). In order to achieve this image, Susan tried to grow her hair out, grow her nails out and get manicures, and tried to wear skirts, none of which lasted because it did not feel comfortable to her and interfered with who she perceived herself to

be. To remedy this, she compartmentalized her work life from her personal life. By trying to adjust her outward appearance to fulfill the expectation of teacher, Susan is performing gender, more specifically, she tried to enact what it means to be female by adjusting how she presented herself to others.

Susan and I discussed attending gay pride events and if she would ever participate in the parade. She said if she were to do that, she would

...throw myself in with Youth Zone (a queer youth organization) or PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) because if a parent ever questioned it, I can say I do community outreach that way or defuse it that way, or make it a teachable moment in tolerance, but not have to disclose my own sexuality.

(Interview 2)

In the event Susan is seen in a gay pride parade, she will make a conscious effort to position herself with organizations that can be seen as having positive connotations, such as Youth Zone and PFLAG. In doing so, she does not have to out herself as a lesbian, but will instead be seen as a supporter of these groups. She is able to position herself with less innocuous groups so she does not have to draw attention to her sexuality or out herself.

During the time of the interviews, Susan was actively trying to get pregnant. She had a discussion with her principal about it because it might mean she would be a pregnant, unwed teacher. In order to remedy this, Susan felt like she needed to change her last name to her partner's name to look like she got married over the summer vacation to help alleviate questions from people. She feels as if part of it is "my feelings of needing to conform" (Interview 2). The discourse of good teacher and morality are

present within this action because teachers are thought to be moral subjects and being an unwed mother, much less a lesbian unwed mother would disrupt this normative discourse (Evans, 2002; Harbeck, 1997; King, 2004). Susan is also positioning herself in terms of heterosexual expectations by wanting to change her name to mirror what many straight women do upon getting married to a male.

Susan and Ansley are the most aware of their clothing, adjusting their work clothing so they can fit in better with what teachers at their schools wear. As previously stated, Ansley is very cognizant of what she wears when she is near the school. During the school day, she wears the same outfit everyday, khakis and a school shirt. When she started teaching, Ansley would try to wear more feminine clothes, but was not comfortable in them. If she does have to dress up for an event at school, however, she will wear the more feminine outfit.

In adjusting their dress, both Ansley and Susan were actively policing their identities to fit within the heterosexual norms, although this can also be seen as a way of conforming to expectations of what teachers should look like through their dress (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Ferfolja, 2007). Their gender is also being regulated through conforming to the standards of gender intelligibility when Ansley and Susan adjust their clothing when they are within the school building (Butler, 2006). The regulatory practices of gender and gender expectations dictate how Ansley and Susan present themselves in their schools. Ansley and Susan, however, did not feel comfortable with the regulations placed upon them in terms of clothing and the expectations of they should dress to perform teacher. Instead, they adapted their dress to reflect outfits they

were more comfortable in by wearing khaki pants to school everyday and by Ansley choosing to wear school shirts everyday.

Positioning selves as role models. Another subcategory within shifting identities is how the teachers position themselves as role models to possible LGBT students or same-sex families. Jamie, Susan, and MJ wanted to be role models for their students as LGBT individuals. Jamie wanted to be a positive role model and be seen as “a nice, normal gay person that teaches me everyday. She’s just nice and normal and she doesn’t seem to be all dressed in leather (indecipherable)” (Jamie, Interview 2). Her statement implies being gay is not normal and there is something wrong with it, setting up gay in relation to straight, as well as good in relation to bad (Harré & Slocum, 2003).

Susan also wanted to be a role model in her school, not only for the students in the school, but to be visible for other LGBT parents who had students in the school so it would be a more accepting and open environment for their children and for the parents when they came to school events. She wants to be able to have a table at PTA meetings on same-sex families so people will start to be more open towards it.

MJ struggled with the idea of being a role model for children because she was gay. Her prior work was at Outward Bound, where she was unwilling to be an instructor for the first few years she worked there. She was unsure if it was okay for her to work with children because she was gay (Interview 1).

Harré and Slocum (2003) also discuss supererogatory duties that are taken on by those being positioned feel they need to fulfill, going above and beyond the call of duty. When people are positioned in the role of teacher, there is an expectation that teachers have to act in a certain way to maintain a certain standard of behavior and morals, even

outside of the classroom. Teachers in this study also discussed their pull in feeling like a role model for LGBT students, as well as LGBT families within their schools. They want to take on the extra duties of role model for the population of which they are a part.

While I do not know if heterosexual teachers would say the same thing about feeling like they need to be role models for families made up of straight parents, I do not believe they would, because families comprised of heterosexual parents are the normative discourse, and is not looked upon as different.

Students in schools seeking out LGBT teachers. One category within the subtheme of role models as part of identity is how students in the schools seemingly seek out LGBT teachers. There are instances that have occurred for Jamie and Ansley where students were seeking them out because they may have been gay. Jamie had an instance where there were fifth grade female students who were beginning to get involved in a lesbian relationship and coming out to their guardians and during this time, they came to Jamie and she thinks it was because they sensed she was gay. She referred it to the counselor right away though, because she did not want to be outed. She did wish she could be out to be a role model for these girls, as previously discussed.

Ansley also had a situation with a female student writing her notes, like she had a crush on her. The student had two moms, so to her, it was something that was seen in her daily life. School crushes are not uncommon, but in this instance, it was referred to the counselor and principal and it was even discussed to have the student removed from Ansley's classroom to remedy it, implying something is wrong with it. If male students have crushes on their female teachers, it is not seen as something that needs to be remedied by removing the student from the classroom. The reaction by Ansley's

principal suggests there is something wrong with a female student having a crush on a female teacher, bringing up the danger narrative and positioning Ansley as dangerous to this girl because she is a lesbian and the student may need to be protected from her teacher (Cavanagh, 2008).

Working with students. MJ questioned her ability to work with students because of her queer identity. This is another subtheme within the role of shifting identities. MJ is in a different teaching situation than the other participants in the study. She started her career in outdoor education at Outward Bound, an outdoor expedition that “builds character, teaches leadership skills, and inspires a service ethic” (Outward Bound Wilderness Program, 2011). When she started at this position, she did not feel like she could work with students because she was gay. She was worried about the reactions of the youth as well as the other people who worked at Outward Bound. “I felt like the kids are going to think I’m a freak” (Interview 1). It took four years of working behind the scenes until she got the confidence to work as an instructor. It was not until she attended diversity training at Outward Bound for her to find her inner voice and strength to want to be working with kids.

MJ positioned herself within the storyline of being unfit to be a teacher because of her sexual and gender identity. This ties into the discourse that teachers need to fit a particular image in order to work with children, even if she did not teach in a traditional classroom setting and she felt othered because she did not fit in the expectation of teacher (Colbert, 2008). MJ’s reaction implies the disruption of the teacher discourse is not acceptable to her.

After leaving Outward Bound, MJ interviewed as a substitute teacher at the school where she is currently employed as the after-school program coordinator. She was nervous about her presentation because she had a nose piercing and a shaved head. Once she started as a substitute teacher, MJ was asked to remove her nose ring, although there were other teachers at the school who were permitted to keep theirs (MJ, Interview 1). Along with her piercings, at the time, MJ had a shaved head as well. Colbert (2008) found that teachers who do not fit the normative expectation of teacher are often othered for not looking the part. MJ was asked to take out her piercing because she did not look the part of teacher. MJ thinks the teachers that were allowed to keep their nose piercings were allowed to do so because they looked pretty and they already fit the expected role of teacher.

Positioning theory also sets up a complementary or antagonistic pattern of rights and duties (Harré & Slocum, 2003). In this case, gay is set up in relation to straight, as well as gay in relation to danger. This is shown through the emergence of danger narratives where the teachers are afraid they will be accused of pedophilia or of trying to recruit their students to be gay as shown through statements from Ansley and Jamie's interviews. King (2004) discusses the fear people have of gay teachers trying to recruit students into homosexuality in terms of gay men, but not lesbians. From the interviews, it is apparent that this fear is present for lesbian teachers as well, especially when female students who might be identifying as lesbian approach them with a crush or seek them out for support, even though the teachers who identify as lesbian have never come out to their students.

In Carter's narrative, he discusses how a parent was afraid of him being a male teacher with her daughter, another example of how male is set up in relation to pedophile. In a study done by Hansen and Mulholland (2005), they found when talking with their participants that it was suggested by others that because they were male teacher candidates, that they were getting into teaching at the elementary level because they are pedophiles. Carter discusses this in his narrative as well. One of the parents of a student in his preschool class said she was concerned about having a male teacher for her daughter in the early childhood setting and would ask her daughter on a daily basis if he touched her at all (Carter, Interview 1). In this instance for Carter, his sexuality was not at the forefront as much as his gender was.

Using Language to Position the Self

Another theme to emerge from the data is the use of language to position the self in relation to context and to manage identities. Subthemes included changing names, changing pronouns, and staying silent. In this study, the participants did have to self-regulate themselves through the use of language. They engaged in discursive positioning through this self-regulation (Rasmussen, 2006). This positioning came in the forms of changing the names of their partners if speaking in public spaces where they were not out or changing the pronouns of their partners to the opposite gender. The participants in the study also employed silence as a strategy to position themselves within conversation. Language is an aspect of identity because the participants are consciously defining themselves through what they are saying or by not saying by choosing to remain silent.

Changing names and pronouns. One category to emerge under the use of language to position the self in relation to context and to manage identities was the use of

changing partners' names and the use of pronouns when speaking to others. Many of the participants changed the names of their partners to a male name in order to speak about them in public without having to disclose the gender of the person they were speaking about. Susan changes her partner's name to Fred if she wants to discuss something about her partner with her co-teacher (Interview 2). She does it so she does not draw attention to her sexuality with those she is not comfortable with, saying she does it "for politics' sake" (Interview 2). She also changes her partner's name to Fred so she can have conversations in front of her students with her co-teacher about what she did over the weekend. Susan also purposely avoids pronouns so it does not have to become complicated with switching the pronouns.

Susan does see having to use the name Fred as a way of conforming within the school walls and hates having to use the different name. She feels as if "I'm saying the only relationship that's okay is a man and a woman" (Interview 2). This also bothers her because there are students in the school who come from same-sex families and she is unable to be a visible, out staff person for these families.

Carter exercises his agency when he decides what topics to discuss with people depending on the company he is in.

Conversation varied depending on who was around and whether or not I discuss something personal or if I left out the gender, he or she, or saying the name, just talking about someone in general. I never publically would say my boyfriend and I, it was just very generic. (Interview 1)

Mary also employed the tactic of changing names or pronouns when discussing her female partners. "It was he instead of she" or she would say, "My friend Angie

instead of my girlfriend. I hung out with my friend Angie and we did this” (Interview 1). When dating men, however, Mary felt free to discuss her personal life with her co-workers, referring to the male by name and not having to change pronouns. When Mary is dating women, she discussed how it is draining trying to say he instead of she if she is dating a woman (Interview 1). Similar to Ferfolja’s study (2007), lesbian teachers who were previously married to men were assumed to be straight because of their previous relationships. The times Jamie is dating men, she is able to fit into the straight storyline because of whom she is dating. She is able to reposition herself into the new storyline.

Jamie also employs the strategy of policing the pronouns she uses. “I say *we* whenever I talk about what I did over the weekend. ‘We went to the mountains,’ ‘We did this’” (Jamie, Interview 2). Although Jamie speaks in her interviews about keeping the private and public spheres of her life separate, she has found a strategy she can employ when she chooses to discuss her partner by using the pronoun *we* to discuss her partner. In using *we*, Jamie does not have to share the gender of her partner, which allows for her to keep that part of her life private.

The participants in the study must self-regulate themselves through language in order to remain closeted, reflecting the work of Atkinson and DePalma (2009). Through this self-regulation of language, the participants are reflexively positioning themselves within the conversations they have with others (Davies & Harré, 1990). The use of *we*, opposite pronouns, or changing names allows for this to occur. The participants are positioning themselves in heteronormative contexts with this strategy, in order to not be outed or to out themselves to others. The positioning they engage in occurs through

speech acts because they are positioning themselves in the storyline of heteronormative relationship expectations by what they say.

Participants are also participating in the heterosexual matrix when they are positioning themselves in terms of language. The heterosexual matrix posits “for bodies to cohere and make sense, there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (Butler, 2006, p. 208). Through changing names and pronouns to fit the heterosexual framework and expectations, the teachers are expressing specific gender expectations of their relationships.

Insider language with others. The insider language the participants use with others they position as LGBT is another category to emerge within the role of language as a positioning tool. Carter and Mary teach together at the same school and both assumed the other one was gay. Carter made this assumption based on the language Mary used around him.

She has made some comments to me about certain things that would lead me to believe, but she has never said. I can't really say she's a lesbian, but I would probably say she's bisexual because I've heard her having conversations about dating guys as well...I know last year she said something to me about her partner, so that led me to believe... (Interview 2)

Mary discussed how she let Carter know she was gay by asking, “Oh, you're family, right?” (Interview 1). Carter told her to be careful to whom she says that too and she replied, “Well, you're the only person I've said it to and I just assumed you were. If you weren't, you would have had no idea what I was saying by that comment” (Interview

1). The use of family refers to a term used within the LGBT community to refer to other LGBT community members. She used the insider term to see if Carter responded to it, without being too concerned that he was not gay. Mary used this insider language as a way to manage her identity with another presumed gay individual.

Carter will turn the conversations around if people start to ask questions concerning his sexuality. He will respond by saying, “I don’t go around asking you about your husband or wife or what you do sexually in bed or what you do when you leave this building, so it’s really not any of your business what I do” (Interview 2).

Changing the subject. Another category to emerge was the strategy used by the participants to manage their identities by changing the subject in conversation when topics of their personal lives came up. Common questions asked by students to their teachers are oftentimes, “Are you married?” or “Do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend?” The participants in this study responded to this in a variety of ways. Ansley handled it by changing the subject with her students. She will tell them, “I’m too busy and have too much stuff going on with school” or if it occurs at recess she would tell them to, “Go play,” in order to avoid answering the question (Interview 1). She heavily employs this strategy when they start to ask too many questions and just cuts the conversation off in order to protect herself from her students finding out too much about her personal life. Interestingly, when Ansley discussed her partner, she said, “If I described her, she would be a guy anyway, I wouldn’t have to lie, I would just change the name” (Interview 3). It is interesting that Ansley does not see changing her partner’s name as a lie, because she describes her girlfriend’s traits as those traits traditionally associated with men. In this sense, Ansley is positioning her girlfriend as having male characteristics in relation to

other males, making it acceptable to change her girlfriend's name and to not disclose her gender (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Silence. A subtheme to emerge from the role of language to manage identities is the role of silence. For a majority of the participants, silence was used as a form of language in dealing with other staff members or students. Butler (2006) states that language can be used to subordinate and exclude. Participants choose to use silence as a strategy in order to exist in schools, because they have to exclude parts of their lives from others. "I typically don't talk about it, or I may say *we*, or use pronouns" (Carter, Interview 2).

Jamie has lived in the neighborhood she has taught in, where he students have seen her with her partner. She has heard students whisper, "She's gay, she's gay" but would choose not to address it with them (Interview 2). The students did not approach her at school to question her about it though and she did not bring it up, stating, "I'm much more comfortable with don't ask, don't tell¹⁹ at school" (Interview 2). This extends past her comfort level to the principal who "would probably encourage me not to talk about it or talk about these sorts of things" (Interview 2). If Jamie were able to be out, she would probably come out to staff members and use her partner's name instead of saying *we* or changing pronouns. She also thinks

it would kind of relieve some of the kids asking are you married, do you have kids, that sort of stuff because I really want to say, 'Yeah, I am,' but if I say, 'Yeah, I am,' then I would have to say who I'm married to or I feel like I would

¹⁹ Don't ask, don't tell refers to a military policy that does not allow for LGBT soldiers to come out. If they do come out, they risk being discharged from the military.

and I don't feel like I can do that right now. It would give me the opportunity to be a little bit more open about personal stories. (Interview 2)

In this statement, Jamie contradicts her previous statement of being comfortable with the concept of "don't ask, don't tell" within the schools because she says she would like to say she is married when asked by others there. It is especially interesting that she thinks the students know she is gay, but it is not discussed with the students in the school, even though they have their assumptions about their teacher.

Although MJ is out to the staff at her school, she is also silent about her sexuality and gender identity when it comes to the students. She would like to find a way to be out with her students, but is still struggling to figure out how. "I don't want to be like, 'Welcome to aftercare, I'm gay. If you have questions, come talk to me,' That's the part that is eating away at me" (Interview 2). MJ does work with older students in her capacity of the aftercare director and on multiple occasions MJ has brought up the idea of putting a Safe Space sticker on her office door, which has been ignored by the administration at the school.

MJ had recently had a discussion with two eighth grade students in the aftercare program about some fears one of the girls had about another girl having a crush on her and maybe turning her gay as well as the language they were using in the discussion, that LGBT people are not a separate category from what the girls saw as "normal" people. By having this discussion, MJ is helping the students disrupt their notion of heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as abnormal. Instead, she worked to build these discourses in with each other.

During this discussion, MJ wanted to come out to the students, but did not because a fear of administrative backlash and the fear of losing her job.²⁰

I was like, “Wow, should I come out right now?” I sat there and I didn't. I wondered if I should say, “I'm gay.” That's what I would've done at Outward Bound and I didn't do it. I just sat there and thought, “Shit, I can't believe I just had a conversation about this.” It doesn't have to be about me, but I have mixed feelings about it for sure. (Interview 3)

Susan also uses silence as a strategy for interacting with staff members who are not supportive of her sexuality.

This is something I don't speak openly with her (another staff member) about it because it clearly makes her uncomfortable. There are other people in this building who I'm not going to talk about that with. You're going to go your way and I'm going to go my way and it's fine. (Interview 1)

“There are the people that know and we just choose not to talk about it and that's okay, that's life, that's the real world” (Interview 2).

Susan is able to be out and open about her sexuality with a majority of her colleagues, but knowing there are people who are uncomfortable with it, she does not discuss it around them. She is exercising her agency here because she can choose with whom she discusses her personal life around. She does, however, have to censor herself around these people because they are not comfortable with the subject matter. In this sense, she is positioning herself within the different storylines in her school, openly speaking about her life in some instances, and not speaking about it in others.

²⁰ For a complete description of this discussion, see MJ's narrative in chapter 4.

LGBT topics in the classroom. Across the participants, LGBT topics are not spoken about within the curriculum. Susan and her co-teacher did a unit about families with her kindergarten class and same-sex families are mentioned only once in the books they used for the unit. Her co-teacher

was really good this year in making sure that when we did our family unit when she would talk about families. She would say families look like all different things and she purposely made an attempt to say some families have two moms or two dads. She didn't go into depth with it because it is still a very taboo topic.

(Interview 2)

Just talking about families that might look different from the traditional nuclear family cannot be discussed within the school.

Ansley also mentioned the same book that was used in Susan's classroom as being the only one in their school library that recognizes same-sex families. When Ansley started teaching at her school, she looked at the health curriculum guide for her county and it specifically stated in the curriculum "homosexuality is not to be portrayed as an acceptable alternative lifestyle" (Ansley, Interview 2). This is another example of the institutional power positioning homosexuality as something negative and needing to be silenced within the school's curriculum, with heterosexuality being the only acceptable topic to discuss when it comes to relationships (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Slocum, 2003).

The phrases, "That's so gay" or "You're so gay" are not directly discussed when students use them as put-downs against other students. Overwhelmingly, the participants would not draw attention to what was said or address the power of the language behind it.

Ansley tells them to stop calling names or gives them a check as part of her classroom management system (Interview 2). Jamie will tell students, “That’s inappropriate, we don’t call names, etc. I would just treat that as I would any other derogatory, whatever the kids would call each other because they meant it in a derogatory sense” (Interview 2). Jamie works within a district that had a fifth grade student commit suicide the previous year because he was being bullied about his perceived sexual orientation.

I think if the kid went home to kill himself because he was being tortured that day, I think it had been going on for a long time and was extreme. I mean, the teachers see it; I see it. I know who the kids like and who they don’t like and who they try to ostracize. (Interview 2)

Although Jamie works within this district where this suicide occurred, she does not draw attention to the language the students use when putting each other down.

Anagnostopoulos, Buchanan, Pereira, and Lichy (2009) examined gender-based bullying and the use of positioning theory in teachers’ responses to the bullying. They suggest that school staff members have a duty to interact in cases of bullying because of their positions of power within the institutions in which they work. They believe it important to examine how school staff members position themselves in terms of the interactions and students and may help us understand how the teachers respond in these situations. This may suggest why the teachers in this study do not directly address the students’ statements of “You’re so gay” or “That’s so gay.” The teachers do not want to position themselves in terms of the anti-gay statements, because it may draw attention to their sexual orientations and they work to keep this aspect of their lives away from their students. There is a hierarchy of institutional power within the schools and the teachers

may not feel they have this power when it is related to LGBT issues because they are already feeling as if they are not allowed to speak of this subject matter.

When I was teaching, the students were using “You’re so gay” as a putdown towards each other and I did try to treat it as any other putdown, but after awhile, when it was not stopping, I decided to address it head on, knowing that I could lose my job or be sanctioned for the discussion with my students. As I spoke to them and they were saying things like, “It’s gross,” or “It’s wrong,” I could tell they were not seeing my point, so I took a deep breath and asked, “What if I said I was gay?” They gasped and asked, “Are you?” I responded with, “Does it matter? What do you think of me as a teacher?” They shared things like, “You teach us. You take care of us,” etc. and decided it did not really matter when one student connected it to being discriminated against for being African-American. After that discussion, the students did not use it as a putdown and would address it if new students came into the classroom using it. Just treating it as a regular putdown was not good enough. The students had to know the power behind their language and it was my responsibility to take the negative connotations away from their words.

Another way in which positioning theory is working within these participants’ lives is through their teaching and curriculum are through the positions the participants are taking up in their classrooms. There are possibilities for how the teachers can trouble the curriculum or address the bullying centered around “You’re so gay” or “That’s so gay” but do not, because they are positioned as subordinate to their straight colleagues and the topics they are permitted to discuss (Harré & Slocum, 2003). Topics pertaining

to LGBT subject matter are left out of the curriculum, classrooms, and schools effectively silencing the discussion of them.

Public versus Private Identity Management

The third theme to emerge from the data is private versus public identity management. Harré and Slocum (2003) discuss three categories of actions within positioning theory: a) the actions one has done, b) the actions one is permitted or encouraged to do, and c) the actions one is physically and temperamentally capable of doing. The participants position themselves in what they are allowed and permitted to do when it comes to positioning theory when they hold back aspects of their lives they would like to share with others.

Many of the teachers in this study felt it not possible to share their personal lives in the schools, but at different degrees. Some teachers were comfortable being out with administration and staff members, others to only select staff members. None of the teachers in the study, however, felt they were able to be out to students.

It was important for those teachers who were only out to a select few staff members to keep their LGBT identity separate from their work identity. Included in this was the idea that their professional lives were their professional lives and their personal lives were their personal lives and the two worlds did not intersect.

I keep my personal life pretty separate from most of the staff, there's always a couple of friends what I've had in each school who I've been really close with, at least one person that I could confide in everything. If I didn't have that I think I would be...I would be really uncomfortable if I couldn't be open with at least one person. It might get to be a burden. (Mary, Interview 2)

Jamie was very intentional in the beginning of her career when choosing where to teach. “I specifically got a job that was almost an hour away, because I didn’t want to mix those two worlds” (Jamie, Interview 1). Jamie consciously exercised her agency in where she worked in order to protect her private life by physically separating her employment from her home. Although Jamie is exercising her agency by choosing to physically separate her employment location from her home location, she is also making a sacrifice in order to do so, having to drive a great distance to keep those parts of herself separate. This is a structural injustice that exists because of the lengths Jamie has to go to in order to protect herself and keep those components separate.

This separation is also evident when major life events occur within some of the participants’ lives. Two of the participants, Jamie and Mary, were engaged to women during their time as teachers, but did not share this part of their life with the staff at their respective schools. In my experiences as a teacher, when staff members got engaged, there would be a big announcement in the staff newsletter or at faculty meetings. In Mary’s case, this did not occur. Part of this was due to her choice to keep quiet though. “When people saw the ring and asked me about it, I just said, ‘Yes, but I’m a private person, it’s not something I need everybody at the school to know about’” (Mary, Interview 2). She also thought about the future and having a baby, where baby showers are also a common occurrence with staff members and said, “Sometimes I do get sad thinking, ‘Gosh, nobody would celebrate a baby shower’” (Mary, Interview 1). Jamie was actively planning her wedding during one school year and at the same time, another staff member was as well. “That was all we talked about. She got this great big shower and blah, blah, blah. That was a little mmmmmm moment” (Jamie, Interview 2).

In the case of Mary's engagement, she allowed herself to be positioned within heterosexual discourses, allowing people to assume she was engaged to a male, when she was engaged to a female (Davies & Harré, 1990). By not addressing their questions about being engaged, she allowed those who asked her to make their own assumptions about to whom she was engaged. Mary also did nothing to disrupt the heterosexual matrix by allowing others to assume she was engaged to a male (Butler, 2006). This reifies the heterosexual matrix because the compulsory practice of heterosexuality is not being disrupted when Mary allows others to assume who she is in the relationship with.

For most of the participants, this was a method they employed from the time they were undergraduate education students.

I learned in college, early on, both academically and socially and professionally that Monday through Friday, it's business time and I'm wearing my business hat during that time. Saturday and Sunday is me time and I wear my me hat during that time. (Susan, Interview 1)

Jamie discussed keeping a distance from her classmates as an undergraduate.

There's my personal life, but even in my classes at school, I didn't consider my classmates my friends. I didn't hang out with them socially. I would go to do class projects or whatever we had to do with them, but then I was completely out and open with my real friends, kind of the way I do with work. (Jamie, Interview 1)

In both of these cases, the participants kept their work and professional lives compartmentalized, allowing their colleagues and classmates to see their public personas as student or teacher, and allowing their friends to see their private persona, which

included their sexual identities and the life associated with the private component of their lives.

Mary's thoughts about how out she could be also shifted during her time teaching. Before entering the field, Mary thought she could be more out than she is able to be, although she did draw that line at parents and students. "I definitely thought I couldn't share my life completely, but I thought I could be out to everybody, colleagues. I didn't think I could be out to students and parents" (Mary, Interview 1). Part of this was because she was able to be out in her art education program, but she had previously worked in coffee shops where she was also able to be out. She thought this would transfer to the teaching environment, but came to find this was not the case. She summed it up by saying, "All of a sudden, I was realizing that I had to live a hidden life in some way" (Mary, Interview 1).

The role of relationships in being out. A subtheme to emerge from private versus public identity management is the role of relationships and how comfortable the participants felt being out to different staff members at the schools. Those with more relationships and friendships within the school were more likely to be out than those who saw their purpose at the school as just to teach. "I typically don't build a whole lot of friendships at work because that's not my purpose for being there. My purpose is for work" (Carter, Interview 2). He does say it would not matter if he was gay or straight, he would still act in the same way, keeping his personal life personal. "Even if I was heterosexual, it would be the same in that I don't believe in discussing it. I think work is work" (Carter, Interview 3).

Mary does not feel like she has a strong identity with the school she currently works at now. She has a few close friends who she confides in, but is not open with her sexuality. Like Carter, Mary does not feel like she would share this part of her life if she were heterosexual. “Even if I was dating a man, I wouldn’t be telling everybody I work with that business anyway” (Mary, Interview 1).

Carter and Mary position themselves as within the separate spheres of work and home. When they are in these different locations, they construct different storylines for themselves. The storyline they construct at school is that of a teacher, who is there to do a specific job for a specific number of hours a day. In this sense, they write their personal lives out of their working storyline. The categories developed by the actors in their storylines exclude some categories, while including others (Davies & Harré, 1990). The categories Carter and Mary use exclude their personal identities for their teaching identities.

Other teachers were more open with the staff at their schools, not hiding their sexual identities from them. They did, however, draw the line at being out to students. “I don’t feel like I really need to hide anything, it’s just from the kids in the class” (Ansley, Interview 2). By being out to the staff, it was almost a freeing experience.

I like being out because I don’t have to try to hide anything or make up lies, because for some many years, you have to tell lies all the time, if you have a girlfriend, you have to, you can’t tell that you have a girlfriend. (Ansley, Interview 2)

Ansley feels like she cannot be any more out than she is now though. “I’m basically out to everybody I can be out to, that I think I can be out to now, so I don’t really think

there's anything more I can do. I'm kind of at a standstill with that" (Ansley, Interview 3).

Susan is also out to most of the members of her staff. She felt out the climate at her school for much of the first year she was there and decided it was ok to come out to her staff. Although her sexual identity is common knowledge in the school building, she does not speak about it in front of everybody she works with.

I kind of felt it out who those people are and I learned early on, that these are the people you just don't bring it up with. You don't talk about your personal life with them, and that's fine. These are strictly business people... They tend to be older and nothing against them, but what they know to be the norm is very different than what we've grown up with. They are exceptions and their tolerance is at a different spot. (Susan, Interview 2)

Susan is also out to select parents within her school. A parent once asked her what she could do to make it easier for Susan to be out and Susan's response was, "Just talk about it. You can point out my partner and I when you see us out, but it didn't come from me" (Interview 1). This suggests the Susan is comfortable with parents slowly finding out about her sexual orientation, but she does not think it is acceptable for her to be the one to come out. She has to have other people leak the information. The parents who do know are well regarded in the community and if the information comes from them and not directly from Susan, the parents who are just finding out might better accept it.

Like Ansley and Susan, MJ is out to the other staff at her school. She also feels like she is unable to be out though. She struggles with not be able to be out to students

because when she was working at Outward Bound, she was able to be out on the courses. At school, “It pains me to be holding back” (Interview 1). At Outward Bound, she was out because,

I find it a responsibility to be visible. I’m thinking about all of the queer and questioning kids who are going through courses and this might be the only opportunity for them to have somebody to talk to. I’m thinking about all of the straight kids going through the courses and this might be the only opportunity for them to see this in a positive light and have somebody there in the woods with whom they trust with their safety, their emotional safety and their physical safety. To know that queers aren't these scary, fucked up people...and just because, just because, we're all different kinds of people. Why should this be the only thing on the course you're not supposed to talk about? (Interview 1)

MJ feels this responsibility at school to be visible as well, but due to the climate and Conservative head of school, is not able to be out to students even though she is fully out to the staff there, although she has not formally been told she cannot come out, she feels as if it is one of those things that is better left unsaid.

Ansley, Sara, and MJ all feel comfortable being out to staff members within their schools. They position themselves differently than do Jamie, Carter, or Mary in that regard. They allow for their personal lives to be known to other people in their schools, and in doing so, they are exercising their agency to be more open with fellow staff members. The moral order of the institutions may prohibit how people can position themselves in terms of the way the institutional power is set up (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). The institutional power of schools prohibits the participants from

positioning their LGBT identities with their students and limits their agency because none of the teachers in the study are out to their students and only a few are out to select parents in their classrooms. The participants stated in their interviews that if there was job protection for sexual orientation, they would be more willing to come out to students. Their agency, however, is limited because of their fear of losing their jobs. The moral order within the institutions of schools do not allow for these teachers to completely come out, positioning them as behind the closet doors (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999).

Within every position one takes up, there are storylines present. These storylines shift depending on the context the person is situated in. Positions also constrain what one may meaningfully say and do (Harré & Slocum, 2003). Positioning theory also focuses on the relation between what one believes they lack a right to perform and what is done because of that belief (Harré & Slocum, 2003). In the case of schools, the participants do not believe they can be out to parents and students, and because of this, separate their personal and professional lives.

Contradictions. In regards to being out, there are some contradictions my participants' interviews. Carter was very clear about keeping his personal and private life separate, but did go on to say, "I have a few close friendships, but I tend to keep it very limited and talk about work, how was your week, vacation, etc. I really don't get too personal. We are not friends, we are co-workers" (Carter, Interview 2). In a sense, this contradicts his previous statement about not having friends at work, but those relationships that he does consider friendships are still not enough for him to really open up about his life.

Mary also fell into this contradiction. She is very careful to keep her professional life separate from her personal life, but did say, “I couldn’t lie *all the time*. I even felt like, ‘Oh, I could lie as long as somebody knows, at least I can go to somebody to talk sometimes’” (Mary, Interview 1). Mary also contradicts herself when she says she would not share that part of her life with staff members, but goes on to say, “If I felt a sense of security and openness, I would definitely be more comfortable telling teachers I was close to” (Mary, Interview 1).

Although Susan was out to the staff in her school and a few select parents, she had reservations about being out once she had children. Susan and her partner were actively trying to get pregnant when I interviewed her and we spoke a bit about having children and being out. The county Susan works in allows for the children of teachers to attend the same school the teacher works in. Susan did not foresee this occurring, however, once their children reached school age. It was important to Susan that the children be in supportive environments and that county was not where that could occur.

In terms of seeing other families that look like theirs and being surrounded by a supportive environment, I think that’s crucial, especially at an early age where self-esteem is critical. I want to make sure that we put our kids in places where their self-esteem, just as a person and an individual and as their family self-esteem can be fostered and embraced and this county may not be the place for that.

(Susan, Interview 3)

She also feels that by having children in the same school, it would completely out her as a teacher. “That complicates things because then I am fully out, because they’re going to have classmates and their classmates are going to know about their family because I’m

not going to ask for a child to hide their family” (Susan, Interview 2). She does not want her children to hide who their family is, but she does not want it to be fully open about her personal life where she teaches because doing so would require her to be out to her students and parents in her classroom. This could be because of a fear of repercussions from people she works with or the parents of her students at the school.

The role of being a parent is a new storyline for Susan and she needs to constitute herself within this role. In discussing her fear about not wanting her child to have to hide his or her family, she believes it necessary to place her child in a different school to protect herself within her job.

For Carter, who was actively trying to adopt a child during our interviews, it was also important for his children to attend a different school, but not because he was worried about being outed. Carter wants his children to have a different experience of school by being more independent in a separate school.

I want my child to have a different aspect than being at the same place that I am because then they feel like I am watching them. I want, as well for me as a parent, I want to be able to parent and not have to worry about “Hey, I work here.” If I want to say something to that teacher as a parent I want to be able to say it and not worry about I work here too. (Carter, Interview 3)

The positions that are set up are relative to one another (Harré & Slocum, 2003). The participants are positioned as the role of teacher in relation to their students, but they are also positioned in the role of gay in relation to straight. These positions have expectations and beliefs that occur within the storyline, as well as expectations of the roles the actors will play in the storylines, which are ever moving and shifting.

Institutions can also be positioned as actors within these storylines. For the teachers in this study, the institution of schools positions heterosexuality as the acceptable expression of sexual orientation and homosexuality in opposition to that.

Subversive Nature of Religion in Schools

Although there is a law about the separation of church and state, public schools in the south must have a moment of silence in the mornings. This came out of a lawsuit that argued the removal of prayer from schools and instead, the moment of silence was put into place for those who wanted to pray in the morning, allowing them an opportunity to do so (Thaxton, 1996). In the Conservative south, the Christian Right does not believe being LGBT is acceptable. This is especially true in the schools. One of the reasons for this is because there is fear teachers will teach it is acceptable to be gay and if LGBT rights are passed or included in policy, it is being legitimized as an acceptable lifestyle (Macgillivray, 2008). Gay marriage is constitutionally banned in many states in the south, including the state where the study occurred (Human Rights Campaign, 2011).

Another fear of the Christian Right regarding the discussion of LGBT topics in the school is that it will become acceptable to formally include LGBT topics in the school curriculum. The parents of children who believe this think it is the parents' job to teach about their moral and ethical values and homosexuality goes against these beliefs (Macgillivray, 2008).

Religion is a strong force in the south and the state where this study occurs is in the middle of the Bible Belt, a location of Conservative religious beliefs. Due to the religious and Conservative undertones of the schools in this area, it is risky for the teachers to open up about their sexuality, not only because of the lack of job protection

that exists, but also because of the morality that is placed on teachers. Queer teachers would disrupt this stable moral location and that is too big of a threat for these teachers.

For Mary, Jamie, and Susan, religion in the schools was an issue that bothered them because they did not see the separation of church and state through the inclusion of religion in the schools, whether it was overtly or subversively present. Carter did not see any sign of religion in the schools, but would discuss the religious issues with his students if they asked. Ansley only noticed the moment of silence in the morning, not realizing the history behind this action and MJ, because she worked in a private school, said religion was not a part of the school at all.

Religion in the schools. Although religion is not supposed to be overtly present in public schools due to the separation of church and state, in many of the schools the participants worked in, religion is an underlying current that runs through the schools. Mary, Jamie, and Susan had the most aversion to the role religion played in their schools. In these three cases, their administration was very Conservative in their views and made their religious views known. This was most salient for Mary. She “feels like I am in a church setting,” similar to another part of the county where she previously taught. In her current setting, she received religious emails on school email accounts from other staff (Interview 1). Her principal is “über Christian. He’s already made comments that *they* don’t understand, meaning people that don’t go to church the way he does and practice faith the way he does” (Interview 1). Mary’s principal asked a group to come in to run a Christian Club at the school on a weekly basis before school starts. She thinks if there is going to be a religious group coming in, it should be a Muslim or Buddhist group, something different from what the students get at church every Sunday, so they can learn

something new (Interview 1). The secretary will play gospel music over the intercom in the mornings before school as well. The principal also puts a Christmas tree up in the school entrance, but not a Menorah or Kwanzaa items. The principal,

called a special education teacher, who is Jewish up to the office and told her, “Do you have a problem with Christmas trees? I’m Christian and this is my school, so if I want Christmas trees, I’m going to have Christmas trees.

(Interview 1)

Mary also struggles with the role of religion in her school with her students.

While I was raised Christian and while I would still probably consider myself a Christian, I want my kids (students) to realize there are a lot more possibilities out there, even if they don’t practice them, that it’s okay that these people don’t believe in the same Gods and I have to say it, but then I have to come back and say but what you think is, whatever you are learning at home, and that’s what your family believes in, that’s great, but there are people out there that think differently than us. They are not less. (Mary, Interview 2)

Carter, who is in the same school as Mary, sees it differently. He does not think religion plays a role in the school because of the “whole no religion in schools thing,” but goes on to say,

Because it is a predominantly African-American school with an African-American staff, the talk of religion is there. If the kids in my class talk about religion, I will talk about it but if they don’t talk about it, I won’t bring it up. If they ask a question I feel is okay for me to answer, I will answer. I remember during testing, the kids would say, “Mr. Draper, we want you to lead us in

prayer.” I would say, “I can’t lead you in prayer, but if you guys want to pray, you can go ahead and pray before the test and I have no problem with that, but I can’t be the one guiding you through this mini-prayer service before you take your test.” (Interview 2)

He thinks part of this is because the African-American population is traditionally very big in the church, so it is a natural extension of their religious practices. Carter positions the African-American community in terms of religion, as the students in the schools playing a role in the discourse of religion and religion being present in their lives because of the role religion plays within the African-American community. It is a normative discourse for him, and because of this, he does not see religion in the schools because it he sees it as a part of the students’ lives and it is not unusual for them to discuss it while they are at school.

Jamie, like Mary, sees religion in the schools in the south. Before teaching in the school she is at now, she was in another school in North Carolina where the principal would pray over the loudspeakers in the morning and before the faculty meetings. Although she does not think religion plays a large role in the school she is at now, her “principal has made it a clear point that she’s a Conservative Christian” (Interview 2).

Susan also sees religion as playing a role in the school she is in. “There is no separation of church and state...not in the Bible belt. In the Bible belt, that separation does not exist” (Interview 3). The partner-in-education for the school Susan teaches in is a church and for the kick-off for the school year, the pastor from the school came in to give their motivational speech for the year. “It started out very motivational and then all

of a sudden I felt like I was sitting in church” (Interview 3). She does not like the idea that one of the partners-in-education is a church instead of a business.

Of all the participants interviewed, only MJ did not have religion within the school setting. This is because she teaches in a private school. They do not have moments of silence in the morning like the public schools do, but they do say the pledge everyday. Students, however, do not have to say the pledge if they do not want to, they just need to be respectful during that time.

Religion in the participants’ lives. Religion plays various roles in the lives of the participants. Some of the participants have had very negative experiences with religion as they were growing up, while others had positive experiences. Jamie grew up as Southern Methodist and grew up “hearing all about homosexuality and burning in the fiery pits my whole life” (Interview 1). She ended up leaving home at the age of 15 because she came out to her mother and had a girlfriend who “didn’t go to the right church and didn’t seem like a good Christian girl” (Interview 1). After coming out to her mother and living on various couches of family and friends, her mother let her move back home, but only if she and Connie would attend pastoral counseling. “We did, we went. Connie would come pick me up and we would go, ‘Yes, yes, bad, wrong, burn in hell,’ and then make out and go home. We did that for awhile” (Interview 1). Jamie went back into the closet until the end of college for self-preservation. While in college, Jamie became part of the Presbyterian Student Association, which had a large number of queer members, and is where she accepted her queer identity.

While Jamie’s experiences with religion represent the negative outcomes of what could happen, MJ also struggled with the religious aspects of herself as she was coming

to terms with her gender identity as well as her sexual identity. MJ was raised in a Presbyterian family. Part of her coming out experience included having to come out to God. At the end of her senior year in high school, she was on a retreat. “I was like, ‘Alright God I’m gay, what are you going to do about it?’” (Interview 1). When she went to college, she joined Intersity, a Conservative Christian group on college campuses. During this time, she “dove in with everything that I had. I completely put it away...I was closeted all through college, I worked at a Conservative Christian camp for three years” (Interview 1). During this time, while MJ went back into the closet, she was in love with her best friend at school and because of this, withdrew from her Christian community at school because she could not stop the feelings she had for her friend. She struggled with this relationship because of the religious piece. “My religious life made it take a long time to be okay with myself. I don’t think I really let it all go until I was probably 25. I came out when I was 22” (Interview 1). When she did come out, she did so because the relationship she was in “was so amazing and good. I couldn’t see how there could be anything bad about it. I couldn’t see how God would not like it because it was so spiritual and amazing” (MJ, Interview 1).

Carter’s situation with religion is unique in that some of his students attend the same church he does. Religion plays a large role in Carter’s life. “I have always gone to church and believed in God. I was raised Baptist, and the whole Christianity piece. So it has been a huge part for me” (Carter, Interview 2). When he was coming to terms with his sexuality, there was a struggle to reconcile the religious piece of him with the gay piece of him.

I think there's always a struggle for any, I shouldn't say any, but I know for most Black men who are gay and were raised in the South, the Bible Belt in the sense, it becomes, you have to find a point where you are content with yourself and this is who I am and God has to love me for me. Of course you were raised that being gay is not right and homosexuality is a sin. There are so many ways that you have to look at it, so I think everybody has to find their peace within themselves and trusting God and trust in what they believe in and pray for the best. (Carter, Interview 2)

He goes on to say,

It was, but it wasn't (difficult). I just kind of accepted that, okay, it's not ever any full clarity because you morally don't have an answer to say yes, your life is right or it's wrong. It becomes clarity in that I am at peace with myself. (Carter, Interview 2)

Although Mary has difficulties with the prevalence of religion within her school, she does not personally have difficulties with religion, "I do enjoy mass. I was raised Episcopalian with a touch of Southern Baptist and I never had any negative experiences with religion until I became older and met people who want to put their values and beliefs on me" (Mary, Interview 1). As she has gotten older, she has difficulties when the churches are not open and accepting.

There are all these churches now that say they accept anybody, but it's still don't ask, don't tell, like what you do in your own life is fine, but we want you to come to church, just don't talk about it. (Mary, Interview 2)

She also has difficulties with churches some of her friends attend “where they are taught and told that they should be home serving their husbands” (Mary, Interview 1). “I like the way I was raised in my religion and if I don’t like it, I leave. I made my mother leave the church I was christened in because they went with the sect of the Episcopal Church that believed women couldn’t be ministers...” (Mary, Interview 1).

Although she does not agree with religion in the schools, Susan does not have difficulties with spirituality in general.

I think I am more spiritual than my partner in the sense I believe in a higher being. I don’t necessarily have a name for it, because I can’t explain it and I’m very scientific in that way... There is definitely something else out there, I don’t know what it is. (Interview 3)

Ansley has also had positive experiences with religion in her life. She was raised Lutheran and her stepfather was a pastor within the church. She continued in church throughout high school and in college, was in a church group on campus. She continues to go to church with her mother and brothers today. “I think God accepts all people. It’s not like I think there’s a problem or that gay people will go to hell, or anything like that” (Ansley, Interview 2). She feels like the church she currently attends, “does not discriminate. They accept everybody, I mean, you can wear whatever you want, you can wear a hat, it’s whatever” (Ansley, Interview 2). What is interesting about this statement is Ansley equates discrimination with what you are allowed to wear, not thinking about the other aspects churches can discriminate on, such as sexual orientation.

The participants in this study all have some type of history with religion with some experiences as positive and some experiences as negative. All of the participants

except Carter and MJ, are outsiders to their religious contexts within their schools. They position religion in schools as something that is negative because it is not something they ascribe to within their own personal lives. The institutional power, however, positions the subversive location of religion as something that is accepted because of the history of religion in the schools (Davies & Harré, 1990). The teachers have histories as subjective beings within the realm of religion, reacting in their own ways to it. As a result of their histories however, they react in different manners, with most of the reactions being negative. The role of religion in the south also makes it dangerous for LGBT teachers to open up as LGBT because of the subversive existence of religion in public schools there.

Chapter 11

Strengths, Limitations, and Implications

Strengths

The findings of this study build on previous studies and theoretical work, indicating the study's relevance pertaining to LGBT elementary school teachers and their identities within the schools. The use of rich, in-depth interviews that were completed with the participants enriches the study. With the exception of one, each participant participated in three interviews, lasting from 25 minutes to 60 minutes. Due to a scheduling conflict, one participant could only participate in two interviews, so we discussed the past and future within the second interview instead of making it three separate interviews. Participating in three interviews with each participant allowed for more information to come through, as well for us to begin to develop a rapport. Also, by using a limited number of participants and three in-depth interviews, more information can be learned than possible in a large-scale study. I was able to spend valuable time with the participants getting to know them and their stories.

This type of knowledge and forming of relationships would not be possible in a large-scale study because of the large amount of people involved. The data gathered from my interviews is much richer than a large-scale quantitative study because that type of study gives a snapshot of a large group of people at a particular time and does not take into account all of their lived experiences. The participants shared very personal stories with me and took a risk in participating in the interviews in the first place, so the three interviews allowed for rich data through in-depth stories.

There are also few qualitative studies that focus specifically on LGBT elementary school teachers. Studies that do include LGBT elementary school teachers also include middle and high school teachers and do not focus specifically on this group (Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma, & Hemingway, 2008; Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; Ferfolja, 2007; Jackson, 2006; Jackson, 2009; Khyatt, 1992; Resenbrink, 1996). Studies that do focus on LGBT elementary school teachers are not set in the context of the United States, so they may not be transferrable to the experiences of the LGBT teachers who live and work here, providing more reason that studies like this need to be done (Allan et al., 2008; Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; Ferfolja, 2007; Khayatt, 1992).

Limitations

This study has several limitations that could affect its transferability to other settings. The first limitation is the limited context of the study. The context is limited because the participants all come from a particular geographic region, a large metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. Although the teachers represent a variety of school districts, they are still located within a similar context. The context of the Bible Belt could also affect the transferability of the findings, limiting them to teachers who may be located in other locations in the United States that may also be Conservative.

A second limitation is the teachers who chose to participate in my study. These teachers contacted me to participate in the study after I sent out my call to participants. Some of them did not contact me until three or four emails about the study from their friends or acquaintances. This leads me to wonder how many other teachers received the email, but did not feel comfortable enough to participate in this study. Those who chose

to participate felt some degree of comfort in sharing their experiences with me in the interviews.

My participants, as reflected in the literature, are underrepresented in terms of race and sexuality. African-Americans are an underrepresented group in the literature, as well as my study (Parks, Hughes, & Werkmeister-Rozas, 2009). The majority of my participants identify as lesbian and this may be due to my sampling technique because it went through channels of people whom I know, mainly in the lesbian community in Southern City, USA.

Another limitation to the study is the use of interviews as data. The memories of the participants are all their perceptions and perceptions can shift depending on the individual who is having the memory and how they experience different events. This is shown with Carter and Mary and their perceptions of the role of religion within the school they are teaching.

Because this study limited in its population and geographic location, the goal is not for generalizability, but for transferability. Transferability allows for the findings to be transferred to other similar settings (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The teachers in this study did not teach in the same school district, but instead, represented a variety of school districts in one geographical area. The experiences of the teachers in this study are not representative of every elementary school teacher in the United States, but can be transferable to elementary school teachers in Southern contexts, due to the shared experiences of teachers in the southeastern United States.

Implications

The findings of this study point to the need for improvements in teachers' professional development, implications for practicing classroom teachers, as well as implications for policy pertaining to LGBT issues at different institutional levels.

Implications for professional development. Bullying issues are taking a national stage at this moment in time. President Obama recently held a national summit on the issue of bullying because it is such a problem in schools. As this study shows, participants in the study and other teachers in the school are not directly addressing comments from students like, "You're so gay," or "That's so gay." The LGBT teachers are not addressing it for fear of outing themselves and the straight teachers are not addressing it, whether it be because they are uncomfortable with it or think it is just as harmless as other forms of name calling. The suicides of Seth Walsh, Jaheem Harris, Asher Brown, Billy Lucas, Tyler Clemente, and others who have not gotten national news attention, show that this is not harmless name calling, but can really affect the children who are being bullied with these harmful statements. Teachers need to be trained to handle these types of statements in the hallways, playground, and classrooms because there is a level of discomfort with it. Professional developments need to be developed and delivered for schools in order to teach teachers how to intervene in these situations. It is not enough to just speak about needing to do these trainings, but the trainings need to be implemented.

Implications for teachers. There are also direct implications for teachers within the schools. If the school is not a safe setting for LGBT teachers to come out, straight teachers can be a support system for those teachers, if they are comfortable sharing that

part of themselves, so they do not have to be alone. Safe Space stickers are not needed just in middle and high schools. They should be on the door of all teachers in elementary schools as well, so the teachers who are allies can be visible presences within the school, for students, other teachers, and LGBT families.

There are cities within the United States that have different types of support groups for LGBT teachers, but they are not everywhere or accessible to all teachers. Although the National Education Association (NEA) has a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Caucus, in my experience for recruiting for this study, they were very unresponsive. I cannot help but wonder if they would be as unresponsive to teachers who reach out to them as well. LGBT organizations such as the Gay, Lesbian, Support Education Network (GLSEN), Human Rights Campaign (HRC), and different teachers' groups need to recognize the necessity of having support for LGBT educators at all levels. There needs to be more outreach to these teachers from these organizations.

Implications for policy. The majority of the participants in the study said they would be more likely to come out in their schools and classrooms if there job protection in place. None of the school districts represented in the study has sexual orientation or gender identity included in their non-discrimination policies found within the employee handbooks. The first step is to get gender identity and sexual identity protected under these non-discrimination policies, whether it is at the level of individual school districts and counties or at the state level, which at this point is more unlikely due to the political climate in the state where these teachers are located.

What does it mean for me now?

I left the elementary school classroom six years ago and was not out to students in my classroom or to their parents. Even now, I question if I would be able to be out and speak openly about my family to my students. I also wonder how this would change now that I have a son. Would I be willing to share that piece of my life with my students and celebrate it like other teachers who gave birth were able to do? I cannot answer this because I am not in that position. Working at the university level, I am able to share this event with colleagues and students.

On the first day of class each semester, I have to come out all over again to the new group of pre-service teachers who are in my classes. I feel it is my responsibility to be out in the classroom because of the negative connotations attached to being a LGBT educator. I want my students to see me as a person who, although I do not fit into their normative discourse of what a teacher should look like or act, is not a bad person and can disrupt their notions of normative teacher discourses. If I want my students to question the norm and expand their thinking, I have to be out, it is my responsibility as an educator to be out and to introduce new ideas to the students.

I have a friend who works in Children's Literature and on the day she talked about LGBT-themed children's books, she was met with a large amount of resistance. Her students told her those books have no place in their elementary classroom. I argue they do. These pre-service teachers are going to encounter students from same-sex families or students who might challenge the traditional notions of gender in their classrooms. These children need to be included in the reading corner of their classrooms. I am not only thinking about this as a teacher and teacher educator, but also as a parent

whose son is going to be entering some of these classrooms in the future. His family deserves to be recognized just as much as the traditional family portrayed in the majority of children's books. I think it is our responsibility as pre-service teacher educators to bring this material and LGBT topics into the classes of our college students in order to plant a seed they might be resistant to. Students need exposure, and although not all will agree, their beliefs need to be challenged. If we can start doing this, my friends in the advising office might not get questions from LGBT undergraduates about being able to be a teacher because of their sexual orientation. I hope that one day, it will not even be a thought.

Final Comments

This study shows the need for a shift in the thinking about LGBT teachers, especially at the elementary school level. In most instances, it is not safe for these teachers to discuss their personal lives. While some heterosexual teachers may argue not sharing personal details is not exclusive to the LGBT community because they choose not to share these details either, there is a difference. The heterosexual teachers have that choice through their heterosexual privilege. LGBT teachers are a part of a marginalized population and do not have this choice. They have to remain silent for self-preservation and their own safety because elementary schools are not safe places for them to open up about their lives.

REFERENCES

- Allan, A., Atkinson, E., Brace, E., DePalma, R., & Hemingway, J. (2008). Speaking the unspeakable in forbidden places: Addressing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality in the primary school. *Sex Education, 8*(3), 315-328.
- Anagnostopoulos, D., Buchanan, N. C. T., Pereira, C., & Lichty, L. F. (2009). School staff responses to gender-based bullying as moral interpretation: An exploratory study. *Educational Policy, 23*(4), 519. doi:10.1177/0895904807312469
- Identifying Citation. (2011).
- Atkinson, E., & DePalma, R. (2008). Imagining the homonormative: Performative subversion in education for social justice. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 29*(1), 25-35.
- Atkinson, E., & DePalma, R. (2009). Un-Believing the matrix: Queering consensual heteronormativity. *Gender and Education, 21*(1), 17-29.
- Balsam, K. F., & Mohr, J. J. (2007). Adaptation to sexual orientation stigma: A comparison of bisexual and lesbian/gay adults. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 54*(3), 306-319.
- Berger, L. (2001). Inside out: Narrative autoethnography as a path toward rapport. *Qualitative Inquiry, 7*(4), 504. DOI: 10.1177/107780040100700407
- Bliss, G. K., & Harris, M. B. (1998). Experiences of gay and lesbian teachers and parents with coming out in a school setting. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 8*(2), 13-28.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Butler, J. (2006). *Gender trouble : Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cavanagh, S. L. (2008). Sex in the lesbian teacher's closet: The hybrid proliferation of queers in school. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 29(3), 387-399.
- Chambers County School District. (2010). Faculty and staff handbook. [Web page]
Retrieved from Chambers County School District website.
- Chambers, S. (2003). Telepistemology of the closet; or, the queer politics of *Six Feet Under*. *The Journal of American Culture*, 26(1), 24-41.
- Identifying Citation. (2008).
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Colbert, R. (2008). Teacher candidate fashion, tattoos, and piercings: Finding balance and common sense. *Childhood Education*, 84(3), 158C-158D.
- Connelly, M. F., & Clandinin, J. D. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2-14.
- Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory Into Practice*, 39(3), 124-130.
- Cullman County School District. (2010). Faculty and staff handbook. [Web page]
Retrieved from Cullman County Schools website.
- Cushman, P. (2005). Let's hear it from the males: Issues facing male primary school teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(3), 227-240.

- Dallas County School District. (2010). Faculty and staff handbook. [Web page] Retrieved from Dallas County School District website.
- Dankmeijer, P. (1993). The construction of identities as a means of survival: Case of gay and lesbian teachers. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 24(3), 95-105.
- Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20(1), 43-63.
- Day, C., Kington, A., Stobart, G., & Sammons, P. (2006). The personal and professional selves of teachers: Stable and unstable identities. *British Educational Research Journal*, 32(4), 601-616.
- DePalma, R., & Atkinson, E. (2009). Permission to talk about it": Narratives of sexual equality in the primary classroom. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 15(5), 876-892.
doi:10.1177/1077800409332763
- Du Bois, W.E.B. (1903). *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Library of America.
- Duke, T. S. (2008). Hidden, invisible, marginalized, ignored: A critical review of the professional and empirical literature (or lack thereof) on gay and lesbian teachers in the United States. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*, 4(4), 19-38.
- Epstein, D., & Johnson, R. (1998). *Schooling sexualities*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Evans, K. (2002). *Negotiating the self: Identity, sexuality, and emotion in learning to teach*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Farr, D. F., & Degroult, N. D. (2008). Understand the queer world of the l-lesbian body: Using *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* to address the construction of the lesbian

body. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 12(4), 423-434.

doi:10.1080/10894160802278580

Ferfolja, T. (2007). Teacher negotiations of sexual subjectivities. *Gender and Education*, 19(5), 569-586.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Francis, B. (2008). Teaching manfully? Exploring gendered subjectivities and power via analysis of men teachers' gender performance. *Gender and Education*, 20(2), 109-122. doi:10.1080/09540250701797226

Franklin County School District. (2010). Faculty and staff handbook. [Web page]. Retrieved from Franklin County School District website.

Gates, G. J. (2006). *Same-Sex couples and the gay, lesbian, and bisexual population: New estimates from the American community survey*. UCLA School of Law: The Williams Institute.

Identifying Citation. (2000).

GLADD. (2010). GLADD media reference guide. Retrieved from <http://www.gladd.org/page.aspx?pid375>.

Golafshani, N. (2003). Understanding reliability and validity in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 8(4), 597-607.

Identifying Citation. (2010).

Graneheim, U. H., & Lundman, B. (2004). Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: Concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Education Today*, 24(2), 105-12. doi:10.1016/j.nedt.2003.10.001

- Gruenewald, D.A. (2003). Foundations of place: A multidisciplinary framework for place-conscious education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(3), 619-654.
- Griffin, P. (1991). Identity management strategies among lesbian and gay educators. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 4(3), 189-202.
- Hampton School. (2010). Accreditation. [Web page] Retrieved from Hampton School website.
- Hansen, P., & Mulholland, J. A. (2005). Caring and elementary teaching: The concerns of male beginning teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 56(2), 119.
doi:10.1177/0022487104273761
- Harbeck, K. (1997). *Gay and lesbian educators: Personal freedoms, public constraints*. Malden, MA: Amethyst Press & Productions.
- Harré, R., & Slocum, N. (2003). Disputes as complex social events: On the uses of positioning theory. *Common Knowledge*, 9(1), 100-118.
- Human Rights Campaign. (2011). State laws. Retrieved from http://www.hrc.org/laws_and_elections/state.asp
- Human Rights Campaign. (2011). Glossary of terms. Retrieved from <http://www.hrc.org/issues/3336.htm>.
- Jackson, J. M. (2006). Removing the masks: Considerations by gay and lesbian teachers when negotiating the closet door. *Journal of Poverty*, 10(2), 27-52.
- Jackson, J. M. (2007). *Unmasking identities: An exploration of the lives of gay and lesbian teachers*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

- Jackson, J. M. (2009). Teacher by day. Lesbian by night": Queer (y) ing identities and teaching. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy: Journal of NSRC*, 6(2), 52-70.
- Jennings, K. (2005). *One teacher in 10: LGBT educators share their stories*. Los Angeles: Alyson Books.
- Johnson, J. M. (2002). In-Depth interviewing. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method*. (pp. 103-20). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Khayatt, D. (1992). *Lesbian teachers: An invisible presence*. State University of New York Press.
- Khayatt, D. (1997). Sex and the teacher: Should we come out in class? *Harvard Educational Review*, 67(1), 126-43.
- Khayatt, D. (2006). What's to fear: Calling homophobia into question. *McGill Journal of Education*, 41(2), 133-144.
- King, J. R. (2004). The (im)possibility of gay teachers for young children. *Theory Into Practice*, 43(2), 122-127.
- LaSala, M. C. (2009). When interviewing "family": Maximizing the insider advantage in the qualitative study of lesbians and gay men. In W. Meezan & J. I. Martin (Eds.), *Handbook of research with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations*. (pp. 208-22). New York: Routledge.
- Lawrence et al. v. Texas, 539 U. S. 558 (2003).
- Levitt, H. M., & Hiestand, K. R. (2004). A quest for authenticity: Contemporary butch gender. *Sex Roles*, 50(9), 605-621.

- Macgillivray, I. K. (2008). Religion, sexual orientation, and school policy: How the Christian right frames its arguments. *Educational Studies: Journal of the American Educational Studies Association*, 43(1), 29-44.
doi:10.1080/00131940701796210
- Mauthner, N., & Doucet, A. (1998). Reflections on a voice-centered relational method: Analysing maternal and domestic voices. In J. Ribbens & R. Edwards (Eds.), *Feminist dilemmas in qualitative research: Public knowledge and private lives*. (pp. 119-46). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. doi:0761956646
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). Mobility in the teacher workforce. *National center for education statistics* [Web page]. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2005/analysis/sa01.asp>
- New Hampshire Historical Society. (2008). Rules for teachers. [Web page] Retrieved from <http://www.nhhistory.org/edu/support/nhrowingup/teacherrules.pdf>
- Outward Bound Wilderness Program. (2011). [Web page]. Retrieved from <http://www.outwardbound.org/index.cfm/do/exp.index>
- Parks, C. A., Hughes, T. L., & Werkmeister-Rozas, L. (2009). Defining sexual identity and sexual orientation in research with lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. In W. Meezan & J. I. Martin (Eds.), *Handbook of research with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations*. (pp. 71-99). New York: Routledge.
- Rasmussen, M. L. (2006). *Becoming subjects: Sexualities and secondary schooling*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Rensenbrink, C. W. (1996). What difference does it make? The story of a lesbian teacher. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(2), 257-70.
- Sears, J. T. (1991). *Growing up gay in the south: Race, gender, and journeys of the spirit*. New York: Haworth Press.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Shelp, S. G. (2002). Gaydar: Visual detection of sexual orientation among gay and straight men. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 44(1), 1-14.
- Sleeter, C. E. (2001). Preparing teachers for culturally diverse schools. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(2), 94-106.
- Sodomy Laws. (2007). [Web page]. Retrieved from <http://www.sodomylaws.org/>
- Thaxton, L. R. (1996). Silence begets religion: Brown v Gwinnett County School District and the unconstitutionality of moments of silence in public schools. *Ohio State Law Journal*, 57(4), 1399-1442.
- Identifying Citation. (2003).
- UC Davis Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center. (2011). LGBTQIA glossary. Retrieved from <http://lgbtcenter.ucdavis.edu/lgbt-education/lgbtqia-glossary>.
- Van Langenhove, L., & Harré, R. (1999). Introducing positioning theory. In R. Harré & L. van Langenhove (Eds.), *Positioning theory: Moral contexts of intentional action*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Warner, M. (1991). Introduction: Fear of a queer planet. *Social Text*, 9(4), 3-17.

- Watkins, M. (1994). *On the real side: Laughing, lying, and signifying—The underground tradition of African-American humor that transformed American culture, from slavery to Richard Pryor*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Weiss, R. S. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York: Free Press.
- Willick, M. L. (2006). *"The grief never goes away": A study of meaning reconstruction and long-term grief in parents' narratives of perinatal loss*. Thesis, University of Saskatchewan.
- Woog, D. (1996). *School's out: The impact of gay and lesbian issues on America's schools*. Boston: Alyson Publications.

APPENDIX A

Definition of Terms

- Coming Out-voluntarily being public about one's sexuality; usually begins with self-recognition before beginning to come out to others (GLADD, 2010; HRC, 2011)
- Discourse-an institutionalized use of language and language-like systems (Davies & Harré, 1990)
- Gender Queer-a person whose gender identity and/or gender expression falls outside of the dominant societal norm (GLADD, 2010; HRC, 2011, UC Davis, 2011)
- Heteronormative-heterosexuality is taken as normative within a society leading to expectations, demands, and constraints on other aspects of sexuality that deviate from this norm (Chambers, 2003; Warner, 1991)
- In the closet-a metaphor for people who are not open about their sexual orientation (GLADD, 2010; HRC, 2011, UC Davis, 2011)
- LGBT-gender identity terms including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. It is an umbrella term used to refer to the community as a whole (GLADD, 2010; HRC, 2011, UC Davis, 2011)
- Othered-marginalized individuals who do not fit the status quo (Jackson, 2009)
- Out-being open about one's sexuality; from the term 'being out of the closet' (GLADD, 2010; HRC, 2011, UC Davis, 2011)
- Passing-ability to be perceived as straight/heterosexual or be able to fit the gender norms and expectations (Griffin, 1991)

- Performativity-A subject is constructed in discourse through repeated acts (Butler, 2006)
- Straight-a term used to identify a person whose physical and emotional attraction is to that of someone of the opposite gender; also known as heterosexual (GLADD, 2010; HRC, 2011, UC Davis, 2011)
- Subjectivity-“Relationally, historically, and contextually construction through language, where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested...and where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is *constructed*” (Weedon, as cited in Ferfolja, 2007)
- Queer-Not necessarily defining oneself within the framework of LGBT; can be seen as a negative term, but some people who identify as LGBT have reclaimed the word to self-identify; the term can have different meanings to different people within the community (GLADD, 2010; HRC, 2011, UC Davis, 2011)

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

Interview questions included:

- What term do you use to identify yourself and why? How is that identity important to you?
- When did you begin coming out?
- Did that change how you talked about yourself? How did it change?
- Describe your experiences as a LGBT teacher.
- What does it mean to be a LGBT teacher?
- Describe a situation in which you have been pressured to conform to the norm of the school.
- Tell me about a time you had to present yourself differently from how you might present yourself outside of school.
- Why do you choose to be out to the degree that you are?
- What does it mean to be out?
- What images are portrayed when one says gay teacher?
- How do you handle gay as a put down in insult in the classroom?
- What might it be like if being out was protected at your school? Would you still come out or not? Why?
- Do you think there would be a loss of legitimacy or credibility if you were to come out?

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Letter



Office of Curriculum and Instruction Field Experiences
College of Education
The Pennsylvania State University
170 Chambers Building
University Park, PA 16802-3205

Phone: 814-865-1734
Fax: 814-865-1927
www.ed.psu.edu/preservice

Good Afternoon,

You are being asked to participate in a study examining identity of Lesbian and Gay elementary school teachers. This study is being conducted for research purposes. It will examine the level of performance, otherness, and framing that potentially occurs with how LGBT elementary teachers might present themselves to students, parents, and other school faculty, administrators, and staff. This study will consist of a series of three interviews that will last 60-90 minutes. They will occur within three days to two weeks of each other.

To be included in the study, you must be a practicing K-6 educator who identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. You do not have to be out in your professional or personal life in order to qualify.

The interviews will be audio recorded and stored in a password-protected file by the primary investigator. Upon completion of the study, the audio recordings will be destroyed.

In the event of publication or presentation, pseudonyms will be used to protect your identities.

In order to compensate and thank you for your time, you will receive a \$25 gift card to Starbucks at the completion of the study.

If you are willing to participate or have any questions, please contact Allison Kootsikis at akk151@psu.edu.

Sincerely,
Allison Kootsikis
Ph.D. Candidate, Curriculum and Instruction
The Pennsylvania State University

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent

ORP OFFICE USE ONLY
DO NOT REMOVE OR MODIFY
IRB# Doc. #
The Pennsylvania State University
Institutional Review Board
Office for Research Protections
Approval Date:
Expiration Date:



Office of Curriculum and Instruction Field Experiences
College of Education
The Pennsylvania State University
170 Chambers Building
University Park, PA 16802-3205

Phone: 814-865-1734
Fax: 814-865-1927
www.ed.psu.edu/preservice

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research

The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Performances: A Study of Gay and Lesbian Elementary School Teachers

Principal Investigator: Allison Kootsikas
163 Chambers
University Park, PA 16802
akk151@psu.edu
814-769-3722

Advisor: Dr. Kimberly Powell
163 Chambers
University Park, PA 16802
kap17@psu.edu
814-863-7308

- 1. Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to examine teacher identity of Lesbian and Gay elementary school teachers. It will examine the level of performance, otherness, and framing that potentially occurs with how LGBT elementary teachers might present themselves to students, parents, and other school faculty, administrators, and staff.
- 2. Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to complete a series of three interviews that will last 60-90 minutes. Interviews will be tape-recorded. You can choose not to answer certain questions.

3. **Discomforts and Risks:** There is a low risk for psychological discomfort. Participants will be given the option not to answer if they are uncomfortable doing so.

There is also a risk for loss of confidentiality potentially resulting in risk to reputation and employability. This will be minimized through strict confidentiality procedures, careful handling of data, and the use of pseudonyms and non-disclosure of working environments.

Referral information will be provided if needed.

4. **Benefits:** The benefits of participating in this study include helping to add to existing research about LGBT educators in elementary classrooms. In doing so, it may help in making schools safer for students and teachers.
5. **Duration/Time:** Each interview will last 60-90 minutes. The interviews will be spaced three days to two weeks apart.
6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured at the primary investigator's office in a locked filing cabinet in 238 Chambers Building and electronic files will be password protected. Only the primary investigator will have access to the files. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared. Pseudonyms will be used upon presentation of the research. Only the primary investigator will have access to the audio recordings. The Pennsylvania State University's Office for Research Protections and Institutional Review Board, and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this project.
7. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Allison Kootsikas at (814) 769-3722 with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you feel this study has harmed you. If you have any questions, concerns, problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact The Pennsylvania State University's Office for Research Protections (ORP) at (814) 865-1775. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. Questions about research procedures can be answered by the research team.
8. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You may choose not to answer certain questions. Your permission to use your data is voluntary and you may revoke your permission at any time. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.
9. **Compensation:** You will receive a \$25 gift card to Starbucks upon completion of the study.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Participant Signature

Date

Person Obtaining Consent

Date

Vita of Allison K. Kootsikak

EDUCATION

- 2011 **Ph.D., Curriculum and Instruction**
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park
- 2003 **M.Ed., Math Education**
The University of Georgia, Athens
- 2000 **B.S., Elementary Education**
Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois

TEACHING & SUPERVISION EXPERIENCE

Urban Teaching Collaborative Seminar, (2007-2010), Department of Curriculum and Instruction, The Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania

Graduate Lecturer, (2006), Department of Math Education, The Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania

Classroom Teacher, (2002-2006), Bryant Intermediate School, Mableton, Georgia

Classroom Teacher, (2000-2002). Third Grade Teacher, Flat Shoals Elementary School, Conyers, Georgia.

PUBLICATIONS & PRESENTATIONS

- Kootsikak, A.K. (2011). *Changing Prounouns and Staying Silent: A Study of LGBT Elementary School Teachers' Identities*. Paper accepted for the 2011 American Educational Research Association Conference, New Orleans, LA.
- Kootsikak, A.K. (2010). *"I had to live a hidden life in some way": A study of LGBT elementary school teachers' identities*. Paper presented at the Curriculum and Pedagogy Conference, Akron, OH.
- Kootsikak, A.K. (2010). *Closing the Distance: Using Video Diaries as a Supervisory Tool of Student Teachers*. Paper presented at the Association of Teacher Educators Conference, Chicago, IL.
- Kootsikak, A.K. (2009). *Impact of Specialized Learning on Attitudes and Perceptions of Undergraduates Towards Work in Urban Schools*. Paper presented at the Association of Teacher Educators Conference, Dallas, TX.
- Kootsikak, A.K. (2008). High Stakes Testing and Effects on Grade Retention: Should Retention Decisions Be Based on High Stakes Tests? In J. Bao, L. Vold, & M. Tidwell (Eds.), *Preparing Urban Teachers Collaboratively in Philadelphia: Practices, Research, and Reflections* (pp. 173-183). California: National Social Science Press.
- Kootsikak, A.K. (2008). *Pre-service Teachers Making Sense of an Urban Seminar*. Paper presented at the Curriculum and Pedagogy Conference, Decatur, GA.