

Article

Understanding Identity and Context in the Development of Gay Teacher Identity: Perceptions and Realities in Teacher Education and Teaching

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Abstract: The way a teacher perceives relational justice—the feeling of being treated equitably and being included—in their work context is central to understanding the negotiation and enactment of teacher identity. For LGBTQ teachers, the degree to which they are out of the closet with their students and colleagues leads to many possible outcomes. These outcomes, ranging from feeling like they need to live duplicitous lives to being activist teachers that subvert the heteronormative assumptions in schools and curricula, are studied here by examining the identity development of a group of gay teachers and their perceptions of the schools in which they work. This article is based on a dissertation study that theorized that the heteronormative nature of teacher education is a limiting factor for gay teachers’ abilities to work and thrive in school contexts. The study included in depth case studies of four gay teachers and their journeys as gay men and teachers. The goal of the study was to answer the question: Does the enactment of gay teacher identity interrupt heteronormativity in schools? The study also sought to answer two ancillary questions: (1) How do gay teachers negotiate gay teacher identity in schools? and, (2) How do school contexts impact gay teachers’ perceptions of identity-based motivation and relational justice? This article will focus on Peter Ryan’s (pseudonym) case study, specifically because of its emblematic nature in summarizing the intent and implications of the overall study.

Keywords: gay teacher; gay identity; teacher identity; heteronormativity; teacher education; teacher motivation; relational justice

1. Introduction

This article is based on the findings of a dissertation [1] about gay teachers’ identity negotiation and the enactment of teacher identity. The study included in depth case studies of four gay teachers and their journeys as gay men and teachers. This article will focus on the case of Peter specifically because of its emblematic nature in summarizing the intent and implications of the overall study. More importantly, however, I am choosing to highlight Peter’s case study for this article to celebrate his memory and inspire others with his story. Not long after I completed the study, Peter’s life ended tragically in an automobile accident on his way home from school. As a teacher, Peter left an indelible mark on his school and community in the San Jose, California area where he was a beloved teacher and had built a home with his partner.

2. Background

“To live in society is to live in heterosexuality . . . Heterosexuality is always already there within all mental categories” [2] (pp. 40, 42). In other words, heterosexuality is the presumptive “normal” foundation in all aspects of life. Contrary to heterosexuality, anything queer is, therefore, seen as

abnormal, deviant, and wrong. Coining the term “heteronormativity” in the nineties, Warner [3,4] explains that heteronormativity includes those punitive rules—social, familial, and legal—that force members of society to conform to hegemonic, heterosexual standards for identity. In today’s society, Warner [3,4] argues, it is vital that those who are gay or lesbian act to change heteronormative perspectives and practices in their daily lives. For LGBTQ teachers and students, heteronormativity has a pervasive effect on curricula (both formal and informal), extra-curricular activities, and teaching as a profession. Illich [5] understood this notion, though in a different context, when he wrote *Deschooling Society*. Illich asserts that “to understand what it means to deschool society, and not just reform the educational establishment, we must now focus on the hidden curriculum of schooling” (p. 32). From a queer perspective, Illich is directly referencing the normative nature of schools as socializers of society in the views of the mainstream, of the hegemonic establishment.

Defining and understanding hegemonic heteronormativity is simply not enough to impact schools and schooling. Teacher preparation programs and in-service teachers have an obligation to society to interrupt heteronormativity as a social justice imperative—“the bottom line of teaching is enhancing students’ learning and their life chances by challenging the inequities of school and society” [6] (p. 37). Schools can no longer just socialize students into the so-called mainstream because all senses of “normal” are being questioned, and this is a good thing.

The study on which this article is based sought to examine the experiences of gay teachers working in schools across the United States. In particular, I examined the identity negotiation experiences of gay teachers in order to determine what they experience, how they develop their gay teacher identity, how school culture and leadership impacts their motivation at work, and what schools can do to support them. Further, the original study examined how these teachers enact their identity through Cross’s [7] Multicultural Enactment-Transactional Model, by identifying the strategies used by these teachers when their gay teacher identities are in conflict with the normative nature of a school and by detailing how their gay teacher identity is socially constructed in the school environment. Ultimately, I answer the question of whether or not the enactment of gay identity can provide an avenue for teachers to interrupt heteronormativity by examining the identity negotiation process and the impact of schooling on identity-based motivation [8] in teaching.

The original study posited that gay teachers who are not able to fully negotiate and enact a gay identity in a school that is relationally just, are working in oppressive environments. Understanding this ideological stance and naming it as such is important in this research as a pushback against critiques of the “objective” validity of advocacy research. This study and this article integrate the personal with the academic, in acknowledging the value of the *subjective I* [9] in scholarly work.

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the original study involved the juxtaposition of a gay teacher’s identity negotiation process with the school context. Emergent in the literature regarding gay and lesbian teachers is the theme of living a duplicitous life and the efforts that teachers put forth to keep separate the personal from the professional [10–12]. These efforts appear to dissipate as these teachers “come out” at school and in their classrooms. In examining the shared experiences of gay teachers, there is a significant emphasis on the relief, authenticity, and richness of the teachers’ experiences with the curriculum and with their students as a result of being “out” in the classroom. These experiences are implicit aspects of one’s identity as a person and, more importantly, as a teacher. Sachs [13] asserts that teacher professional identity allows teachers to construct ideas of “‘how to be’, ‘how to act’, and ‘how to understand’ their work and their place in society” (p. 15). As teachers enter the profession and grow professionally, they are constantly negotiating their professional identities within the walls of their classrooms and schools. Logically, then, an examination of a teacher’s professional identity must also be situated within the school’s affect and climate.

The pervasive effects of heteronormativity are a source of consternation and dissonance for many gay teachers, leading to the conditions for the duplicitous life mentioned above. Figure 1,

below, problematizes gay teacher identity negotiation by examining the social construction of identity and the relational justice of a school context. Graphically, Figure 1 illustrates a juxtaposition of two continua whose intersections change based on the experiences that are being analyzed, recognizing that the intersection of the two continua is wholly dependent on how the teacher in question views his/her place in a school in relation to his/her gay identity. The goal of such an analysis is to ascertain mechanisms used in identity negotiation and enactment of gay teachers that can be used to interrupt heteronormativity in classrooms and impact teacher education programs, and to ascertain practices at the school level that gay teachers feel affords them agency and relational justice in the work place.

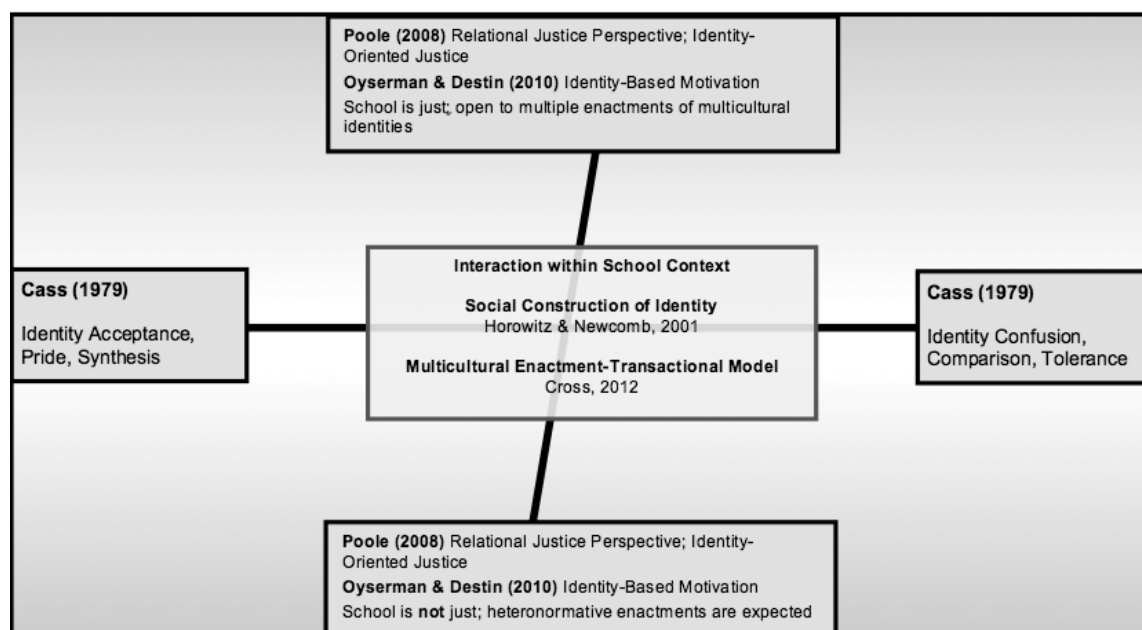


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of gay teacher identity.

3.1. Conceptual Framework: The School Context

Figure 1 places the context of a school along the vertical continuum of the diagram. Two opposing school contexts are delineated. First, a school context that is *relationally just* and open to the enactment of multicultural identities. Opposite is a school environment that is *relationally unjust* and expects and perpetuates the enactment of heteronormative identities. A relationally just workplace is one in which members believe their self-identities are treated with respect and when the groups with which they self-identify are treated with respect, leading to increased levels of agency within the workplace. Another analytical lens at play in the contextual continuum is identity-based motivation. A school that functions in a way that is relationally just offers a greater chance that teachers will have higher Identity-Based Motivation (IBM) because they will be able to act in ways that are “identity-congruent”, meaning that when “behavior feels identity congruent in the context, it feels natural” [8]. Being a socially constructed model of motivation, IBM asserts that “cognition and action are not separate from the contexts but rather dynamically shaped by them” [8] (p. 1012).

3.2. Conceptual Framework: The Gay Teacher

The gay teacher is situated along the horizontal continuum of Figure 1. As an initial measure of gay identity, participants in the original study were assessed based on the Gay Identity Questionnaire (GIQ), which is a validated measure [14] of Cass’ [15] Homosexual Identity Formation (HIF) model. The developers of the GIQ noted that, in essence, the HIF could be thought of in terms of two larger identity phases, one taking the first three phases together and one taking the last three together, hence why those same clusters are used at each end of the continuum. A primary limitation of the HIF is

the inattention to multiple contexts. To that end, the GIQ directions read “circle whether you feel the statements are true or false for you at this point in time” [14] (p. 15). In order to account for this limitation, a social constructionist perspective [16,17] and the Multicultural Enactment-Transactional Model [7,18] informed data collection and analysis focused on determining to what degree each participant developed and enacted a gay teacher identity in a relationally just, identity-motivated school context.

4. Literature Review

In this section I review the literature on identity briefly, then focus on the work on racial and homosexual identity development, and teacher identity as identity performance, in framing the challenges to gay teacher identity development.

From a psychological perspective Erikson [19] focused his understanding of identity through staged maturation of individual identity in a social context. Erikson posits a chronological, life-long staged progression of identity and psychological development, as a human passes through various social contexts and faces various stages of cognitive dissonance at each level of development. From a sociological perspective, Mead [20] argues that identity is constructed through social communication; by communicating, one is able to define him/herself in terms of the roles attributed to others and the self. Therefore, following Mead’s conception of the self and identity, “who” we are is contingent on the context in which we are at that moment. To further punctuate this perspective, Gee [21] explains that identity development occurs in an intersubjective field, wherein one seeks to answer the recurring question of “who am I at this moment?” through a process of interpreting one’s role in a variety of discourses in varying contexts.

4.1. Racial Identity Development

Scholars have further explained identity in terms of specific subgroup membership. To that end, Black identity development will serve as the prototype for identity models of societal groups acknowledging that, while there are several other group identity models, the essence of their experiences can be understood in this analysis. Also, choosing to examine Black identity was very deliberate in the original study, namely because of the parallels in the social histories of those with Black identities and those with gay identities. Furthermore, Black identity models arise from a social context where Black people have had to cope with not being members of a dominant group in the greater society and have also had to cope with “being Black”.

4.1.1. Nigrescence

Cross’s Nigrescence [22] model. Seeking to explain the “Negro” to “Black” shift in the consciousness of African Americans in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of Black militancy, Cross proposed a staged model of Nigrescence where undergoes “the process of becoming Black” [23] (p. 157). The first stage in the Nigrescence model is the “Pre-encounter” where one is immersed in the world view of the dominant culture, originally seen through the perspective of the “self-hating Negro” [23] (p. 158). At this stage, one has allowed his/her identity something that he/she accepts from the dominant culture’s normative imposition. Second is the “Encounter” stage, where one has a personal experience that “temporarily dislodges someone from his or her old-world view and identity, thus making the person receptive (vulnerable) to conversion” [23] (p. 159). This period of cognitive dissonance serves as the catalyst that moves one from Encounter to stage three, “Immersion–Emersion.” In this stage, the person becomes transfixed on the new identity, seeks to distance him/herself from the original identity, and fully adopts the new Black identity. Cross explains this stage in two phases:

While the first phase involves immersion into a total Black frame of reference, the second phase (emersion) represents emergence from the dead-end, racist, oversimplified aspects of Immersion. . . . the person’s emotions level off, and psychological defensiveness is replaced

by affective and cognitive openness, allowing the person to be more critical in his or her analysis. [23] (p. 158)

Next, one enters the stage of “Internalization” as he or she becomes firmly rooted in the new Black identity and seeks to make alliances with those in the dominant group as a consequence of a new-found confidence and positive self-concept [23]. The final stage in Cross’s Nigrescence model is that of “Internalization-Commitment,” which is characterized by a shift in thinking from “uncontrolled rage toward white people . . . to controlled anger toward *systems* of oppression and injustice and racist institutions” [23] (p. 159).

A limitation of the original Nigrescence model is that the model encapsulates the conversion from Negro to Black American and does not take into account the life span of a person. Cross and Fhagen-Smith [24] then proposed Nigrescence from a life span perspective, identifying three growth patterns that one passes through from infancy to adulthood. Unique to this model is the “recycling” that occurs in adulthood, meaning that once one becomes Black he/she then can refine and further develop a richer, enhanced Black identity through a continuing process of “encounter” and “immersion–emersion” [24]. An assumption in Nigrescence is the role of one’s context in his/her identity development. Because every person experiences life in a unique manner—by a matter of birth, circumstance, or chance—the context in which one develops his/her identity is integral to the kinds of “encounters” he or she will have.

4.1.2. Black Identity Development Model

Similar to Cross’ contextualization of Nigrescence in the shifting society after the Civil Rights Movement, Jackson [25] developed the Black Identity Development (BID) model in order to explain how “conversion experience was affecting the way Black people saw themselves and responded to their world” (p. 11). Unlike Nigrescence, Jackson’s BID model was a life span theory from its inception. The BID model has five stages: Naïve, Acceptance, Resistance, Redefinition, and Internalization.

The “Naïve” stage begins at birth and runs typically through preschool age. Beyond the obvious physical and cultural differences, Black children in the naïve stage “generally do not feel fearful or hostile, inferior or superior” [25] (p. 19), thus the literal meaning of naïve is naïve to the ways of the world. The second stage, “Acceptance”, is characterized by the socialization into American culture of “what it means to be Black in the United States” [25] (p. 19). Here, the Black child adopts a normative construct that prioritizes whiteness over Blackness in attempting to fit in to the dominant culture and structure of society. During the third stage, “Resistance,” Black people begin “to understand and recognize racism in its complex and multiple manifestations—at the individual and institutional, conscious and unconscious, intentional and unintentional, attitudinal, behavioral, and policy level” [25] (p. 21). At this stage, Black individuals may passively resist the power structures in society, acknowledge the system and still try to manipulate through it, or actively resist the system outright [25]. A Black person who actively resists is “energized and experiences a sense of personal power” when he is able to make his voice heard on a small scale [25] (p. 22). “Redefinition” is the fourth stage where the individual focuses the resistance internally in order to define “himself in terms that are independent of the perceived strengths and/or weaknesses of White people and the dominant White culture” [25] (p. 23). The Black individual in the redefinition stage surrounds himself with likeminded Black people. Black people who have gone through redefinition begin “to experience their sense of Blackness in a way that engenders pride” [25] (p. 24). Finally, showing the lifespan of the model, Jackson [25] asserts, “the sensitivity from acceptance, the lessons about power from resistance, and the self-definition from redefinition carry the Black person into the stage of internalization” (p. 25). “Internalization” represents a realized negotiation of a self-defined racial identity: “the integration of a redefined racial identity into all aspects of one’s self-concept or identity” [25] (p. 16). A key difference between Nigrescence and BID is that in Nigrescence one can “recycle” to a prior stage and experience the identity development process again. BID assumes that once a person has “internalized” her or his Black identity, that identity is fixed.

4.2. Gay Identity Development

Similar to Black identity development, the modern “gay” identity came about as a reaction to the increased visibility of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer (GLBTQ) people during the Civil Rights Movement and after the Stonewall Riots. Concomitantly with racial identity models, gay identity models have traditionally been staged models. Most of the stage models [17,26–31] tend to have four general stages that can be described as “(1) Awareness or Sensitization; (2) Internalization or Acceptance; (3) Disclosing; and (4) Synthesis or Integration” [17] (p 5). Cass’s [15] model of Homosexual Identity Formation (HIF) has a significant amount of empirical support [14,15,32] and is the staged model of gay identity development that was used in the original study as a prototype of staged models. Moreover, in the original study, the use of Cass’s Homosexual Identity Formation model [15] and Cross’ Nigrescence model [22] functioned well together because of their connection to one another, Cass cites Cross in her work, leaving one to assume that the work on Nigrescence influenced the work on Homosexual Identity Formation. Further, the Multicultural Enactment-Transactional Model [7] does not rely on how an identity is developed, but rather how that identity is enacted in a particular context.

Gay Identity through a Social Constructionist Perspective

If a staged model of gay identity development, like Cass [15], is limited, then what is a more suitable perspective for viewing gay identity? Horowitz and Newcomb [17] argue for a social constructionist view of identity development, stating that “social constructionism is principally concerned with explaining how people account for, experience, and describe their world, including themselves...the individual interacts with the environment to construct an identity” (p. 10). Cross [7], while focusing much of his intellectual efforts into the study of Black identity, acknowledges the role of socially constructed identities across contexts and how “divergent social groups are more alike than different in the way social identity is enacted during critical *everyday transactions*” (emphasis in original, p. 194). This attention to “everyday transactions” is most salient given the goals and objectives of the original study.

4.3. Teacher Identity as Identity Performance

The discussion of teacher self-disclosure in the literature review draws out and explicates the view of self-disclosure as an identity performance. In this research, teacher identity comes from the narrative or story perspective, where a teacher’s identity is performed and implicated in practice. Carter [33] defines narrative or story research as “represent[ing] a way of knowing and thinking that is particularly suited to explicating the issues with which we deal” (p. 6). Cochran-Smith and Lytle [34] outline three conceptions of teacher learning. The first conception, “knowledge-for-practice,” is the stuff of methodology and pedagogy coursework so often found in university programs; the second conception, “knowledge-in-practice”, refers to what one learns on the job, in the midst of doing the work of teachers; and the third, and most relevant, conception, “knowledge-of-practice,” is founded in the reflective apparatus of teaching, when teachers “*generate local knowledge of practice by working within the contexts of inquiry communities to theorize and construct their work and to connect the larger social, cultural, political issues*” [34] (p. 250, emphasis in original). Elbaz [35] argues that narrative, autobiography research

is the very stuff of teaching, the landscape within which we live as teachers and researchers, and within which the work of teachers can be seen as making sense. This is not merely a claim about the aesthetic or emotional sense of the notion of story with our intuitive understanding of teaching, but an epistemological claim that teachers’ knowledge in its own terms is ordered by story and can best be understood in this way. (p. 3)

Stories, then, often have foci that range beyond the immediately specific or content-based issues of curriculum and classroom lessons to encompass teachers’ personal experiences. Thus, teaching events are framed within a context of a teacher’s life history. As a result, the central themes are often moral and philosophical, having more to do with feelings, purposes, images, aspirations, and personal

meanings than with teaching method or curriculum structures [33,35,36]. This attention to the life history of the teacher is problematic when the life history of a teacher is outside of the heteronormative nature of schooling.

The heteronormative nature of schools and schooling is an impediment for gay teachers, as their professional identities can arguably be seen as less authentic than the identities of their heterosexual peers. Accordingly, in terms of the original study and this article, I argue that in the right context—classroom or otherwise—any self-disclosure is appropriate.

5. Methodology

The original multiple case study had two phases. In phase one, participants completed an online survey that determined their location along the HIF model continuum [15] and garnered information about their teaching history and context. In phase two, participants completed two interviews and related reflective and focused journaling activities. These data were analyzed for themes and patterns using the four perspectives that bound the conceptual framework. The goal of this research was to increase understanding of how negotiation and enactment of a “gay teacher identity” in school contexts interrupts heteronormativity. Triangulation of data from phase one revealed two major themes: first, the participants had varying conceptions and enactments of being “out,” and second, the participants indicated dissonance and variety in answering, for themselves, the question of “is ‘out’ appropriate?”.

In phase two, four participant cases were profiled. Cross’s [7] adaptation of Phinney’s [37] Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) was used to analyze each case to understand their negotiation and enactment of gay identity. Oyserman and Destin’s [8] theory of Identity-Based Motivation (IBM) and Poole’s [38] notion of relational justice helped to identify three pervasive themes during the cross-case analysis: teacher preparation and professional development, perception/nonperception of administrative support, and activist teaching. Finally, the conceptual framework was revisited and reformatted into a model of gay teacher identity. For the purposes of this article, only findings from Peter’s case will be shared and discussed.

6. Peter Ryan

Peter was one of the four participants invited to participate in phase two of the original study. In this phase he was asked to write weekly reflection journals focusing on how his gay identity, gay issues, or gay students impacted his teaching (if at all). He was also asked to reflect on his weekly curriculum and pedagogical practices and/or the broader school context to see if he could identify instances where he perceived homophobia, bias, or heteronormativity, and, if so, how he did or did not react to those instances. Peter was also asked to complete four focused journal entries on specific prompts that addressed his coming out process and his teaching philosophies. The focused journals were designed to give him a venue in which to truly think through his responses and write without constraints.

Peter was interviewed twice. The first interview centered on his upbringing, schooling, and gay realization and coming out. The second interview centered on his teacher education, teaching career, and various hypothetical school and classroom-based situations.

Participant Profile

Background. Peter Ryan is currently an academic dean for a charter elementary school in the Western United States. Peter is 26 years old and the youngest in his family, having an older brother and sister. Peter’s father passed away four years ago. Peter currently lives with his partner and the two of them have been together for five years. Unlike Chris in the previous case, Peter’s childhood was not as peaceful. Peter was bullied throughout elementary and middle school.

Yeah, when I first moved, I got teased a lot because I was the new kid and was teased a lot about my accent, being from New York, and the way I spoke. As I got older, I got teased by the boys because I was terrible at sports and didn’t like sports, I didn’t do what all the other

boys were doing. I was called a sissy and never felt like I fit in except for a small group of friends that I had.

The bullying turned violent in middle school, where Peter says he was assaulted many times for no apparent reason, he recalls his father having to constantly go into the school to conference with school officials.

Peter's gay realization and coming out. Peter began having homosexual feelings toward the end of middle school:

I pretty quickly associated the feelings with 'being gay'—In middle school kids talked about "gay" teachers all the time, mostly to poke fun at them. Beyond the fact that being gay meant boys liking other boys, and that kids made fun of people who were gay, I didn't understand much more about homosexuality the time.

Already being the target of much of bullying growing up, Peter knew that these feelings he was having about boys would only complicate the situation even more if he disclosed them. Thus, he remained silent throughout middle school and well into high school. In the tenth grade, Peter began coming out to his friends. He started by coming out to his casual friends and not his closest friends, explaining, "I didn't want to tarnish my closest relationships—the ones that meant the most." Peter decided to come out to one of his best friends after she came out as lesbian to him. Peter was pleased with her reaction, but that pleasure was only short lived because when his friend's mother found out her daughter was lesbian and that her friend (Peter) was gay they were quickly forbidden from speaking to one another. However fleeting the time was where Peter was out to his best friend, he was still able to find attachment with another member of his group identity [7]. Losing that friendship, however, empowered Peter to come out to more of his friends:

I had just found out what it was like to lose a friendship over my sexual identity. It could have made me more fearful of it occurring again in the future, but it had the opposite effect. If I could go through it once and still feel strong—emotionally unbroken—then surely, I could handle telling more people.

The empowerment Peter felt as a result of the strength he gained in this example can be viewed as a type of emotional buffering [7], where he learned possible feelings of rejection and loss but persevered because the feelings of openness and authenticity were stronger. Peter continued coming out to his friends, and eventually everyone (except his family) knew Peter was gay: "For the first time, I felt like I could truly be me. It was an incredibly liberating experience."

Coming out to his family was more difficult for Peter, "even when they made it easy". When Peter was in the tenth grade, his older brother had found some of Peter's adult materials saved on the family computer one afternoon and confronted him:

'I found some pictures of men on the computer. Are you gay?' I remember my heart just about pounding out of my chest and trying to play it off like I had no clue what he was talking about. He wouldn't let off though, 'so then you must be bi?' I eventually snapped at him, flat out denying I was gay and telling him never to bring it up again. So, he didn't. We didn't talk about it again for 5 years, when I was ready to talk about it.

Five years later, Peter was a senior in his bachelor's program finding himself alone after his boyfriend of three years unexpectedly ended their relationship. Emotionally distraught and depressed, Peter described his drives to work and school as full of tears and his time at home as time spent alone in his room, not speaking with anyone. Like Chris in the case before, Peter's mother sensed something was wrong with her son and decided to reach out to him.

I told her the truth. That I was in a relationship for 3 years that just ended and that the only reason I didn't tell her was because I was gay. She hugged me and told me that relationships are hard—not even mentioning the fact that I was gay. She asked me what happened and about who it was with. She was so remarkably supportive.

Peter and his mother had several further conversations about his sexual identity and his mother confessed that she had “figured it out” much earlier. Peter came out to his brother a few days after coming out to his mother: “Since then my brother has become one of my closest family members. Even though my mom has been super supportive, it's my brother who I feel like I can talk most openly to”. Peter and his mother both decided to keep the information from Peter's father because they were unsure of his reaction. Unfortunately, Peter's father passed away shortly thereafter, and he died never knowing. Peter reconciles these feelings by recalling what his father always told him. “I think my father may have had a hard time coming to terms with a having a gay son, but he always claimed his love was unconditional—and that was all I ever needed to hear.” Peter's mother and brother are vital bridges [7] in his life; they served to help validate Peter's identity as a gay man and to allow his identity to fully develop.

Becoming a teacher. Peter recalls wanting to be a teacher early in his life, even shadowing his fifth-grade teacher one year for career day. Unfortunately, having grown up on the verge of poverty, Peter knew first-hand the importance of a career that was financially rewarding. In high school, Peter joined the speech and debate and mock trial teams for his high school and found great success in those endeavors. These experiences led Peter to a career trajectory aimed at law school and a career as an attorney. Peter majored in political science at the state university he attended and was an excellent student. Peter also worked as a legal clerk in the district attorney's office, it was working there that Peter began to see the negative side of the legal profession:

Working for the DA's office was a disenchanting experience for someone who has grown up with Hollywood's glorification of the legal world. I observed lawyers spending countless hours with deskwork—writing briefs, etc. It wasn't the type of work I had initially imagined.

Peter was also an active member of the College Democrats at his university. He recalls a trip he took with the group to Washington D.C. to learn about access to higher education and the barriers that existed for students of low-income families—especially racial minorities:

We spent that trip in DC lobbying congressmen and senators from [our state's] delegation to vote on some key pieces of legislation to increase student aid funding. Most of the bills didn't pass—which could have been disheartening, but I think truly lit a spark.

During a meeting of at his college Democrats chapter, a representative from Teach for America (TFA) spoke and Peter became interested in the organization, researching the mission and goals and finding his beliefs and values aligned greatly with the organization's core values. Eventually, Peter applied and was accepted to the TFA Corps.

Peter was assigned to work in a new network of charter schools whose explicit mission was to close the achievement gap by creating the largest network of high performing schools serving low-income students in the country. Prior to the beginning of his first school year as a TFA teacher, he completed the basic training program through TFA, which is an intensive, month-long, program where teachers are provided basic pedagogy, classroom simulation, curriculum development, and planning. TFA trainees would also spend time observing teachers in the field. For Peter, teaching felt natural, “After just a couple weeks I was doing very well and was really successful at doing it.” Even though he reports being quite successful in his training and first year teaching, Peter admits, “my preparation was very minimal. I had very little support or coaching and was rushed out.”

7. Peter's Case as Emblematic, Peter's Story as Inspirational

When considering the overarching question of this study—does teacher enactment of gay identity interrupt heteronormativity in schools—looking to Peter's case specifically—the answer is undoubtedly

“yes”. A broad understanding of gay teacher identity would lead one to assume that in order to have gay teacher identity one must be gay and be a teacher. What this research provides is nuance. When understood through the lens of this research, gay teacher identity means much more. Peter was never simply a gay person who happened to be a teacher. Peter had cultivated his gay teacher identity by finding his place in the work environment that allowed him to feel identity congruence and relational justice, empowered him to be comfortable enacting his social and professional identities freely, and received positive reinforcement of his decisions from the students and staff with whom he interacted. These are the reasons I consider Peter emblematic of the overall study—its intentions, findings, and advocacy implications. Gay teachers negotiate their gay teacher identity when they decide to begin coming out at school. The degree to which a gay teacher comes out will determine the degree to which he can be an activist, interrupting heteronormativity through positive enactments of identity. This negotiation is a process and requires the gay teacher to perceive his context as one that provides a relationally just, identity-congruent environment that will foster and manifest positive enactments of identity.

Gay teachers enter a school building with years of identity development in tow; their experiences in teacher preparation, other fields of study, life experience, family upbringing, and sociocultural positionality all situate them to have unique orientations and entry points for their gay teacher identity to be fully negotiated. Therefore, an understanding that everyone comes into the Gay Teacher Identity model based in these experiences is vital. The model is not intended to be a linearly progressive experience, but rather a tool for understanding identity development, taking into account the richness and importance of context and how that context is perceived.

Peter expressed confidence in his own teaching identity and ability and in the respect students and staff had for him in the school. This emphasis on respect may be read as an investment in an identity as a ‘good teacher,’ or as indicative of the heightened importance of being a good teacher in context, which can be necessary as a means of buffering against heteronormativity in a school context. Schools present a delicate hierarchy that must be carefully managed on a day-to-day basis by a teacher; relationships with other staff members, support staff, students, and also their parents, must all be taken into consideration and often involve varying strategies and difficult negotiations and enactment.

Maintaining a high degree of respect from students and parents was a priority for Peter. Epstein and Johnson [39] discuss the onus on gay people to prove themselves acceptable in the face of fear of prejudice should their sexual orientation become known. Rasmussen [40] refers to the figure of the *superteacher* who must compensate for a perceived lack associated with being lesbian or gay, while Blount [41] also notes that being a popular teacher will mitigate negative attention towards GLBTQ identity. This suggests that the more powerful and respected the teacher is in the school, the more likely gay teacher identity can interrupt heteronormativity and be negotiated and enacted.

Embedded in this research is an implicit call for authenticity to be embraced, because the role of being an authentic human being and how it plays out in a teaching and learning setting is ultimately a goal of this research. Authenticity is not a disposition nor a particular value; rather, authenticity here is the ability to be one’s fully realized and actualized self and having that self be inherently valued and valuable in the school context. An understanding of gay teacher identity will provide gay teachers, school leaders, and teacher and principal educators with steps to take in order to facilitate the interruption of heteronormativity in the school environment.

8. Recommendations for Teacher Educators

Peter’s case, as well as the other cases in the study, present clear directions and areas where those of us in teacher education can make great strides in supporting teachers and students who are GLBTQ. Teacher education curriculum must become more inclusive of sexual and gender minorities and their lived experiences. Scholars interested in how topics of diversity and identity are addressed in teacher preparation program have found that gender and sexuality, along with queer theory perspectives, are routinely underrepresented in curricula [42,43]. In a 2007 survey of program coordinators, Jennings [44]

found that 8.6% of programs did not address sexual orientation at all, while two thirds of programs reported this topic as the lowest priority in terms of “form[s] of diversity” (p. 1261). In their work to promote visibility of gender and sexuality in teacher education coursework, Robinson and Ferfolja [45] have called for these topics to be covered in the context of broader approaches to understanding power and inequality in education. O’Malley, Hoyt and Slattery [46] have presented ways that gender and sexuality diversity can be included in foundations of education courses, similar to those we teach in our respective departments.

In their 2013 article, Gorski, Davis and Reiter [47] called for an extension of their own analysis of multicultural teacher education course syllabi to other aspects of course organization and delivery in order “to better understand the visibility and nature of attention to LGBTQ concerns within them” (p. 243).

9. Recommendations for Educational Leaders

Peter’s case highlights the immense value found in identity, especially when considered as a means of motivation and relational justice in the workplace. Educational leaders must be able to assess their school environments, taking into account the various identities and personalities found therein. The model presented in this study can be utilized by school leadership to assess where their schools would be placed in terms of their teachers’ perceptions of identity congruence [8], leading to increased perceptions of relational justice [38].

Principal support was identified as an important source of support for the teachers in this study. Educational leaders can lead to increased perceptions of support by GLBTQ teachers (and students) through the following suggestions. School leaders must develop professional development opportunities that demonstrate how to infuse GLBTQ identities and issues into curriculum, both explicitly and through implicit means.

Additionally, when planning for professional development, leaders must be cognizant of the difference between planning programming for GLBTQ teachers and students versus planning programming about GLBTQ teachers and students. While both are extremely beneficial and take schools in the direction of interrupting heteronormativity, these two types of functions serve different purposes and must be balanced. Programming about a group allows for all stakeholders to develop an understanding about the group and work toward inclusivity and relational justice. Programming must be group-specific—intended to help group members develop intrapersonal strategies that allow their identity to become more fully actualized, leading to an increased level of identity congruence and perception of support.

10. Conclusions

Peter’s life was tragically cut short, but his legacy has not been forgotten, nor will his memory be extinguished. Peter was not only a participant in this dissertation but was also a close friend of mine. We met in our undergraduate years. I was nearing the end of my college career preparing to start teaching high school in the same district from which we both graduated as students. Peter was a college sophomore, still undecided between wanting to go to law school or politics. When he told me he was graduating and joining a national, non-profit teacher development organization and moving to another state I felt sad to lose a friend but happy for his future students, because I knew they would find a role model in Peter, someone who would bring out the best in each and every one of them. To this day, I still believe these things to be true. Peter’s case is emblematic of all that I came to understand in my research, but Peter’s life and legacy are truly inspiring. He was an amazing person, loved by everyone he encountered. I miss you, my friend.

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