5-2022

Exploring How Latinx Gender and Sexually Diverse Youth in the Rio Grande Valley Experience and Confront Homophobia: A Qualitative Study of Alumni Community Leaders/Advocates

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EXPLORING HOW LATINX GENDER AND SEXUALLY DIVERSE YOUTH IN THE

RIO GRANDE VALLEY EXPERIENCE AND CONFRONT HOMOPHOBIA:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ALUMNI COMMUNITY

LEADERS/ADVOCATES

A Dissertation

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Major Subject: Educational Leadership

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

May 2022

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ABSTRACT

Flores Jr., Heraclio <u>Exploring How Latinx Gender and Sexually Diverse Youth in the Rio Grande Valley Experience and Confront Homophobia: A Qualitative Study of Alumni Community Leaders/Advocates</u>. Doctor of Education (EdD), May, 2022, 146 pp., 8 tables, references, 132 titles.

Framed by queer theory, this qualitative study seeks to better understand the unique experiences of homophobia that occur amongst Latinx gender and sexually diverse youth (GDSY) in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley are less likely to be in schools that adopt affirming policies and are therefore more likely to experience homophobia. It is also likely that their social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing are impacted negatively. The study collected written journal responses from nine Latinx gender and sexually diverse alumni of RGV schools (including the researcher) that presently serve as community leaders and advocates. Findings suggest that homophobia is experienced as trauma and that participants employed positive trauma responses to confront their experiences. Future research is warranted to understand the role that Latinx intergenerational trauma may play in trauma response for Latinx GDSY in the RGV. Moreover, additional research is needed to develop tailored professional development for RGV educators that identifies and sustains affirming policies and practices that mitigate how Latinx GDSY experience and confront homophobia.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family who have loved and found ways to affirm

their queer, nonbinary child and sibling. To friends and colleagues that have offered love and

support to both myself and the causes I hold dear. Lastly and most importantly, this dissertation

is for the queer youth of the Rio Grande Valley and queer people of color the world over. May

this collection of words speak truth to stories that often go erased and unheard.

> "And at last you'll know with surpassing certainty that only one thing is more
>
> frightening than speaking your truth. And that is not speaking."
>
> - Audre Lorde

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Prologue

As I blew out the candles on my tenth birthday cake, I recall making a wish no child ever needs make. Growing up, I was often bullied (Olweus & Limber, 2010) for failing to conform to the prescribed identities that dominated the Rio Grande Valley in the late 80's and 90's. One, I grew up in a predominately Spanish speaking community; I was bullied and excluded for speaking English as my first language. Two, I was a sissy; I loved unicorns and rainbows, reading fantasy and make-believe and there were no identifiably safe spaces for queer children in the *machista* (Gilb, 1996) Rio Grande Valley. Outside the boundaries of my bedroom and sacred spaces – my woods and waterhole, *mi monte y poso* – I learned early on that the world was difficult to navigate. I learned that it was best to stay quiet – unnoticed and unseen. I had no clue that I would grow up to like boys, but I knew the bitter, lasting sting of words like faggot, sissy, and *joto*. I can remember the countless times I was told by friends, family, and educators to quit being a sissy. I specifically remember by tenth birthday.

Growing up I was particularly close to a Christian family who had chosen to home-school their children. Their eldest was a girl my age, followed by their only son, who was a year or two younger, and finally two more daughters that were not yet of schooling age. I got along well with the children and treasured my time with them, as they were the only other children I knew that

1

did not openly tease or bully me. On my tenth birthday, my mother invited the entire family over to our house for cake, ice cream and play time. And while I don't remember exactly what we did that day, I remember the feeling of happiness spending the day amongst friends. I also remember that come evening I found myself balled up in the shower where scalding hot water overpowered the pain, drowned out my sobs, and washed away my tears. On my tenth birthday, the Christian family's patriarch admonished my mother for allowing me to play so much with the girls; if left on that track I would surely grow up to be a homosexual. On my tenth birthday I remember feeling like I had embarrassed my mother. On my tenth birthday, I had no idea I would grow up to love men, but I knew the pain of being labeled homosexual. I knew that the 80's had not been kind to gay men; I knew that they were the victims of AIDS, often left to die alone and forgotten (Ramírez-Johnson, Díaz, Feldman, Ramírez-Jorge, & Ramírez-Johnson, 2013). I remember praying to God that night, begging that I wouldn't end up gay, that I wouldn't end up contracting and wasting away from AIDS. On my tenth birthday I experienced the full force of the shame (and trauma) of homophobia (Brown, 2006); I remember blowing out the candles on my cake and wishing I wasn't gay.

School bullying, peer victimization or peer harassment, is the physical, verbal, or psychological abuse of victims by perpetrators who intend to cause harm" (Olweus & Limber, 2010). According to Olweus, victimization is characterized by the intent to cause harm and an imbalance of power between perpetrator and victim (Graham, 2016). Bullying, and associated harassment and intimidation pose serious public and mental health concerns. Bullying can poison a school's climate and affect students' ability to engage in learning (Ansary, Elias, Greene, and Green (2015). A recent study conducted by American Psychological Association (2017) tracked hundreds of children from kindergarten through high school and found that chronic bullying was

related to lower academic achievement, a dislike of school, and low confidence by students in their academic abilities. In general, over twenty-five percent of students in US schools will report being bullied in any given school year (American Psychological Association, 2017; Ansary et al., 2015). While studies indicate that schools that adopt affirming policies and practices can improve the outcome for LGBTQ students, the reality is that few schools do (Dragowski, McCabe, & Rubinson, 2016; Higa et al. 2014; Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2018; Kane et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018; Porta, Singer, Mehus, Gower, Saewyc, & Eisenberg, 2017; Sinclair & Reece, 2016; Young, 2012; Young-Jones et al., 2015). More alarming, even fewer schools that serve students of color adopt affirming policies and practices (Flores, H., Aguilar, I., McPhetres, J., & Hernandez, F., 2021).

With the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) decision that affirmed Marriage Equality (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2016), the more recent ruling finding that the Civil Rights act of 1964 applies to and protects LGBTQ workers (Liptak, 2020), and the increased pressure to pass the Equality Act (NPR, 2021) it appears that the experiences of LGBTQ Americans are getting better. However, much work is still needed in schools to improve the lives of Gender and Sexually Diverse Youth (GDSY) (GLSEN, 2019).

The Study

Background of the Study

A majority of gender and sexually diverse youth (GSDY) continue to experience high levels of homophobia and feel unsafe in US schools (Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2018; Kane, Nicoll, Kahn, & Groves, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2016; Young-Jones et al., 2015). GSDY in learning environments with prevalent, homophobic, socio-

cultural expectations experience and internalize homophobia as shame. (Brown, 2006). As a result, GSDY experience obstacles such as diminished attendance, GPAs, graduation rates, and plans to pursue post-secondary education (Higa, Hoppe, Lindhorst, Mincer, Beadnell, Morrison … Mountz, 2014; Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016; Young-Jones, Fursa, Byrket, & Sly, 2015). For GSDY of color (Latinx) such obstacles are compounded by racism, classism, and systems of oppression (Human Rights Campaign, 2018). Without effective affirming policies and practices/resilience strategies to counteract the effects of internalized homophobia, Latinx GSDY are at risk (Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Kane et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2016; Young-Jones et al., 2015).

This qualitative research investigated the experiences of Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley; the impact on their social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing; how affirming policies and practices/resiliency strategies, if any, were used to confront experiences of homophobia; and the role, if any, that educational leaders played to affirm participants' identities and experiences. Without action, schools will continue to be unsafe negatively impact the social, emotional, and educational wellbeing of GSDY.

Affirming policies and practices. Affirming policies and practices refers to any school policies and/or practices adopted and implemented to meet the unique needs of LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2016). In schools and other social institutions, heterosexuality and gender conformity are often assumed by default (Castro, & Sujak, 2014; Kosciw et al., 2016). Due to the pervasiveness of predominately heteronormative culture, LGBTQ students often feel harassed and unsafe in schools (Castro, & Sujak, 2014; Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Kane et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2016; Young-Jones et al., 2015). Some schools have adopted affirming policies and practices to support and mitigate the adverse effects of homophobia

(harassment, discrimination, and victimization) frequently experienced by LGBTQ youth in school, their homes and communities, and society at large (Kosciw et al., 2016). Such policies and practices are referred to as affirming because they affirm and validate LGBTQ identities (Kosciw et al., 2016). Affirming policies and practices generally fall under four main categories, namely: Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs), inclusive curriculum, LGBTQ school visibility, and supportive school administrators (Kosciw et al., 2016). These categories will be explained further in the review of the literature.

Support of LGBTQ identities. When discussing LGBTQ issues, support can be defined as the willingness and preparedness of an individual to be an ally and act on behalf of LGBTQ individuals. The Human Rights Campaign's (2014) guidebook, *Coming Out as a Supporter*, delineates ways in which an LGBTQ ally can shows support. Allies show support by being honest about their feelings and level of understanding regarding LGBTQ issues and identities. They send gentle signals about their acceptance, support, and openness towards LGBTQ issues and identities. They display courage by openly supporting and accepting LGBTQ persons and identities. Additionally, they assure that LGBTQ identities merit dignity and respect. Lastly, they show support in their real-world behaviors and decisions, such as standing up to prejudice and discrimination.

Statement of the Problem

The progress recently made towards social and political equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) Americans is unprecedented, yet the deck is still stacked against our country's LGBTQ youth who continue to feel unsafe in US Schools (Human Rights Campaign, 2018; Kane et al., 2013). The Human Rights Campaign's (2018) most recent survey of 12,000 self-identified LGBTQ youth, ages 13 – 17, found that:

"only 13% of LGBTQ youth report hearing positive messages about being LGBTQ in school; only 27% of LGBTQ youth can "definitely" be themselves in school as an LGBTQ person; and only 26% of LGBTQ youth report that they always feel safe in the classroom" (Human Rights Campaign, 2018, p. 8). While the aim of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015-2016) is "to provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps" (SEC. 1001.), the reality is that schools experienced as unsafe by LGBTQ youth results in diminished school attendance, GPAs, graduation rates, and plans to pursue post-secondary education (Higa, Hoppe, Lindhorst, Mincer, Beadnell, Morrison … Mountz, 2014; Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016; Young-Jones, Fursa, Byrket, & Sly, 2015). The effects of unsafe schools are compounded for LGBTQ youth of color (Human Rights Campaign, 2018).

Feeling safe in schools requires adopting and implementating affirming policies and practices (Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Kane et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2016; Young-Jones et al., 2015). However, few schools adopt and implement affirming policies and practices (Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Kane et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2016; Young-Jones et al., 2015). Even fewer schools in predominately Latinx communities provide affirming policies and practices, leaving Latinx LGBTQ youth especially at risk (Human Rights Campaign, 2013).

This is compounded for Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). Most recently in the 2020 election, Republicans were able to run up their numbers in the counties that make up the RGV. Described as "conservative, liberal, indifferent and hybrid" (para. 12), many RGV Latinos that voted republican in the 2020 election were "Border Patrol and U.S. Customs agents, veterans and oil and gas workers, who … are naturally conservative (Hernandez & Martin,

2020). Many Latinos [in the RGV] also identify as White and don't subscribe to a pan-ethnic identity apart from their Texan identity" (Hernandez & Martin, 2020, para. 24).

As such, GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley are subject to conservative morals and values. They are less likely to be in schools that adopt affirming policies and practices (Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2018; Kane, Nicoll, Kahn, & Groves, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018 Young-Jones et al., 2015), and are therefore more likely to experience homophobia. It is also likely that their social, emotional, and educational wellbeing are impacted negatively (Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2018; Kane et al. 2013; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018 Young-Jones et al., 2015).

Purpose of the Study

Unfortunately, Latinx GSDY experience homophobia in schools and are placed at an educational disadvantage due to the compounding effects of discrimination and victimization. The purpose of this study is to explore how Latinx GSDY of the Rio Grande Valley uniquely experience homophobia, the impact it has on their social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing, and the affirming policies and practices/resilience strategies, if any, employed to confront experiences of homophobia to better meet the needs of all students in the RGV. The secondary purpose is to understand the impact of educational leadership on affirming policies and practices/resilience strategies that serve best to meet the unique needs of Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley. Furthermore, the significance of this study is its effort to inform current educational leaders, community leaders, and policymakers on the needs of GSDY.

Research Questions

The following research questions will be investigated:

- How do Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley experience homophobia?

- How does homophobia impact the social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing of Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley?

- How do affirming policies and practices, if any, help Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley confront experiences of homophobia?

- What strategies, if any, do Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley employ to confront experiences of homophobia?

- How do Latinx GSDY perceive educational leaders in the Rio Grande Valley?

Methodology

Framed by queer theory, this qualitative study seeks to understand better the unique experiences of homophobia that occur amongst Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley. The study will use a purposeful sample of participants, namely Latinx alumni from public schools in the Rio Grande Valley that identify as gender and sexually diverse and that now serve as community leaders and advocates for change in the Rio Grande Valley. The study will collect participants' experiences with homophobia; the impact on their social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing; how affirming policies and practices/resiliency strategies, if any, were used to confront experiences of homophobia; and the role, if any, that educational leaders played to affirm participants' identities and experiences. Additional artifacts (poems, paintings, musings) were encouraged to examine participants' experiences with depth and richness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Queer theory (Butler, 1991; Dilley, 1999, Jagose, 1996; Namaste, 1994; Sedgwick, 1990). Critical race theory and Shame Resilience Theory (Brown, 2006; Freire, 1970), served as additional lenses to frame the study and examine how participants experience and confront homophobia.

Definition of Terms

This section includes the definition of terms related to and used throughout the research. For the dissertation the following terms will be defined as such.

Homophobia. Homophobia "is the fear, hatred, discomfort with, or mistrust of people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual" and/or transgender (Planned Parenthood, n.d., para. 1). "Although transphobia, biphobia, and homophobia are similar, they're not the same thing. Both gay and straight people can be transphobic and biphobic, and people can be transphobic without being homophobic or biphobic" (Planned Parenthood, n.d., para. 2). For this dissertation however, homophobia is being used to describe the mistreatment of gender and sexually diverse persons. The literature does not often distinguish between homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia.

Gender and Sexually Diverse (GSD). GSD refers to the diversities of sex characteristics, sexual orientations, gender/gender identities and gender expressions (American Psychological Association, 2015). While much of the literature still uses terms like LGBT, LGBTQ, and LGBTQIA+ to refer to gender and sexually diverse populations, such descriptors are limited by their letters. As more and more GSD persons live authentically and visibly it is becoming more evident that diversity of queer identities cannot be neatly categorized into four, five, or even six letters in an acronym, and a plus sign, although meant to be inclusive, does little more than erase entire categories of very real persons. Hence if the letters in LGBTQ represent silos, GSD is more like a spectrum. This dissertation uses the term GDS while acknowledging that the literature may use other words to represent the same populations of persons.

Latinx. According to Merriam-Webster (2017), being that Spanish is inherently a gendered language, the term "Latinx was originally formed in the early aughts as a word for

those of Latin American descent who do not identify as being of the male or female gender or who simply don't want to be identified by gender" (para. 1). Members of Latin LGBTQ communities have embraced the term Latinx to identify themselves as people of Latin descent possessing a gender identity outside the male/female binary (Merriam-Webster, 2017, Padilla 2016). Previously, the form Latino/a has been used to show the inclusiveness of both genders, but such a form omits individuals who identify outside of the gender binary of male and female (Merriam-Webster, 2017, Marquez, 2018). Free from gender in its makeup, Latinx is liberating for those who identify as trans, queer, or nonbinary (Merriam-Webster, 2017, Padilla 2016).

Salinas (2020) described Latinx as a term predominantly used in higher education. His 2020 study highlights that Latino/a participants felt comfortable using the term within the privileged spaces of higher education but abandon the term when returning to their communities. He argues that while the term has causes dis(comfort) and ambiguity in its rise and use it also "allows people to ask questions about gender, language, and inclusion, and other changes among cultures" (Salinas, 2020, p. 150). Most importantly, although the term Latinx is an attempt to be inclusive, it is important to discuss and ask people of Latin American origin and decent if they identify with the term or prefer to use something else (Salinas, 2020).

Participants for this study were recruited from the membership of the South Texas Equality Project which has adopted the term Latinx as inclusive and representative of the Rio Grandy Valley's gender expansive community. The term is widely used in meetings and the organization's print and social media. Therefore, the term, Latinx was chosen and used throughout this study.

Significance of the Study

  The goal of the study is to explore how Latinx GSDY of the Rio Grande Valley uniquely experience homophobia, the impact it has on their social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing, and the affirming policies and practices/resilience strategies, if any, employed to confront experiences of homophobia to better meet the needs of all students in the Rio Grande Valley. The secondary goal is to inform educational leadership of any specific affirming policies and practices/resilience strategies that serve best to meet the unique needs of Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley. Past studies indicate that creating safer and affirming schools may result in increased student achievement and social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing for GSDY (Dragowski, McCabe, & Rubinson, 2016; Higa et al. 2014; Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2018; Kane et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018; Porta, Singer, Mehus, Gower, Saewyc, & Eisenberg, 2017; Sinclair & Reece, 2016; Young, 2012; Young-Jones et al., 2015).

Limitations of the Study

  As designed, the study will draw primarily upon participants' recollections of experiences with homophobia. Due to ethical concerns, it would be inappropriate for this dissertation to directly research the experiences of minors. Therefore, a retrospective approach has been taken.

Summary

  This study retrospectively examined how Latinx gender and sexually diverse youth experience homophobia in Rio Grande Valley schools; how homophobia impacts their social, emotional, and physical, and academic wellbeing, the resilience strategies used to overcome homophobia, and the perceived role of educational leaders. The next chapter is a review of the

literature as it relates to the study. The literature review examines a historical background,

homophobia and its effects, affirming policies and practices, and related constructs and theories.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Kite and Bryant-Lees (2016), recent advancements in lesbian, gay,

bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning (LGBTQ) civil rights (legal rights, social acceptance,

and visibility) may lead observers to assume that homophobia experienced by the LGBTQ

community is a thing of the past. However, homophobia, such as discrimination, bullying,

denying transgender rights, and employment disparities are still prevalent in American culture;

the effects of heteronormative culture and heterosexual privilege are far-reaching and deeply

engrained into the American psyche (Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016; Patterson, 2013). While there

have been marked improvements in the treatment of LGBTQ individuals, plenty more still needs

to be done to reach full equality (Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016; Patterson, 2013). Research

conducted indicates that there is inherent value to teaching about LGBTQ history and the

implementation of affirming policies and practices. This literature review aims to highlight the

history of homophobia experienced by LGBTQ youth, the impact such homophobia has on

students' social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing, and identify affirming policies

and practices that educators can use to mitigate the negative impact and limiting reality

experienced by LGBTQ youth (Patterson, 2013). Topics reviewed include: Historical Policy and

Legislation, Historical Background, Homophobic and Unsafe Schools, Affirming Policies and

Practices, and Constructs and Theory.

The Review

Historical Policy and Legislation

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) persons living in the United States of America have a right to be "out;" We have a right to identify and openly exist, to be our authentic gender and sexually diverse selves.

> In our pluralistic society, all persons have a right to be open regarding fundamental aspects of identity, personhoods, and group affiliation. Contextualizing this right to be "out" and reviewing its development in public sector today, it is clear that it reflects a classic combination of First Amendment and Fourteenth Amendment principles. It is both a right to express and identity and a right to be treated equally as a result of expressing this identity. Emerging under court decisions and a range of relevant federal and state statutes, the right to be out encompasses – but is not limited to – disclosure of one's race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, political views, medical conditions, past experiences, present involvements, and future plans. (Biegel, 2010, p. xiii)

The intersection of freedom and equality. The First Amendment and Fourteenth Amendment are among the most powerful and popular the constitutional provisions, and these amendments are often the basis of noteworthy court decisions (Biegel, 2010). Legal scholars consistently place the First Amendment and Fourteenth Amendment on the highest possible pedestal and identify links between the two (Biegel, 2010). The First Amendment Free Speech Clause and the Fourteenth Amendment Equal Protection Clause have been labeled 'the great abstract clauses" of the Constitution; "the textual embodiment of fundamental moral principle" (Biegel, 2010, p. 3). Kenneth Karst is credited with saying that the First Amendment and

Fourteenth Amendment "provides a 'doctrinal basis for protecting the expression of a gay identity" (Biegel, 2010, p. 3). Together the First and Fourteenth Amendments codify the equal intrinsic worth of all humans" (Biegel, 2010, p. 3). Queer identities involve both freedom and equality "the freedom to express an individual [queer] identity without suffering the harms inflicted on members of subordinate groups" (Biegel, 2010, p. 3). The right to be out, the right to express a queer identity exists at the intersection of freedom and equality, and the intersection of the First Amendment and Fourteenth Amendment.

Several examples in case law demonstrate the intersectionality of the First Amendment and Fourteenth Amendment. In *Niemotko v. Maryland* (1951), when a group of Jehovah's Witnesses argued to secure First Amendment rights to hold "Bible Talks" in a public park, Chief Justice Vinson's opinion demonstrated that the Fourteenth Amendment protected the group's equal access to the public park as a forum for expression (Biegel, 2010). Similarly, in *Police Department of the City of Chicago v. Mosley* (1972), when a Chicago ordinance that prohibited picketing, but included an exception for labor groups, was challenged, Justice Marshall strengthened his First Amendment based opinion using the Fourteenth Amendment because Chicago treated some picketing differently from others (Biegel, 2010). The *Mosley* decision continues to serve as the prototypical example of how free speech and equal protection work together to enhance a litigant's position (Biegel, 2010). In both *San Antonio v. Rodriguez* (1973) and *Plyer v. Doe* (1982) Justice Brennan found that "education is inextricably linked to the [Fourteenth Amendment] right to participate in the electoral process and to the rights of free speech and association guaranteed by the First Amendment" (Biegel, 2010, p. 6). In *Serrano v. Priest* (1976), the California Supreme Court described "public education as a 'unifying social force' that could help foster equal access and equal opportunity, and … noted the inevitable

connection between these equal protections and First Amendment principles" (Biegel, 2010, p. 6). These cases demonstrate how a stronger and more effective right is located at the intersection of the First Amendment and Fourteenth Amendment. We have seen how Fourteenth Amendment principles have been used to bolster litigants' free speech rights and First Amendment disputes, and how First Amendment principles have also been used to add both power and depth to the equality-based right to an education found within the Fourteenth Amendment (Biegel, 2010). Queer identity is such a right that exists at this intersection.

The right to be out. The right to be out has not always existed. As pointed out by William Eskridge, gays and lesbians have been smothered by law, as recently as the 1960's people risked arrest and police brutalization for such things as possessing publications on gay issues or that wrote on homosexuality without disapproval; LGBTQ persons of color often faced additional challenges (Biegel, 2010).

From 1945-1965 The Gay Liberation movement relied heavily on the First Amendment freedoms of speech, press, and assembly to establish and protect our right to exist openly – to gather together and openly discuss and write about queer issues (Biegel, 2010). The modern gay rights movement is said to have started in 1969 with the uprising against police harassment at Stonewall Inn in New York City, and the removal of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973 (Biegel, 2010). Queer-related free speech lawsuits that followed established the right to form gay and lesbian student clubs at the post-secondary level, the right to take a same-sex partner to prom, the right to establish gay-straight alliances at the K-12 level, and the right to dress consistent with one's gender identity on public school campuses (Biegel, 2010). In *Gay Students Organization (GSO) of the University of New Hampshire v. Bonner* (1974), ruling unanimously

in the students' favor, the U.S. Court of Appeals concluded that the founding of the GSO and its

activities were examples of communicative opportunities meriting the full protection of free

speech law (Biegel, 2010). Using *Police Department of the City of Chicago v. Mosley* (1972) the

court found that the university could not limit the activities of the GSO because it did not agree

with or support the ideas expressed by the GSO, its members, and the larger message conveyed

by holding public events (Biegel, 2010). Similar victories for gay student groups followed at

other universities including: Virginia Commonwealth University, University of Missouri, and

Georgetown University Law Center (Biegel, 2010). Each time the courts recognized the

communicative aspect of a GSO as protected by the intersection of the First Amendment and

Fourteenth Amendment.

> By ruling in favor of the students in one decision after another at the
>
> highest levels of the federal appellate court system, the nation's top jurists
>
> were making it clear that treating gays differently was no longer
>
> acceptable and that gays had the same right to express themselves in this
>
> manner as everyone else (Biegel, 2010, p. 10).

Many modern cases have continued to strengthen the right to be out. In *Nabozny v.*

Podlesny (1996) the federal appeals court found that, by not disciplining perpetrators, by

attempting to justify the perpetrators' actions, by blaming the victim for bringing it upon himself,

and disclaiming responsibility for the perpetrators' actions in a court of law, the school district

was discriminating against queer identities (Biegel, 2010). In ruling in favor of *Nabozny*, the

federal appeals court sent out a clear message that allowing the harassment of queer students

must end; school district out to protect queer identities (Biegel, 2010).

In *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), the U.S. Supreme Court's 6-3 decision removed the presumption of criminality that severely impacted queer person's right to be out (Biegel, 2010). The court agreed with Attorney Smith that "when the homosexual conduct is made criminal by the law of the State, that declaration in and of itself is an invitation to subject homosexual persons to discrimination both in public and private spheres" (Biegel, 2010, p. 14). Justice Kennedy in the majority opinion stated, "our obligation is to define the liberty of all, not to mandate our own morale code" (Biegel, 2010, p. 14). Justice O'Connor, concurring in the decision, added stronger language: "Moral disapproval of this group [queer persons] … is insufficient. We have never held that moral disapproval, without any other asserted state interest, is a sufficient rationale to justify a law that discriminates among groups of persons" (Biegel, 2010, pp. 14-15). The ruling of Lawrence v. Texas honors the dignity of queer persons and respect for their private lives; queer persons would occupy a very different place within the U.S. constitutional jurisprudence.

Obergefell v. Hodges (2016) would continue this trend. Citing Loving v. Virginia, the definition of legal marriage, a vital personal right essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness, was expanded to include same-sex couples.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruling found that without marriage equality:

> Same-sex couples are consigned to an instability many opposite-sex couples
> would deem intolerable in their own lives. As the State itself makes marriage all
> the more precious by the significance it attaches to it, exclusion from that status
> has the effect of teaching that gays and lesbians are unequal in important respects.
> It demeans gays and lesbians for the State to lock them out of a central institution
> of the Nation's society. (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2016)

Furthermore:

> No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of
> love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. … It would misunderstand these
> men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they
> do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for
> themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded
> from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the
> eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right. (*Obergefell v. Hodges*,
> 2016)

In *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia* (2020), the supreme court held that an employer
who fires an individual merely for being gay or transgender violates Title VII of the *Civil Rights
Act*.

Based on the rulings of *Nabozny v. Podlesny* (1996), *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003),
Obergefell v. Hodges (2016), and *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia* (2020), it would be
difficult for schools and school administrators today to justify the treatment of openly queer
students as second-class citizens (Biegel, 2010). Yet today queer youth are not always safe and
free from homophobia in U.S. schools.

Out in schools. The basis to be out and safely express a queer identity in schools can be
derived from the 1969 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent
Community School District*. The decision in *Tinker* held that "neither K-12 students nor their
teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of expression at the schoolhouse gate"
(Biegel, 2010, p. 24). The court found that First Amendment rights are explicitly available to

19

students and can only be subjected to limitations when there is or will be a material and substantial disruption of the educational setting (Biegel, 2010). Since 1969, three additional cases have followed Tinker, outlining how and when student expression may be limited. In *Bethel v. Frazer* (1986) the court found that educators may limit the expression of students if the expression is deemed inappropriate; however, as seen in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), queer identity and private conduct are no longer criminal nor inappropriate (Biegel, 2010). In *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier* (1988), the court found that student expression may limited in school-sponsored expressive activities. And finally, in *Morse v. Frederick* (2007), the court found that student expression encouraging illegal drug use may also be prohibited (Biegel, 2010). Thus far the exceptions to *Tinker* do not preclude student expression of a queer identity.

The following cases outline queer students' rights to be out in schools. *Fricke v. Lynch* (1980) set the precedent that queer students have the right to take a same-sex date to school functions such as prom (Biegel, 2010). *Colin v. Orange* (2000) and *Boyd County High School (BCHS) Gay-Straight Alliance v. Bd. of Ed.* (2003) "built upon the legal efforts of religious organizations to secure the rights of religious students to have their own clubs, prayer groups, and bible study groups on K-12 campuses" (p. 28) to ensure that Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) were permissible in K-12 schools as well (Biegel, 2010). The right of students to express religious and/or queer identities in schools are guaranteed by the First Amendment and further protected by the Equal Access Act (Biegel, 2010). Using *Tinker*, *Henkle v. Gregory* (2001) reaffirmed that queer students have the right to be out and "became perhaps the first federal court decision to explicitly determine that a student has the right to be out" (Biegel, 2010, p. 32). *Gilman v. School Board for Holmes County, Florida* (2008) found that queer allies have the right to express support and solidarity with fellow queer students (Biegel, 2010). Additionally, *Flores*

v. Morgan Hill Unified School District (2003), *Ramirez v. Los Angeles Unified School District* (2004), *State v. Limon* (2005) have all shown that different treatment of queer students is a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment (Biegel, 2010).

In addition to case law, statutory laws have also emerged to affirm the students' right to be out. "Students who are mistreated merely for the fact that they are open regarding their sexual and/or gender identity can also and often do rely on negligence law, threat law, and harassment law, and a growing number of state statutes designed to maximize campus safety for everyone" (Biegel, 2010, p. 42). As of today, twenty-one states in total, plus the District of Columbia, have anti-bullying laws which specifically protect students based on sexual orientation and gender identity (GLSEN, 2019).

It is important to note that strengthening the right to be out improves the quality of life for everyone. The openness that comes with the right to be out promotes the understanding and appreciation of differences. Being out safely, decreases tension, reduces loneliness, saves lives, and maximizes human potential (Biegel, 2010). One of the tensions in most need of relief is the tension K-12 students and educators face in schools (Biegel, 2010). The murder of fifteen-year-old Lawrence King in a Southern California public school in 2008 only days after coming out is a testament to this volatility (Biegel, 2010). Moreover, the bullying and subsequent suicide of teens like Carl Walker-Hoover and Jaheem Herrera in 2009 for merely perceived queer identities shows that strengthening the right to be out may serve to improve not only the lives of the out, but the lives of those yet to come out, those whom may never be out, and those whom do not identify as queer but may be perceived as such (Biegel, 2010).

Historical Background

A Gallop Poll highlights an increase in the number of American adults that identify as LGBTQ, from 3.5% in 2012, to 4.1% in 2016, and setting a new high in 2021 with 7.1% (Jones, 2022). This marked increase is explicitly attributed to generation z adults (born 1997-2003) and millennials (born 1981 – 1996). The 2021 poll found that 21% of generation z and 10.5 percent of millennials identify as LGBTQ (Jones, 2022). Data from the poll suggests that younger generations increasingly identify as LGBTQ (Gates, 2017, Jones 2022). However, it must be noted, that these numbers inherently represent minimum population sizes. Because of the homophobia commonly experienced by both LGBTQ youth and adults, many members of the LGBTQ community remain closeted, choosing to not self-identify in public settings, or participate openly in surveys and studies (Gates, 2017, Jones, 2022). Therefore, it remains difficult to truly assess the precise numbers of LGBTQ persons in the US. Regardless, the numbers reported indicate that the population of self-identified LGBTQ youth, and specifically, Latinx (Hispanic) LGBTQ youth is on the rise; a population we, as educators, serve.

According to Russell, Day, Ioverno and Toomey (2016):

efforts to reduce harassment and bullying [homophobia] in US schools using systemic strategies began to take hold a decade ago. Two federal laws in the United States would have provided explicit protections to LGBTQ students in public schools: the Safe Schools Improvement Act (SSIA) introduced in 2007, and the Student Non-Discrimination Act (SNDA) introduced in 2011, though both died in committee. These federal policies would have had the effect of establishing enumerated non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies for all students in the nation. (p. 37)

While currently no legislation specifically enumerates protections for LGBTQ youth in schools the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) does represent the legal requirement to meet the educational needs of all students. Its aim, "to provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps" (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, 2015-2016, SEC. 1001.). The law specifically appropriates funds for "prevention and intervention programs for children and youth who are neglected, delinquent, or at-risk" (Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, 2015, 2016, SEC. 1002.). It follows that if Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are genuinely concerned with closing achievement gaps, and increasing completion rates, it necessitates addressing the issues that keep LGBTQ from being successful in US schools. ESSA establishes that all students are legally expected to achieve academic success, yet studies indicate that homophobia routinely hinders the performance for LGBTQ students, and that few schools seek active remedy.

Recent studies indicate that our public schools are doing a poor job of addressing the social, emotional, political, and, by extension, educational needs of LGBTQ students (Higa et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kull, Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, 2016; Young-Jones et al., 2015). For example, the Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) 2013 study, *Growing Up LGBT in America*, surveyed 10,000 LGBTQ youth, ages 13 – 17, and found that nearly half reported living in non-accepting communities, that they were twice as likely to be physically assaulted than their non-LGBTQ peers, and that ninety-two percent reported hearing negative messages about being LGBTQ in schools, the internet and from their peers (Human Rights Campaign, 2013). Digging deeper into the HRC's survey findings, Kane, Nicoll, Kahn, and Groves (2013) looked at just the responses of Latinx LGBTQ youth. Interestingly, they found that Latinx LGBTQ youth felt less hopeful about meeting future goals due to attitudes present in their current communities (Kane et

al., 2013). For Latinx LGBTQ students, family acceptance and support play a crucial role in how they set, perceive, and attain goals (Kane et al., 2013). They are more likely than other racial/ethnic groups to remain closeted and experience anxiety about coming out for fear of losing or diminishing family acceptance and support (Kane et al., 2013). They are significantly less likely than their non-LGBTQ peers to have a family member to turn to when sad, concerned, or worried (Kane et al., 2013). Hence, according to the survey findings, Latinx LGBTQ are more likely to look for and experience support in schools from classmates and teachers, and they are significantly more likely to be out in school to classmates and teachers than any other racial/ethnic group (Kane et al., 2013). The survey findings suggest that while family support is more crucial and sought after by Latinx LGBTQ students, they are more likely to encounter and experience the support needed to achieve success and attain future goals in school (Kane et al., 2013). These findings, along with the Gallop Polls (Gates, 2017, Jones, 2022), highlight a need for educators in the Rio Grande Valley to support an ever-growing population of Latinx LGBTQ youth, who are at-risk of not attaining key educational milestones and achievements.

And while achievement, is generally the primary goal of schools, we, as educators, cannot forget that students have social and emotional needs that go beyond grades and scholastic performance. If the primary social-emotional needs of students are not being met, how can we hope to impact achievement and attainment? A 2009 study by Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, and Azrael examined the emotional distress experienced by 9th – 12th-grade students due to being perceived as LGBTQ. They found that LGBTQ youth "scored significantly higher on the scale of depressive symptomology" (Almeida et al., 2009, p. 1001), reporting higher ideation of suicide and self-harm than their non-LGBTQ peers. The study findings indicate that "perceived discrimination is a likely contributor to emotional distress among LGBT[Q] youth"

(Almeida et al., 2009, p. 1001). Additionally, Heck, Flentje, and Cochran (2013) report that growing up in a stigmatizing, heterosexist society leads to an increase in substance use and psychological distress among people who identify as LGBT[Q]" (p. 81). Therefore, improving school climate through affirming policies and practices serves more than just improving student performance, such policies and practices may be crucial to saving student lives. Knowing this, the question remains, how homophobic and unsafe are US schools, and to what extent are LGBTQ students being left at-risk? The next section of the literature review will discuss how homophobia leads to unsafe schools for LGBTQ youth.

Homophobic and Unsafe Schools

According to Meyer and Bayer (2013), homophobia experienced by LGBTQ people "causes adverse health out-comes, including poor mental health, decreased well-being, and suicide (p. 1764). The health disparities between LGBTQ and the cisgender heterosexual populations in the United States is well-documented (Meyer, & Bayer, 2013). In fact, "the disparities reported … are remarkable both for their large magnitudes and the consistency with which findings appear across a variety of public health topics (Meyer, & Bayer, 2013, p. 1764).

In recent years, the concern for the safety and wellbeing of LGBTQ youth has increased as evidenced by the inclusion of a new item to the Civil Rights Data Collection conducted and reported by all US schools (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). As of the 2015-2016 Civil Right Data Collection, US schools must report allegations of bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Of the total 135,200 individual allegations of harassment and bullying reported in the 2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection School Climate and Safety report, 41% involved

harassment or bullying based on sex including 16% involved in harassment or bullying on the basis of sexual orientation (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2018).

A 2012 study by Kosciw, Bartkiewicz, and Greytak, examined LGBTQ youth perceptions regarding school climate over the first decade of the new millennium. Through a meta-analysis of studies conducted with LGBTQ youth in US schools between 2000 and 2010, they established that the "climates of U.S. middle and high schools are generally unsupportive and unsafe [homophobic]" (Kosciw et al., 2012, p. 10) and that the percentage of LGBTQ students that reported homophobia (harassment or assault and hearing biased language) remained generally stable throughout the decade. Young-Jones, Fursa, Byrket, and Sly (2015), surveyed 130 LGBTQ participants to explore the long-term effects of homophobia. "The results indicate participants who described themselves as … bullying victims had significantly lower academic motivation than respondents who did not." (Young-Jones et al., 2015, p. 185) The study findings suggested that the effects of bullying (homophobia), can follow victims even into higher education, long after harassment has ceased and recommends additional research into bullying and the effects of bullying at the post-secondary level (Young-Jones et al., 2015). In general, various studies have found that LGBTQ youth encounter homophobia (harassment, discrimination, and victimization) regarding their sexual orientation and/or gender expression (Almeida et al., 2009; Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Kane et al., 2013; Kite &Bryant-Lees, 2016; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018).

Since 2001, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) has been a pioneer in surveying and reporting on the safety of US schools for LGBTQ youth (Kosciw et al., 2018). Their biannually released report surveys LGBTQ students participating in affirming school or community organizations throughout the U.S. and collects information about the

present levels of harassment and victimization experienced by LGBTQ youth (Kosciw et al., 2018). Kosciw et al. (2018) found that 70% of LGBTQ students experienced verbal harassment at school based on sexual orientation, more than half based on gender expression (59%) or gender (53%); that 60% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 40% because of their gender expression; that 35% of LGBTQ students missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable; that 42% of LGBTQ students avoided gender-segregated spaces in school because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable; and lastly, that most reported avoiding school functions and extracurricular activities because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. A significant portion of the LGBTQ youth population does not feel safe in US schools. To combat generally homophobic and unsafe schools, GLSEN reports that the use of affirming policies and practices by and in schools, and associated community-based organizations have proven beneficial in diminishing the levels and impact of discrimination and victimization experienced by LGBTQ youth (Kosciw et al., 2018).

While LGBTQ youth may face homophobia at home, in their communities, and schools, the implementation of affirming policies and practices has improved educational achievement and attainment for LGBTQ youth. Positive factors, such as identity development, peer networks, and involvement in the LGBTQ community, can be readily improved upon to ameliorate the homophobic environments encountered by LGBTQ youth (Higa et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018). When implemented, affirming policies and practices directly improve school climate, address school-based harassment and bullying, and mitigate the resulting negative effects of homophobia (Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Kane et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018). Unfortunately, it is a given that LGBTQ youth will be harassed, what is not given – what is actionable, is that they receive

the necessary support and affirmation in schools to be successful in school and beyond. The next section of the literature review will describe and discuss anti-homophobic, affirming policies and practices that researchers have found to be beneficial (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2015; Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Kane et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018). Anti-homophobic, affirming policies and practices and can be classified into four main groups, namely: Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs), inclusive curriculums, LGBTQ school visibility, and supportive school administrators.

As of 2022, and the defense of this dissertation, GDSY continue to face discrimination, homophobia, transphobia, and threats to their safety in US schools (Murib, 2022). In the first three months of 2022, we have seen Florida pass a bill that prohibits the discussion of gender and sexuality in grades K-3rd, the governor of Texas attempted to circumvent law by declaring through an executive memo that affirming parents and families of trans youth should be reported and investigated by the state's child protective services, and various other states are attempting to pass legislation that limits trans youth access to gendered sports and facilities (Murib, 2022).

Affirming Policies and Practices

According to Young (2012), LGBTQ youth make it clear that being LGBTQ in and of itself does not cause problems, what does are the "outcome[s] of intolerant actions and speech [homophobia] by peers, parents, teachers, clergy, and strangers" (p. 8), and that affirming policies and practices make the positive difference for LGBTQ youth. "To protect [LGBTQ] youths, writers from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, social work, public policy, and education, recommend a comprehensive approach to reduce stigma and prejudice, focusing in particular on school-based LGBT[Q] affirmative anti-homophobic interventions (Meyer, & Bayer, 2013). This section includes a synthesis of literature related to

anti-homophobic, affirming policies and practices that lead to safer schools for LGBTQ youth, and defines what is meant by "affirming policies and practices."

Conducted biannually since 2001, GLSEN's National School Climate Survey's indicates that reports of school-based harassment and victimization of LGBTQ students have diminished due to the implementation of affirming policies and practices (Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018). In the survey, students participating in affirming school or community organizations throughout the U.S. report about the present levels of homophobia experienced by LGBTQ youth, the impact on their formal education, and the use and success of anti-homophobic, affirming policies and practices to mitigate negative outcomes (Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018). The 2015 and 2017 National School Climate Surveys concluded that anti-homophobic, affirming policies and practices helped close the achievement gap for LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018). Affirming policies and practices include the following: gay straight alliances, inclusive curriculums, LGBTQ school visibility, and supportive administrators (Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018).

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs). "California and Massachusetts have led the United States in efforts on behalf of LGBTQ students with the establishment [of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs)] in the1980s" (Meyer & Bayer, 2013, p. 1765). The aim of a GSA is to increase sensitivity and awareness of staff and students about LGBT[Q] people to develop school policies that protect LGBTQ students from harassment, violence, and discrimination [homophobia]" (Meyer & Bayer, 2013, p. 1765). A GSA accomplishes this by "sponsoring social events and initiating changes in schools that enhance understanding of and reduce stigma, prejudice, and hostility towards" (p.1765) LGBTQ youth (Meyer & Bayer, 2013). Heck et al. (2013), describe GSAs as:

usually student led, school-based clubs that exist in middle and high schools

whose goals involve improving the school climate for LGBT[Q] youth and

educating the school community about sexual minority issues. [GSAs] can be a

place for LGBT[Q] youth to spend time with peers and may increase social

support for [LGBTQ] youth. [GSAs are] more likely to form in liberal urban and

suburban areas, in larger school districts with greater financial resources, and in

communities with existing support groups for LGBT[Q] youth. (p. 82)

A meta-analysis by Marx and Kettrey (2016) evaluated the impact of GSAs on LGBTQ

student reports of homophobia. The analysis quantitatively synthesized 15 studies with 62,923

participants and found that the presence of a GSA is significantly correlated with diminished

reports of homophobia (Marx, & Kettrey, 2016). Porta, Singer, Mehus, Gower, Saewyc,

Fredkove, and Eisenberg (2017) espouse the positive benefits of GSAs for the physical, social,

emotional, and educational well-being of LGBTQ youth. The study identified three ways GSAs

improve LGBTQ youth's health and well-being: building communities, serving as a gateway,

and representing safety (Porta et al., 2017). In an essay by Sinclair and Reece (2016), the authors

tout the benefits of GSAs as a "safe haven [for LGBTQ students] from the heteronormative

realities of school" (p. 109) and describe how GSAs are instrumental in counteracting the often

oppressive [homophobic] nature of schools. They go one step further by holding that GSAs are

merely a starting place for more comprehensive affirming policies and practices and suggested

that we aim to create 'brave' rather than 'safe' places for LGBTQ students (Sinclair, & Reece,

2016). Additionally, Toomey and Russell (2013), surveyed two-hundred thirty LGBTQ, 7th –

12th graders to determine the effects of participation in a GSA. The study found that

participation in GSAs can be credited with improving an overall sense of school belonging and

school safety, and as a result, improved LGBTQ student achievement (Toomey, & Russell, 2013). However, the study also found that the positive effects of GSAs diminish if schools also have high levels of homophobia (Toomey, & Russell, 2013). As reported by Sinclair and Reece (2016), GSAs are an important and, in fact, foundational component of an anti-homophobic, affirming and supportive school environment, but GSAs alone cannot single-handedly improve the outcome for LGBTQ students, especially if they are experiencing high levels of homophobia (Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018; Marx, & Kettrey, 2016); Porta et al., 2017; Sinclair, & Reece, 2016; Toomey, & Russell, 2013). GSAs also require school administrator acceptance and support to thrive (Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018). Porta et al. (2017), specifically attribute the development of a robust and comprehensive GSA to the involvement and support of school administrators. However, as of the 2017 survey only 39.8% of LGBTQ students reported having had a supportive school administrator (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Inclusive curriculum. Dodge and Crutcher (2015), hold that **"**The human condition is not represented through a single story, [and that] teachers enacting social justice pedagogy [must] incorporate texts important to students' lives that reflect the experiences and identities of all students" (p. 95). "A curriculum that includes anti-homophobic, positive representations of LGBTQ people, history, and events can promote respect for all and improve the experiences of LGBTQ students, families, and educators" (Slesaransky-Poe, 2013, p.43). Castro and Sujak (2014), discuss how LGBTQ students respond to the 'official' and 'hidden' curriculums they encounter in high schools. Their findings suggest that LGBTQ students directly and adversely suffer from the hidden heteronormative curriculum common to high schools (Castro, & Sujak, 2014). According to Castro and Sujak, in their 2014 study:

A positive, supportive environment where a student feels represented and noticed

is undoubtedly the ideal situation for any student, yet [LGBTQ] students are

underrepresented, undersupported, and unnoticed. When asked about a time when

homosexuality was academically presented in their high school setting, none of

the participants could remember it being mentioned in a class. (p. 456)

Based on their research, they offer three areas which schools can strive to make their curriculums

more inclusive, namely: the academic curriculum: classroom, the campus curriculum: groups,

and the social curriculum: relationships (Castro, & Sujak, 2014).

Academic curriculum: classroom. Castro and Sujak (2014), hold that the level of

representation of homosexuality in the taught curricula of classrooms is mostly up to the

teachers. Without federal, state, or local mandates to include LGBTQ representations in lessons,

it is largely left up to teachers to decide if, when, and how to include such representations

(Castro, & Sujak, 2014). "This is a clear example of how the hidden curriculum bleeds into the

overt curriculum, causing a lack of visibility, understanding, and representation of sexual

minority perspectives (Castro, & Sujak, 2014, p. 458). According to Lipkin, as cited in Castro

and Sujak (2014) "having an inclusive school curriculum representing diversity of sexual

orientation provides the following positive outcomes: preparation for life, teaching to student

interests, honest and complete curricula, help for gay and lesbian youth, and help for

heterosexual youth" (p. 458). Also asserted by Lipkin, as cited in Castro and Sujak (2014),

curriculum inclusiveness can be an agent of social change, but the degree of change is dependent

on the professional development and willing participation by faculty and staff, and the implicit

and explicit approval and support of school administrators. Additionally, according to Ngo as

also cited in Castro and Sujak (2014), teachers believe it is difficult to integrate LGBTQ

representation into the taught curriculum without "adequate direction or resources from the school (p. 458). According to Ngo as cited in Castro and Sujak (2014), teachers also "believe that they have not received adequate training on how to address issues related to sexual minorities in the classroom or curriculum" (p. 458). Indeed, "situating schools as spaces that reflect social justice and that challenge the [heteronormative status quo] requires that teachers understand their unique position as agents of social change and incorporate this agency into their classrooms" (Dodge, & Crutcher, 2015, p. 102). SAFE or School Athletics For Everyone, is one such program being used with educators in physical education to support and affirming LGBTQ identities in the all too often hostile and homophobic world of school sports (Greenspan, Whitcomb, & Griffith, 2019).

    Campus curriculum: groups. Castro and Sujak (2014), also hold that "LGBT[Q] groups offer significant advantages for students, [they] see them as a crucial place to feel safe and create social networks, but the existence of the group is not enough to provide complete support" (p.460), such groups themselves must also be visible and supported. It is important to note that the benefits of any LGBTQ group are irrelevant if students are unwilling to join; membership numbers are low in unsupported groups because many LGBTQ youth are still unwilling or unable to come out in unsafe, unsupportive spaces (Castro, & Sujak 2014). In order for LGBTQ groups to take hold and improve unsafe schools, a supportive faculty and school administrators are requirements (Castro, & Sujak 2014). Research indicates that without such support, membership in LGBTQ groups becomes skewed to include few straight allies, more lesbians than gay males, and students that for various reasons are unable to conceal their sexual orientation (Castro, & Sujak 2014). Such a skewed membership has the effect of further alienating students who are "out to the extreme" (Castro, & Sujak 2014). As such Castro and

Sujak (2014) recommend "support groups [that] meet during the school day or after school hours and are led by someone with training to address the needs of sexual minority students." They also recommend "assemblies or programs for students within the school that promoted tolerance or acceptance of homosexuality" especially if assemblies and or programs for other minority groups are held; such an omission would only support the hidden heteronormative curricula (Castro, & Sujak 2014).

Social curriculum: relationships. Lastly, Castro and Sujak (2014), assert that "participation in romantic relationships assists students in developing their sexual identities in tandem with learning valuable relationship skills" (p. 462), however, unlike their heterosexual peers, LGBTQ youth "may not have anyone to consult with as they reach sexual milestones such as first crush first kiss, or first date" (p. 462). Moreover, during adolescence, "at a crucial time when identity formation is linked with adolescent sexual discovery, [LGBTQ] students usually cannot find someone within their school (primarily heterosexual) social networks to date" (Castro, & Sujak 2014, p. 462). The heteronormative culture that predominates schools allows heterosexual students to assume that their peers are also heterosexual; as such, heterosexual students are free to approach, meet, flirt, and establish relationships with other students relatively easily. LGBTQ youth on the other hand, navigate the same heteronormative space quite differently (Castro, & Sujak 2014). LGBTQ youth cannot safely assume the sexual orientation of their peers, and rely on openness, visibility, and visual cues (such as the pride rainbow) to identify, network, connect, and establish relationships with other LGTBQ youth (Castro, & Sujak 2014). A social curriculum that is supportive and that allows for visibility is needed for LGBTQ students to develop social skills and the practice needed to build meaningful relationships in the future (Castro, & Sujak 2014).

LGBT school visibility. Snapp, Watson, Russell, Diaz, and Ryan, (2015) studied two-hundred forty-five LGBTQ young adults to examine the relationship between sexually-related social support and adjustment in young adulthood. The findings indicated that LGBTQ youth benefit strongly from having an accepting family, and that support from friends and the community also contribute to the overall adjustment and self-esteem of LGBTQ youth (Snapp et al., 2015).

Slesaransky-Poe (2013), states that "it also is important to pay attention to how we communicate [in schools]; what we say and write may unknowingly reinforce gender and sexual stereotypes" (p. 43). It is important for schools and classrooms to communicate using inclusive language. Slesaransky-Poe (2013), offers the following as example questions that may be used to determine if school and classroom communication are sufficiently inclusive:

- Do your Emergency Contact Forms or school directory use the terms Mother and Father, or do they say Adult 1, Adult 2?
- Do you use some of the activities that are staples of elementary school, such as the Family Tree, the celebration of Mother's and Father's Days? Do they provide opportunities for students who may have a single parent, two dads or two moms, or who may be adopted, or live in foster families to feel included, visible, and represented?
- Do your district's vision and mission communicate a welcoming message for LGBTQ individuals? (p. 43-44)

"Making LGBTQ stories a standard part of curriculum, just like other issues of diversity, serves to validate and promote acceptance of the experiences of LGBTQ youths who might otherwise not see themselves reflected" (p. 96) in the content taught in schools (Dodge, &

Crutcher, 2015). Moreover, to have social justice in education requires that we acknowledge that our current educational practices are not neutral, that they in fact perpetuate the inequalities that result the pervasive hidden heteronormative curriculum common to US schools (Castro, & Sujak, 2014; Dodge, & Crutcher, 2015). Succinctly summarized by McGarry (2013), "ensuring that schools are more accepting of LGBT[Q] students and issues requires more than passing mentions of diversity in sex education classes" (p. 27). Small changes educators can make to improve inclusiveness in their classrooms and lessons include:

- not expressing heterosexuality as a given but as one of many possibilities;
- use inclusive language when referring to students, their families and other persons;
- use students' preferred names and pronouns;
- build knowledge of LGBTQ vocabulary;
- use gender neutral language; and
- control how and intervene when stereotypes are perpetuated (McGarry, 2013).

Supportive school administrators. According to Slesaransky-Poe (2013), "schools [often] respond to the problem of harassment of LGBTQ individuals by focusing on anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies and procedures. Though necessary, such measures are not sufficient" (p. 41). Such a paradigm places the problem on individuals rather than the culture that encourages and supports homophobia (Slesaransky-Poe, 2013). Instead Slesaransky-Poe (2013) advocates for "a comprehensive approach to create safe, welcoming, and affirming schools for LGBTQ students and their allies [by] providing inclusive and comprehensive sex, gender, and sexuality education to the adults in schools" (Slesaransky-Poe, 2013, p.41). In order for LGBTQ students to learn, they require a safe, nurturing, affirming and supportive atmosphere, and in order to service this population, adults need to be in-formed of diverse

identities, including gender and sexuality (Slesaransky-Poe, 2013). The foundation for such

support and affirmation lies with school administrators. As campus leaders, the actions and

attitudes of school administrators can go a long way in changing the culture that permits the

discrimination and victimization of LGBTQ youth (Slesaransky-Poe, 2013). To improve schools

for LGBTQ youth, school administrators must express comfort and expertise in regard to gender

and sexual identities (Slesaransky-Poe, 2013). According to Slesaransky-Poe (2013), "the

presence of adults who are supportive of LGBTQ students and families can have a positive effect

on the school experiences of all students and their psychological well-being" (Slesaransky-Poe,

2013, p.44). However, it is not enough for adults to be supportive in thinking, they must also be

visible and supportive in action (Slesaransky-Poe, 2013). A supportive school administrator is

openly and visibly anti-homophobic. School administrators need to identify and communicate

their supportiveness of LGBTQ youth in visible ways. "This can be done by being outspoken

about these matters and by using posters and signs indicating that their offices are safe and

supportive" (Slesaransky-Poe, 2013, p.44). Supportive school administrators:

> seize teachable moments to educate students about sexual orientation, prejudice,
>
> and homophobia; they address assumptions that being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is
>
> bad, and reinforce that everyone in the school environment deserves respect. They
>
> confront the stereotypes and misinformation behind insults and the abuse of
>
> sexually diverse students, families, and educators; they confront stereotypes and
>
> homophobia raised by their colleagues, and they explore with LGBTQ students
>
> more appropriate responses to insults than physical violence or reverse name
>
> calling. Finally, they teach students to be resilient. (Slesaransky-Poe, 2013, p.44).

The literature cites supportive school administrators as in being instrumental in supporting the social, emotional, and educational wellbeing of LGBTQ students. However, the reality is that few principal preparation programs prepare school leaders that feel confident is supporting and defending LGBTQ students. Furthermore, even fewer principal preparation programs engage in the social justice work necessary to improve schools for marginalized LGBTQ youth (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Hernandez & Kose, 2012; Hernandez & Marshall, 2016; Karpinski & Lugg, 2006; Lugg, 2006; Lugg, 2017). Dragowski, McCabe, and Rubinson, (2016) found that educators generally lack knowledge of LGBTQ identity development needed to appropriately intervene. And, in a 2015 study, O'Malley and Capper, found that LGBTQ "identities and themes are only marginally integrated into U.S. principal preparation programs, [and] frequently depend on one faculty member or course to do so, rather than being integrated throughout the program" (p. 291). Moreover, they found that as of 2015, "leadership preparation program evaluation literature has not explicitly addressed the preparation of principals for social justice" (p. 291).

"Public school administrators with a social justice perspective have an obligation to permeate society beyond their schools" (Lugg & Shoho, 2006, p. 196). However, for Karpinski and Lugg (2006), "educational administration, both as a field of academic inquiry and as a profession, has historically, been at odds with – if not in direct opposition to – social justice" (p. 278). Educational administration is chiefly concerned with maintaining the status quo – in a society that focuses on accountability and economics, and that "perpetuates a managerial model for educational administrators, those who embrace a social justice perspective will do so at their own peril (Karpinski & Lugg, 2006, p. 278). And, even when school administrators choose to take on a social justice perspective, they "will likely adopt and adapt a social justice perspective

38

suited to their own priorities and needs. In so doing they may incur professional and personal tolls" (Karpinski & Lugg, 2006, p. 278).

The reality is that school leaders are not incentivized to enact social justice measures that may have positive and tangible consequences for marginalized students. Writing in 2017, Lugg states that "we are facing a political and educational crisis that we've not seen in our lifetimes; the rise of a proto-fascist state that spews fear, hate, and endless 'alternative facts'" (p. 969); this environment makes it only that much harder for leaders in any capacity to enact meaningful social justice programs. Now more than ever it is critical to engage in social justice work and leadership (Lugg, 2017). "Educators must see themselves as political actors, who can shape their political environments through their teaching, as well as by participating in other venues" (Lugg, 2006, p. 196). However, Lugg (2006) warns that "contemporary educational leaders, …[are] working in far less hospitable settings than their twentieth-century predecessors. Administrators are under fierce accountability and fiscal pressures, while coping with a larger political environment that is polarized and fearful. And the internal environment of school administration favors a "managerial" approach. Consequently, embracing a social justice ethic invites a degree of risk-taking" (p. 196).

Moreover, how we enact social justice is extremely important. Without meaningful discourse "leading for social justice may, for some, mean assimilating all students into a Eurocentric worldview or creating an oppositional and narrow form of multiculturalism in defense or reversal, treating everyone the same in minimization, and affirming various strands of diversity in adaption" (Hernandez & Kose, 2012, p. 525). What then is the role of a queer/queer-friendly school administrator? How do queer/queer-friendly school administrators engage in

39

social justice work that does not negate or erase their queer identity nor that of the queer students they service?

Lugg and Tooms (2010), explore the identify erasure often experienced by school leaders. School leadership is a highly public 24/7 profession. As such, school leaders must actively manage how their identities are seen by the community both for the success of their school and for personal gain (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). As a consequence, a highly heteronormative and homophobic society makes it so that school leaders often erase their queer or queer-friendly identities in order to ensure success. Early on queer school administrators internalize that to succeed but must become and present "The Right Kind of Queer":

> The Right Kind of Queer is 'an overachiever and workaholic who lives with a different lesser set of civil rights'. The Right Kind of Queer is a person who may or may not be closeted, but they feel they are serving schools which do not support members of the sexual minority. As such, these administrators avoid conflict concerning their sexual identity by making efforts to downplay that aspect of their personhood related to seven constructs. They are: (a) work ethic; (b) the presentation of self; (c) a 'straightened' office; (d) efforts to fit and partner loyalty; (e) the explicit revelation of identity; (f) encounters with insensitive empathy; and (g) political advocacy. In addition to fielding the myriad responsibilities of the daily work of school administration, The Right Kind of Queer must constantly edit who they are in every aspect of their life because being a school leader does not end once one leaves the school car park. For example, how does a typically closeted queer leader introduce their partner to the president of the school board who is next in line to them at the theatre? Queer

40

educational leaders confront this type of challenge on a nearly daily basis. For many queer public-school leaders, every social situation that involves the possible revelation of their partner risks alienation and possible job loss in most US locales. Such situations are more than merely awkward. They are regular acts of social oppression that distort the leadership efforts of sexual minorities. (Lugg & Tooms, 2010, p. 81)

"Social justice demands a far higher standard than merely the absence of hate" (Lugg & Tooms, 2010, p. 85). Lack of bias in public schools is not the same as ensuring social justice for all students, especially queer students. Just because overt hatred is not present does not mean queer students – or queer teachers and queer administrators for that matter – see their lives reflected in the curriculum, personnel policies, or even the seemingly mundane, but critical, every day interactions that human beings have" (Lugg & Tooms, 2010, p. 85). Hence, without a school administrator committed to the type of social justice work that confronts and attempts to eradicate homophobia, the other three affirming policies and practices, namely, GSAs, inclusive curricula, and LGBTQ visibility, are all for not.

But what does active social justice work by school leaders for marginalized LGBTQ students might look like? Hernandez and Fraynd (2014) propose four strategies school administrators may use to create and foster environments that support LGBTQ and perceived-LGBTQ students. First, school administrators must actively counter heteronormative perspectives. "School leaders should constantly refrain from presumptuously identifying all students as heterosexual and should collaboratively combat any school culture where support for straight students translates into marginalization of LGBTQ and perceived-LGBTQ students" (Hernandez, & Fraynd, 2014, p. 118). Second, school administrators must establish and promote

LGBTQ-supportive rituals, celebrations, and activities. "For example, leaders might consider participation in national programs developed to counter the negative experiences that these students are having and to shed light on the issue in schools. Programs include the No Name-Calling Week, Day-of-Silence protests, and Gay–Straight Alliances (GSAs)" (Hernandez, & Fraynd, 2014, p. 119). Third, school leaders may implement of a schoolwide equity audit regarding LGBTQ matters. "Audits regarding sexual orientation are very beneficial to students for two reasons. First, while participating in these audits, future leaders must talk with other school personnel about data related to sexual orientation … [and secondly] most often brings to light glaring gaps in data related to sexual orientation" (Hernandez, & Fraynd, 2014, p. 120). Lastly, school administrators must increase awareness, in themselves and others, of district policies related to LGBTQ issues. "Policies should ensure that schools offer all students a process whereby they can quickly and confidentially report bullying. Safe zones, or areas of a school where students can freely express themselves, constitute another example of how schools can support LGBTQ students" (Hernandez, & Fraynd, 2014, p. 121).

Results from regression analysis conducted by Greytak and Kosciw (2014), found "that knowing LGBT[Q] people, awareness of general bullying and harassment, awareness of anti-LGBT[Q] bullying and harassment, and self-efficacy related to intervention in homophobic remarks were significant predictors of [educators'] frequency of intervention in homophobic remarks" (p. 410). It stands to reason, that school administrator supportiveness, or the willingness and preparedness to be an ally and act on behalf of LGBTQ youth, would increase as school administrators become more versed, familiar, and comfortable with LGBTQ issues and affirming policies and practices. Dragowski et al. (2016) recommend additional professional development for school educators and administrator on LGBTQ issues and identify formation.

Ultimately, school administrators play a crucial role in any meaningful social justice work carried out in schools. They are perhaps the most crucial of the four affirming policies and practices – for without a school administrator championing for LGBTQ students and expecting nothing less that transformative social justice, it is unlikely that the other affirming policies and practices will have much impact on the school climate and environment. Even when affirming practices and policies are in place, without support and staff development, administrators muddle through intervention (Leonardi & Staley, 2018). School administrators must learn to practice vulnerability and share empathy in order to effectively enact and promote affirming policies and practices (Brown, 2006; Leonardi & Staley, 2018).

Affirming practices and policies in higher education. Studies indicate that the hostile, homophobic environments that most LGBTQ students experience in K-12 schools continues on into higher education (Pitcher, Camacho, Renn, & Woodford, 2018; Shriberg & Baker, 2019). And with a variety of affirming policies and practices in place, many LGBTQ students persist in higher education (Pitcher, Camacho, Renn, & Woodford, 2018). In higher education, affirming policies and practices, such as LGBTQ resource centers, stu- dent organizations, policies (including nondiscrimination policies), and a supportive college environment function and symbolically signal to LGBTQ students that they are welcomed, affirmed, and that hostile issues will be dealt with (Pitcher, Camacho, Renn, & Woodford, 2018). This is not to say that affirming policies and practices in higher education cannot be improved upon. Indeed, more work is needed to improve affirming policies and practices for transgender and gender nonconforming students (Goldberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2019; Shriberg & Baker, 2019). Institution of higher education seeking to improve school climates for LGBTQ students and more specifically for transgender and gender nonconforming students, but also engage in dialogue with students to

understand their unique experiences, needs, and vulnerabilities (Brown, 2006; Goldberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2019; Shriberg & Baker, 2019).

In summary, this section of the literature review has discussed various studies indicating that the use of affirming policies and practices, namely: GSAs, inclusive curriculums, LGBTQ school visibility, and supportive administrators, are consistently beneficial to the social, emotional, and educational wellbeing of LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018; Marx, & Kettrey, 2016); Porta et al., 2017; Sinclair, & Reece, 2016; Toomey, & Russell, 2013).

Constructs and Theory

Constructs and theories outlined in this section include Shame Resilience Theory, Critical Race Theory, Queer theory, and Cultural/Queer Cultural Capital. The study was framed using Queer theory and built upon the tenets of Critical Race Theory and Shame Resilience Theory especially in the formation of the research questions.

Shame Resilience Theory. Brené Brown (2006) set out to explore shame and, in particular, how woman experience, interact with, and overcome shame. Her study generated a theory that defined shame, identified strategies for shame resilience, and proposed that such strategies could be taught, and their effectiveness therefore improved. Lastly, Brown (2006) believes that her theory is applicable to other groups besides woman and that further studies are warranted.

Grounded in data, Brown (2006) generated Shame Resilience Theory, as a means to explain "why and how women experience shame; how shame impacts women; and, the various processes and strategies women employ to resolve their main concerns regarding the impact and

consequences of shame" (p. 44). She holds that the study of shame is essential as it has a role in a wide range of mental and public health issues including self-esteem/concept issues, depression, addiction, eating disorders, bullying, suicide, family violence, and sexual assault.

For Brown (2006) shame is the master emotion of everyday life. Brown (2006) interviewed 215 women and asked why and how they experienced shame and to describe the various processes and strategies they use to develop shame resilience. The data collected was then analyzed using grounded theory methodology.

From the data, Brown (2006) defined shame as "an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging" (45). She also found shame to be a psycho-social-cultural construct (Brown, 2006). When talking about shame, participants emphasized psychological components such as emotions, thoughts, and behaviors of self (Brown, 2006). Participants also talked about shame having a social component. For participants shame occurred in an interpersonal context, inextricably tied to relationships and connection (Brown, 2006). And lastly, participants also identified a cultural component to shame. Participants highlighted the prevalent role of cultural expectations and the relationship between shame and the real or perceived failure of meeting cultural expectations (Brown, 2006). Moreover, participants often described "experience[ing] shame as a web of layered, conflicting, and competing expectations that are, at the core, products of rigid socio-cultural expectations" (Brown, 2006, 46). Brown (2006) refers to this as the shame web; the socio-cultural expectations imposed, enforced, or expressed by individuals and groups around us, that are then also reinforced by media and culture, and that ultimately are internalized into the self as shame.

Additionally, Shame Resilience Theory proposed four major theoretical continuums that determine shame resiliency:

(a) Vulnerability: the ability to recognize and accept personal vulnerability;

(b) Critical Awareness: the level of critical awareness regarding social-cultural expectations and the shame web;

(c) Mutually Empathic Relationships: the ability to form mutually empathic relationships that facilitate reaching out to others; and

(d) Speaking Shame: the ability to "speak shame" or possess the language and emotional competence to discuss and deconstruct shame.

Brown (2006) found in the data that women capable of recognizing and accepting personal vulnerability, those with heightened critical awareness of social-cultural expectations, those with the ability to share, express, and seek out empathy, and those able to speak openly and fluently about their own shame, appeared more resilient to the negative effects of shame. To build shame resilience, she proposed the development and use of psychoeducational group work that allows participants to identify personal vulnerabilities, increase critical awareness of their shame web, develop mutually empathic relationships that allow them to reach out to others, and to learn to speak shame (Brown, 2006).

Brown (2006) calls for additional research to be done to test the propositions of Shame Resilience Theory with diverse client populations. She notes that she herself would continue data collection with men and holds that Shame Resilience Theory must be "continually tested and modified if it is to remain a theory grounded in data" (Brown, 2006, 51). Indeed additional studies indicate that Shame Resilience Theory is applicable in other settings and that resilience strategies can be taught and developed in order to counter act and overcome shame (Fatima, & Jahanzeb, 2020; Van Vliet, 2008).

Critical Race Theory. Critical race theory "compels us to confront critically the most explosive issue in American Civilization: the historical centrality and complicity of law in upholding white supremacy" (p. XI) and with it the hierarchies of gender, class and sexual orientation (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, Thomas, & West, 1995). It "is an intellectual movement that is both particular to our postmodern (and conservative) times and part of a long tradition of human resistance and liberation" (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. XI). As conceived by Crenshaw et al., "critical race theory embraces a movement of left scholars, most of them scholars of color, situated in law schools, whose work challenges the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally in American society as a whole" (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. XI). Delgado and Stefancic (2012), define the critical race theory movement as "a collection of activist and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (p. 3). Critical theory examines the same issues as civil rights and ethnic studies but places issues in the broader perspectives of economics, history, self-interest, and group context (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Delgado and Stefancic (2012), outline the following tenets of critical race theory. First, "racism is ordinary, not aberrational … [it is] the usual way society does business, the common, every-day experience of most people of color in this country" (p. 7). Color blind conceptions of equality that insist on treatment that is the same across the board only serves to remedy the most blatant forms of discrimination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Second, the "system of white-over-color ascendency serves important purposes, both psychic and material, for the dominant group" (p. 7); "because racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class Caucasians (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 8). Third, racism is a social construct – "race and races are products of

47

social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 8). "Society invents, retires, and manipulated the categories of racism as deemed fit and convenient" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 8). As humans, we have more in common than our differences. Our higher order traits such as personality, intelligence, and moral behavior dwarf the commonality of physical and genetic traits that are shared by people with a common geographical origin (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Lastly, critical race theory provides a sounding board for the voice of color. Because of our different histories and experiences with oppression, black, American Indian, Asian, and Latinx writers and thinkers ought to communicate to our white counterparts matters that whites are unlikely to know and understand (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Minority status brings with it the "competence to speak about race and racism" (p. 10); we are tasked with the responsibility of telling the stories of our perspectives, experiences, and narratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). We are tasked to make known the nuance of our intersectional and storied lives.

"Critical race theory is chiefly interested in why humans choose to ignore scientific truths to focus on created races and invented stereotypes and pseudo-permanent characteristics" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 9). This is evident in how "the dominant society has racialize[d] different minority groups at different times, in response to shifting needs such as the labor market" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 9). Asians were not always the favored minority, they were once housed in internment camps. As Latinxs, we were once seen as the happy-go-lucky service workers of America; we are now the menacing monster threatening to immigrate in and take over. And once exotic and fetishized, Middle Eastern people have become radical terrorists. Hence the focus of critical race theory changes with the times. In recent years, subspecialties of critical race theory have emerged. For example, Latinx-Critical scholars "study immigration

policy, … language rights, and discrimination based on accent or national origin (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 3).

While many modern-day politicians and news reporters would have us believe that racism is over, that in the 21st century class matters more than race, and that many whites have grown to appreciate and accept diverse cultures, the reality is that people of color seeking housing, loans, and employment are likely to be rejected more often than similarly qualified whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). People of color attract suspicion in public spaces and on public transportation. The prison population is largely brown, and brown continues to be the color of poverty. For example, "black families command, on the average, about one-tenth the assets of their white counterparts (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 12). People of color pay more for products and services, including cars. "People of color lead shorter lives, receive worse medical care, complete fewer years of school, and occupy more menial jobs than do whites" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 12). So much so "that African Americans in the United States would make up the twenty-seventh-ranked nation in the world on a combined index of social well-being [and] Latin[x] would rank thirty-third" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 12).

Hence, critical race theory "scholars must place race at the center of their analyses" (Lynn & Dixson, 2013, p. 1). At is core, critical race theory abandons structural functionalism and "rejects the prevailing orthodoxy that scholarship … be 'neutral' and 'objective'" (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. XIII). "Scholarship about [groups with limited access to power] in America can never be written from a distance of detachment or with an attitude of objectivity … there is 'no exit' no scholarly perch outside social dynamics of [] power from which merely to observe and analyze" (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. XIII). To know anything is political (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. XI). Critical research is an act of liberation from oppression.

Social justice and critical pedagogy. "The expansion of [critical race theory] into education is significant because it has helped to illuminate the ubiquitous nature and 'permeance of race' in the U.S. (Lynn & Dixson, 2013, p. 3). Even after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, "public schools in most U.S. cities remain mostly separate and mostly unequal" (Lynn & Dixson, 2013, p. 3). According to Ladson-Billings as cited by Dodge and Crutcher (2015) "Students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (p. 96). Similarly, Nieto and Bode as also cited by Dodge and Crutcher (2015) argue "that social justice in education must challenge, confront, and disrupt 'misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that lead to structural inequality and discrimination based on race, class, gender, and other human differences'" (p. 96). Critical pedagogy brings the tenets Critical Race Theory to schools; progressive educators "not only commit[] to the ideal and practice of social justice within schools, but to the transformation of social structures and class conditions within society that thwart the democratic participation of all people" (Darder, Baltodano, Torres, 2017, p. 2). Critical pedagogy includes several philosophical principles. For example, cultural politics means that "critical pedagogy is fundamentally committed to the development and enactment of a culture of schooling that supports the empowerment of culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students" (Darder et al., 2017, p. 10). Political economy contends that … schools actually work against class interests of those students who are most politically and economically vulnerable within society" (Darder et al., 2017, p. 10). A third principle, historicity of knowledge, "supports the notion that all knowledge is created within a historical context and it is this historical context that gives life and meaning to human experience" (Darder et al., 2017, p. 10). Next, dialectical theory "embraces a dialectical view of knowledge that functions to unmask

the connections between objective knowledge and cultural norms, values, and standards of the society at large" (Darder et al., 2017, p. 11). Another principle, ideology and critique "provides the means for … a critique of educational curricula, texts, and practices [and] the fundamental ethics that inform their production" (Darder et al., 2017, pp. 11-12). Hegemony is incorporated to "demystify the asymmetrical power relations and social arrangements that sustain the interest of the ruling class" (Darder et al., 2017, p. 12); and resistance and counter hegemony incorporates "a theory of resistance in an effort to better explain complex reasons why many students from subordinate groups consistently fail within the education system" (Darder et al., 2017, p. 12). Praxis, "places a strong emphasis on … question-posing within the educational process" (p. 13) and democratic relations to power (Darder et al., 2017). And lastly, dialogue and conscientization, "supports a problem posing to educate – an approach in which the relationship of students to teacher is, without question dialogical, each having something to contribute and receive (Darder et al., 2017, p. 14). Together teachers and students explore "existing conditions and knowledge, in order to understand how these came to be and to consider how they might be different" (Darder et al., 2017, p. 14). There are likely very few, if any, goals shared by social justice researchers that do not overlap with the goals of researchers who focus specifically on LGBTQ youth (Shriberg & Baker, 2019).

Queer Theory. "Queer theory is not simply about the studying of people whose sex lives are not heterosexual, it is about questioning the presumptions, values, and viewpoints from those positions …, especially those that normally go unquestioned" (Dilley, 1999, pp 461-462). Rather than asking: "*who is queer*" and "*why are they queer*," queer theory asks: "*how is queer*" and "*why are we saying they are queer*" (Dilley, 1999). Queer theory understand that participants cannot be neatly categorized into the letters "LGBTQ" and therefore this study refers to the

participants as gender and sexually diverse (GSD) leaving space for fluid, constructed and yet to be constructed identities.

Queer "describes a political identity – a new move toward a celebration of difference, across sexualities, across genders, across sexual preference and across object choice" (Semple in Hall, Jagose, Beball, & Potter, 2013, p. 97). Queer identity is pluripotent; it is, as attributed to Edelman in Jagose (1996), "'a zone of possibilities,' always inflected by a sense of potentiality that it cannot yet quite articulate" (p. 2). To identify as queer debunks the stability of universal terms and "figure[s] identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions" (Jagose, 1996, p. 3). "Queer is not simply the latest example in a series of words that describe same-sex desire transhistorically but rather a consequence of the constructionist problematizing of any allegedly universal term" (Jagose, 1996, p. 74). 'Queer' frames identity as "an effect of identification with and against others, being ongoing, and always incomplete, it is a process rather than a property" (Jagose, 1996, p. 78). To identify as queer recognizes a changing reality, both in the ways a hostile society labels us and in the manner in which those stigmatized see ourselves (Jagose, 1996). The essence of 'queer' is an ever-changing reality calling into question the existence of any universal gay/lesbian/trans/+ experience, the understandings of identity, and the operations of power (Jagose, 1996).

Queer theory is heavily influenced by poststructuralism (Namaste, 1994). Poststructuralism is associated with the writings of French theorists Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida and refers to interpreting selves and the social in a manner that breaks with traditional epistemologies such as foundationalism" (Namaste, 1994). For Namaste (1994), "poststructuralism argues that subjects are not the autonomous creators of themselves or their social worlds" (p.221) instead we exist in a complex network of social relations. In turn our

identities and how we present and exist in the world are therefore largely informed by such social relation. We do not exist prior to and apart from politics and social structures but rather as actors very much entangled in specific sociopolitical arrangements. Therefore, poststructuralists contend that the idea of individuals as autonomous agents ought to be deconstructed and contested (Namaste, 1994).

For Foucault, the creation and rise of the term homosexual in Victorian Society and Western sexuality to illustrate how "social identities are effects of the ways in which knowledge is organized" (Namaste, 1994, pp. 221-222). Coined to exert social control on homosexual practices, the term homosexual, through discourse, forged a new identity that "began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be acknowledged" (Foucault as cited in Namaste, 1994, p. 222). As such, the idea or identity of homosexual exists only in contrast to what it is not. "Heterosexuality and homosexuality are mutually dependent, yet antagonistic" (p. 224) identities born of the semiosis used to define such terms. "Queer theory is interested in exploring the borders of sexual identities, communities, and politics" (Namaste, 1994, p. 224). Queer theorists ask questions such as: (1) "How do categories such as 'gay,' 'lesbian,' and 'queer' emerge?" (2) "From what do they differentiate themselves, and what kinds of identities do they exclude?" (3) "How are these borders demarcated, and how can they be contested?" (4) "What are the relations between the naming of sexuality and political organizations it adopts, between identity and community?" (5) "Why is a focus on the discursive production of social identities useful?" and (6) "How do we make sense of the dialectical movement between … heterosexuality and homosexuality?" (Namaste, 1994, p. 224)

More importantly, how that relationship is expressed in terms of power and oppression. Queer theory calls us to abandon binary thinking, to question the practice of defining something

by what it is not, and to push for the multiplicity of identity. Queer theory calls us to "think about the *how* of these boundaries – not merely the fact that they exist, but also how they were created, regulated, and contested" (Namaste, 1994, p. 224). It calls us to question the production and management of heterosexual hegemony. "If heterosexuality is something which is taken for granted, and if the adoption of a homosexual identify only serves to bolder the strength of heterosexuality, then perhaps the most effective sites of resistant are those created by people who refuse both options" (Namaste, 1994, p. 230).

In the context of educational studies, queer theory examines gender and sexually expansive issues such as homosexuality, and how such experiences differ from heteronormative practices considered "normal" (Dilley, 1999). Queer theory analytically examines what is "normal" and "abnormal," by deconstructing issues of sexuality in society. "It is more than researching homosexual lives…; it is researching/theorizing why/how/when lives are homosexualized, "queered" outside of the norm (Dilley, 1999, p. 469). This queering is the result of someone (the subject, the researcher, the audience), determining that queer lives and experiences are outside of the bounds of what heteronormative deems they "should" be. (Dilley, 1999).

Queer theory is both political and personal. It seeks to invert and question the very cultural categories we use to know things and construct/create further knowledge. "The paradox of queerness is that it survives by continually collapsing and recreating itself" (Browning, 1993, p. 229). The goal of queer qualitative research is not to know more, it is to know differently and from new/differing perspectives that allow for more lived realities.

Critical queer theory.

"Naming is powerful. Black people and gay people constantly renaming ourselves is a way to shift power from whites and hets respectively" (Blackman in Hall et al., 2013, p. 97).

For queer persons of color, our identities our born from a range of alienations: our racial differences inseparable from our sexual incongruity, our gender eccentricity, and our class marginality (Hall et al., 2013). While our white counterparts come to experience oppression as they step outside the boundaries of heteronormativity, we queer persons of color, have experienced oppression from within the womb. For generations, the color of our skin and the language of our tongues have determined our access to agency and privilege. Our queer identify may be boundless, but they are very much tethered to experiences of racism and classism. Recognized by Anzaldúa in Hall et al. (2013) "queer is used as a false unifying umbrella which all 'queers' of all races, ethnicities, and classes are shored under … at times we need this umbrella to solidify our ranks against outsiders … [nevertheless] even when we seek shelter under it ['queer'], we must not forget that it homogenizes, erases our differences" (p. 98). Our experiences are inseparable from our mestizaje, from our queer, brown, lower/middle class identities.

Queer theory has "failed to acknowledge consistently and critically the intellectual, aesthetic, and political contributions of nonwhite, non-middle-class [queers] in the struggle against homophobia and oppression" (Johnson in Hall et al., 2013, p. 100). Queer theory fails to acknowledge the whiteness that informs its position and dismisses the reality of racial privilege (Johnson in Hall et al., 2013). In attempting to establish a queer identity that eliminates fixed categories, queer theory ignores how racial and class identities and communal ties can be important to surviving oppression (Johnson in Hall et al., 2013). For communities of color, there

exists far-reaching, unifying experiences that cross the boundaries of gender and sexuality. For these reasons, Johnson in Hall et al. (2013), champions theories of the flesh to "emphasize the diversity within and among [queer] people of color while simultaneously accounting for how racism and classism affect how we experience and theorize the world" (p. 98). As attributed to Lorde in Hall et al. (2013), "a theory that dissolves the communal identity … around which the marginalized can politically organize is not a progressive one. Nor is it one that [queer persons] of color can afford to adopt, for to do so would be to foreclose possibilities of change" (p. 101). Queer theory that fails to be critical is ultimately useless to a person of color seeking to bring upon an end to full range of their oppression.

Queer Cultural Capital. Pennell (2016), built upon the work of Yosso (2005) to explore how queer persons of color use culture capital in positive ways. Along with the five forms of capital identified by Yasso (2005) (aspirational, linguistic, familial, navigational and resistant), Pennell (2016) posits an additional, novel transgressive form found in queer communities of color. There are six forms of queer culture capital. Aspirational capital is "'the ability to hold onto hope in the face of structured inequality and often without the means to make dreams a reality'" (p. 325). Familial capital as "family history and community memories, as well as social networks and resources" (p. 326). Next navigational capital is "the ability to steer through institutions that were 'not created with people of color in mind'" (p. 326). Resistant capital: knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenge inequality'" (p. 326). Linguistic capital is "the 'intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language or style'" (p. 326). And lastly, transgressive capital is "the ways in which communities (queer or other minoritized groups) proactively challenge and

move beyond boundaries that limit and bind them, creating their own reality" (Pennell, 2016, p. 329).

Mestizaje: Intersectional critical queer identity.

Now is the time for singular powerful voices telling singular powerful stories to be heard and addressed. Now is the time for my intersectional identify to cry out and be heard. My mestizaje will no longer go unrepresented; I will no longer be silenced.

The notion of intersectionality is born from the truth that each assigned race/identity is a construct, with its own origins and ever-evolving history (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). As best put by the authors:

> No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identify. A white woman feminist may also be Jewish or working class or a single mother. An African American activist may be male or female or gay or straight. A Latino may be a Democrat, a Republican or even black … An Asian may be a recently arrived Hmong of rural background and unfamiliar with mercantile life or a fourth-generation Chinese with a father who is a university professor and a mother who operates a business. Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 10)

We are more than our labels – more than the sum of our parts. We are complex, varied, and intricate combinations or race, class, gender, sexuality and even politics.

Yet these labels, these categories, can be separate disadvantaging factors (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). "What happens when an individual occupies more than one of these

57

categories… do such cases require that each disadvantaging factor be considered separately, additively, or in yet some other fashion?" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 57). Additional questions include: "Should persons who experience multiple forms of oppression have their own categories and representation, apart from those that correspond to the separate varieties of discrimination they incur (pp. 57-58), "and what about the role of these 'intersectional' persons in the social movements such as feminism or gay liberation? Where do they belong?" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 58). The reality is that our labels and specificities dictate the injustices we experience in the context of our surroundings. When movements prioritize broad concerns, the crucial needs of particular subgroups go unaddressed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The reality is that there are no small problems. "How we frame [categories and subgroups] determines who has power, and representation and who does not" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 60). I am not simply Latinx, or simply queer, I am the complex nexus of a Latinx, Androphile, Gender-nonconforming American.

What we need is perspective. "Perspectivalism, the insistence on examining how things look from the perspective of individual actors, helps us understand the predicament of intersectional individuals … to frame approaches that may do justice to a broad range of people and avoid oversimplifying human experience" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 62). Recall that critical race theory abandons the incremental progress of civil rights. Liberalism is not enough; "when we are tackling a structure as deeply embedded as race, radical measures are required. 'Everything must change at once'; otherwise the system merely swallows up the small improvement one has made, and everything goes back to the way it was" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pp. 63-64). Whole groups remedies leave out entire subgroup identities. The resulting deficiency is "particularly glaring in the case of 'double minorities,' such as black women, gay

black men, or Muslim women wearing head scarves, whose lives are twice removed from the experience of mainstream Americans" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 64). Compounding identities compounds discrimination and the liberal fight for equality often asks intersectional minorities to pick a struggle. To be in the minority of a minority group is especially difficult when the larger minority group aims to promote an all-American assimilated identity. Long gone are the days of broad movements to stand against racism and oppression. For Smith in Hall et al. (2013), the term queer is more than a reappropriation of an offensive term, rather it is a "radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality, and the family" (p. 99). For Smith and others in Hall et al. (2013), queer is a playful and inclusive term, that opens rather than fixes identities.

To give voice and agency to the subjects of this study, an identity framework must be queer and critical; it must embrace the mestizaje of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Identity is a construct and therefore defines the subject in some limited, arbitrary, and fictitious way, but it also affords the subject agency with which to act win our sociopolitical constructs (Hames-Garcia, & Martinez, 2011). And while identities are thus necessary and enabling, we must also deconstruct and subvert them to understand and undo the exclusions performed by their limited and arbitrary nature. Hence the goal of queer anti-identitarianism it to promote and allow for this subversion. It is through this deliberate imprecision or lack of an ontological referent, that "queer" avoids the fixed exclusions of other identity labels. (Hames-Garcia, & Martinez, 2011)

Queer theory "integrationists advocate for queer theory to as a way to address the multiple relations among race, gender, class, and sexuality … [by] using the deliberately vague category queer to blur lines among different social locations" (Hames-Garcia, & Martinez, 2011, p. 24). A critically queer identity, however, must recognize the place of identity, the space and

time that race, gender, class, and sexual identities bring to the blur. Only by recognizing the blur, the mix, the mestizaje, might theorists begin to disavow the oppressions of homophobia, racism and classism (Hames-Garcia, & Martinez, 2011). It is a disservice to queer people of color to erase the powerful effects that race and class have on their construction and representation of gender and sexuality (Hames-Garcia, & Martinez, 2011). Queer theory can no longer speak solely from a place of whiteness, that perpetuates the marginalization and tokenization of queer persons of color.

In the 21st century, as the United States undergoes a change in complexion and composition, civil rights activists and scholars mush commit to the deconstruction of race, gender, class, and sexuality so that biological theories of inferiority and hierarchy can never rise again (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This is precisely the battle we face as we combat the rise of nationalism in the United States, as we learn to navigate once more in a post-Trump America. An Intersectional Critical Queer Identify conceptual framework will be conceptualized on the foundations of critical race theory, queer theory, critical pedagogy, and social justice in education to act as an agent for change to improve experiences for LGBTQ youth and consequently for all students.

Summary

The review of literature discussed the historical background of homophobia experienced by LGBTQ youth, a description and explanation of the effects of homophobic and unsafe schools, a discussion on anti-homophobic, affirming policies and practices including supportive school administrators, and a discussion of theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the dissertation. The next section addresses the methods and instrumentation for the dissertation.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

"The hardest thing in a movement is not to lose sight of the people you are

fighting for as individuals. To not forget they are individuals. To be with them

and see them grow as individuals. To listen to their individual hearts" (p. 297) –

Cesar Chavez (Steiner, 1969).

This research study was designed as a qualitative, narrative history design (Gay & Mills,

2016) framed in queer theory (Butler, 1991; Jagose, 1996; Namaste, 1994; Sedgwick, 1990), and

collected and examined participants' experiences with homophobia; the impact on their social,

emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing; how affirming policies and practices/resiliency

strategies, if any, were used to confront experiences of homophobia; and the role, if any, that

educational leaders played to affirm participants' identities and experiences.

The Methods

Research Setting and Social Context

"*Café con leche!*" – My aunt's words still ring clearly in my ears; a term of endearment

uttered and embraced by my mother's light-complexioned family. Often passing as half-white,

my sister and I aren't dark by most standards, but my aunt loved the color of our skin because it

was a tangible indicator of our blended heritage … our roots, *nuestras raíces*.

In our family, like in many other Latinx families, skin color is unpredictable. Take for instance my paternal great-grandmother's youngest children, twins: one light-skinned, *con ojos y cabello claro*, the picture of Spanish heritage; the other, dark – his skin, hair, and eyes echoing our indigenous roots. For nine months my great grandmother carried the essence of our mixed nature, a perfect duality, in her womb. The darkest of the twins was given the middle name *Perfecto*, and in my critically conscious adulthood, I have often wondered why. What was my great-grandmother's intention in naming the darkest of her children, *Perfecto*?

On the other hand, my mother is as fair-skinned as they come. Her nickname growing up was *One-thousand-one*, because it was claimed that 1,001 freckles had sprouted forth from her sun-kissed skin. Her hair, naturally a bright fiery red, and her eyes, a coppery brown with the slightest halo of green. Growing up, having the whitest of mothers always accented my own brownness. And even more, I understood that with her whiteness came unspoken privilege, access, and agency. I have inherited my mother's eyes and, through genealogical osmosis, slightly more privilege than the average Latinx. Like cream poured into the darkest of coffees, my experiences have forever been altered by the privilege afforded by her complexion.

Which brings me to my father's skin. My father, the brown vaquero – coffee straight up black. His skin, a copper sunset, tough and weathered by the elements. Absent of the sun, my father's skin could possibly be as light-complexioned as my mother's, but my father's skin – like my *Tío Perfecto's*, and my great-grandmother's … like my indigenous ancestors – has been blessed. Their skin isn't just brown, it's armored, protected by color that emerges bold, brave, and valiant when exposed to sun.

I am a blend of both my parents. I am *café con leche*; I tan and I freckle. My skin offers some privilege but is primed for protection. My complexion isn't static, nor does it muddle or

grow dirty. My skin, my color, my specific shades of brownness, tell a story of nuance that is my heritage and my experience as a blended person. But my mixture, my *mestizaje*, is more than skin deep, it is a unique blend of race, gender, class and sexual identities like many other Latinx peoples with deep roots in the borderlands. Roots bringing forth life in the rich bicultural, biliterate, and binational soil of the Rio Grande Valley (RGV).

The Rio Grande Valley (RGV). This section discusses the Rio Grande Valley as the setting for the study and how it relates to how participants lives.

> The Rio Grande Valley is located at the southernmost point of Texas. At the meeting point of Mexico and the USA, the 4-county region called the Valley is one of the fastest growing areas of the United States.

> The Valley is one of the richest places in the country in history and tradition. Its culture and identity are based on adaptation to movement and change, perseverance, and resiliency. (UTRGV, 2021, para. 1-2)

Comprised of Cameron (384,007), Hidalgo (759,143), Star (56,972), and Willacy (20,442) counties, the RGV has a combined total population of just over 1.2 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). More than 80% of the population in each county identifies as Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Most notably, the Rio Grande Valley is a borderland. Gloria Anzaldua, lesbian, Chicana, and an RGV native, wrote of the unique experience of living in such a borderland:

> The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab can form it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture.

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us

from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A

borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of

an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and

forbidden are its inhabitants. Los *atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the

perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the

half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of

the "normal." [Those in power] consider the inhabitants of the borderlands

transgressors, aliens – whether they possess documents or not, whether they are

Chicanos, Indians, or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed,

strangled, gassed, or shot. The only legitimate inhabitants are those in power, …

and those who align themselves with [them]. (Anzaldúa, 1999, pp. 25-26)

This borderland, as described by Anzaldua, serves as the setting and backdrop for the

dichotomous experience of living in the RGV.

Twenty years after Anzaldua wrote the words above, the RGV remains a fertile delta of

mixed identities that struggle to take root. American v. Mexican American/Mexican, documented

v. undocumented, English v. Spanish - speaking, Catholic v. Christian, conservative v. liberal,

and queer v. straight are some of the identity battles that are forged daily in the RGV as we code-

switch and navigate surviving life along the river. Long considered a Democratic Stronghold, the

RGV is a unique oasis of blue along the states most southern border. The Valley, more socially

and religiously conservative than the other blue metroplexes throughout Texas, is known for

electing Democrats that vote and act more like Republicans (Henry Cuellar and Eddie Lucio)

(Hernandez & Martin, 2020). 2020, the most recent election year, saw a marked rise in

republican voters throughout the four counties of the RGV (Hernandez & Martin, 2020). It is not uncommon in the RGV for first- and second-generation US citizens, law enforcement, oil field workers, nurses, educators, etc. - the children of immigrants, to call for the rise of a border wall and for an end to immigration, illegitimate or otherwise (Hernandez & Martin, 2020).

The RGV may look blue on an electoral map, but the assumptions that can be made of other blue regions and the state cannot be made of the RGV. The RGV is a borderland and those in power are often social and religious conservatives, aligned to Republican ideals in an effort to assimilate. Most of the RGV votes blue out of tradition but hold firm to conservative values. They are generally unwelcoming and unsupportive of LGBTQ+ persons and causes. Facing homelessness, hostility in the workplace and social media, and inequity in access to local, state, and federal resources, LGBTQ people in the valley openly and routinely encounter homophobia (Cardenas, 2020; Martinez, 2018; Ramírez, 2017; Sealey, 2019). Only recently, has one city in the four-county area begun a LGBTQ taskforce to address homophobia, inequity, and discrimination in the city (Cardenas, 2020). And this taskforce has been met with open discrimination and pushback (Gomez-Patino, 2020). As a foil, a variety of grassroots organizations have developed in the RGV to challenge and confront LGBTQ+ and social justice issues that are uniquely our own. Since the 2016 election, I myself have become involved in the movement and have met amazing homegrown community leaders and organizers that are making a positive difference for LGBTQ+ persons in the RGV. It is the experiences of these individuals that were investigate in this study.

Research Questions

This study is unique in that it examines the experiences of GSDY in retrospect. For the purposes of this dissertation, it would be unethical to interview minors about present day

experiences with homophobia in schools as it could potentially out or unduly harm minor participants with limited agency and access to resources. Instead, I asked participants, alumni of RGV schools, to recollect their experiences with homophobia in schools and offer their narratives as perspectives on the following research questions:

- How do Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley experience homophobia?

- How does homophobia impact the social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing of Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley?

- How do affirming policies and practices, if any, help Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley confront experiences of homophobia?

- What strategies, if any, do Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley employ to confront experiences of homophobia?

- How do Latinx GSDY perceive educational leaders in the Rio Grande Valley?

Research Design

I chose a qualitative approach to gain a greater understanding of participants' experiences of homophobia in RGV schools (Glesne 2016). Imbedded into the design, were elements of narrative history methods often used within queer theory to uncover perspectives that are not fully represented in dominant discourse (Boyd, 2008; Nunes, 2019). I designed the study to focus on written interviews collected from the participants as journal responses over a three-week period.

The framework. Past studies show that queer work in education most often examines queer life histories/stories through qualitative studies (i.e., narrative histories). Sears (1992) offered the benefits of qualitative research when examining issues of homosexuality and explains how qualitative methods aid in the understanding and representation of queer lives. O' Connor

(1995) showed how constructed narratives can give voice to queer youth while protecting their identities. And Tierney (1997), used ethnographic fiction to spotlight the multiple tensions that GSDY can encounter in daily campus life. In each case, qualitative research framed in queer theory, allowed participants and the researcher to forge a greater, more nuanced understanding of what it means to identify and exist as queer in heteronormative/binary spaces.

My study followed such tradition and centered on the "examination of lives and experiences of those considered non-heterosexual," a tenet of queer theory (Dilley, 1999, p. 462). Additionally, I chose queer theory because it placed GSDY at the center of the research rather than studying the participants as solely marginalized individuals, at the fringes and shadows of heteronormative culture (Dilley, 1999). More so, it provided a framework that allowed participants to use language, "text", etc, to construct their own identities and lived histories outside of engrained heteronormative binaries. Specifically, "queer theory enlarges [the] definition of text to include any form(s) of communication utilized to convey an understanding of one's world; it could be a book or a film, obviously, but a text could also be a conversation, a life story, a memory, sexual activity, history, a gathering place, or a social trend (Dilley, 1999, p. 459). This study relied upon that concept of "text" both in its methods design and data collection. Lastly, queer theory research calls on the researcher "to find novel, creative ways of representing [queer experiences] in print data" (Dilley, 1999, p. 463). Such novelty and creativity are present in my study by using journal responses as written interviews to collect narrative histories (Nunes, 2019) and the presentations of the findings using multivocal text (Pillow, 2003). In doing so, this study itself exists as and continues the tradition of being queer text (Dilley, 1999).

Narrative history is a grassroots method that emerged to counter elitism in academia that often ignores or erases narratives that oppose the dominant discourse (i.e., GDSY) (Nunes,

2019). Overviews of seminal works in both queer and critical race theories outline how narrative histories have been essential in documenting and creating space for stories that have been ignored and erased by the historical records and by dominant discourse (Boyd, 2008; Nunes, 2019). Methods for data collection outlined in seminal work include: providing space and opportunity for narrators to frame and tell their own stories; cross-referencing from between five to ten interviews for validity; allowing for community feedback/member checking in which participants review findings and interpretations; and leaving room in interpretation for what is not being said and for the voices/stories lost due to unwillingness or inability to be open and visible (Boyd, 2008). Past studies indicate that narrative histories create rich community-generated archives of lived experiences of marginalized groups (Nunes, 2019).

In this study, narrative histories were collected via written interviews presented to participants as journaling prompts. According to Thorpe (2004) reflective journals are "written documents that [participants] create as they think about various concepts, events, or interactions over a period of time for the purposes of gaining insights into self-awareness and learning" (p. 328). Writing about individual thoughts, feelings, and experiences honestly, requires the reflective thinking afforded by journaling (Thorpe, 2004). Journaling provides the basis and space in which to engage the participant in the trusting relationship and adequate time needed to consider ideas critically, engage in active participation, involvement of self, and commitment (Thorpe, 2004). In addition to journaling about their experiences, participants were also given the opportunity to curate a collection of documents (photos, videos, letters, poems, etc.) that served to enhance and provide greater depth to the recollection of their experiences (Glesne, 2016). The goal being to see and hear things from multiple sources and perspectives to make confident claims about the experiences of participants in this study (Glense, 2016).

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my role as both researcher and participant in the study. However, I stress that this study is not strongly framed as an autoethnographic study. The purpose of this study was not to tell my story and collaborate my experiences with that of the participants. Rather this study sought to document the narrative of an intersectional minority group that is often ignored and erased from the literature (Nunes, 2019). However, being that I too am queer, Latinx, and an RGV community leader and advocate that experienced homophobia in RGV schools, allowed me the unique position as a researcher situated within the study. Therefore, my own experiences and recollection contributed to reinforce themes that emerged from the data collection and provided an intimate and privileged vantage point from which to analyze and interpret the findings.

The process is described as reflexivity in the literature. "Reflexivity is commonly used in qualitative research and has been posited and accepted as a method qualitative researchers can and should use to legitimize, validate, and question research practices and representations" (Pillow, 2003, p. 175). To be reflexive, however, the research must produce "knowledge that aids in understanding and gaining insight into the workings of our social world but also provides insight on how this knowledge is produced" (Pillow, 2003, p. 178). Situated as both researcher and participant in this study requires constant self-analysis and socio-political awareness (Pillow, 2003; Callaway, 1992). This self-awareness allowed me to intimately connect with participants' narratives and in the subsequent interpretation, make visible the construction of knowledge within the research and ultimately produce more accurate analyses of the data collected (Pillow, 2003).

Data collection techniques. Predetermined journal entry prompts were used for the narrative research and were structured to collect the participants' experiences (Connelly &

Clandinin, 1990; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Gay & Mills, 2016; Schiek, 2014; & Thorpe, 2004).

Journaling prompts were written to establish the following: experiences of homophobia; impact

on participants' social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing; effectiveness of affirming

policies and practices; additional strategies employed to confront experiences of homophobia;

and the perceived role of educational leaders in affirming GSDY.

The journal prompts were developed to address each of the five research questions posed

in the study. See Table 1 below.

Table 1

Research Questions and Associated Journal Prompts

Research Question	Journal Prompt
How do Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley experience homophobia?	1. Journal about an experience(s) of homophobia experienced in an RGV school.
How does homophobia impact the social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing of Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley?	2. Journal about how homophobic experiences in RGV public schools impacted your social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing.
How do affirming policies and practices, if any, help Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley confront experiences of homophobia?	3. Journal about anything or anyone in RGV schools that helped you confront or improved your experiences of homophobia.
What strategies, if any, do Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley employ to confront experiences of homophobia?	4. Journal about any strategies or activities that you engaged in to confront or improve your experiences of homophobia in RGV schools.
How do Latinx GSDY perceive educational leaders in the Rio Grande Valley?	5. Journal about how school leaders (principals, assistant principals) improved or did not improve your experiences of homophobia is RGV schools.

The journal entry prompts were reviewed by various third parties to ensure clarity, highlight deficiencies, and receive suggestions for improvement (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Gay & Mills, 2016).

I adapted Seidman's (2013) three-interview series process to frame the written interviews

(Schiek, 2014) via reflective journaling (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Thorpe, 2004) and

subsequent member check-ins (Boyd, 2008). See Table 2 below.

Table 2

Design of Written Interview Process

Seidman's (2013) Three-Interview Series Process	Written/Journal Response Component
Focus Life History	Journal Prompt No. 1 (Schiek, 2014)
The Details of Experience	Journal Prompts No. 2-5 (Schiek, 2014)
The Reflection on Meaning	Member Check-Ins (Boyd, 2008)

The first reflective journaling prompt was written to establish a *Focus Life History* (Seidman,

2013), allowing the participant to tap into and set the stage for a particular experience(s) of

homophobia that they would then share more about in subsequent journal entries. The additional

four reflective journaling prompts were designed to elicit *The Details of Experience* (Seidman,

2013) in which participants were asked to reflect and share the details of their experiences that

directly related to the research questions. Lastly, member check-ins (Boyd, 2008) were used for

The Reflection on Meaning (Seidman, 2013) in which participants were asked to reflect on the

meaning of their experiences and validate the data coding and analysis. Table 3 outlines the

timeline for the journal writing process.

Table 3

Written Interviews and Member Check-ins

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Post Written Check-Ins
Seidman's (2013) Three-Interview Series Process			
Focus Life History	The Details of Experience		The Reflection on Meaning
Journal Prompt No. 1 (Schiek, 2014)	Journal Prompts No. 2&3 (Schiek, 2014)	Journal Prompts No. 4&5 (Schiek, 2014)	Member Check-Ins (Boyd, 2008)
Journal about an experience(s) of homophobia experienced in an RGV school.	Journal about how homophobia experienced in RGV public schools impacted your social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing.	Journal about any strategies or activities that you engaged in to cope with or improve your experiences of homophobia in RGV schools.	Follow-up with one-on-one interviews, to ask clarifying questions and to allow for participants to check-in with my interpretations and understanding of their responses.
	Journal about anything or anyone in RGV schools that helped you cope with or improved your experiences of homophobia.	Journal about how school leaders (principals, assistant principals) improved or did not improve your experiences of homophobia is RGV schools.	

Participants were asked to consider a formal writing process in which they brainstormed prior to writing and initial draft which they then would revisit to add clarity, depth, and nuance. In keeping with the elaboration of "text" called for in queer theory (Dilley, 1999) the participants were also given the opportunity to curate additional documents (pictures, poems, drawings, lyrics, memorabilia, etc.) as part of their journaling. See Appendix D.

It is important to note that prior to soliciting and selecting participants, I reflected and responded to each of the journal prompts. This served two purposes: first, it allowed me to engage in reflexivity (Pillow, 2003) and experience for myself what I would be asking the participants to do and secondly, it created model "text" that I could share with participants. I was encouraged personally reflect, journal, and share my own "text" with participants by my dissertation committee during my proposal defense. My journaling included narrative text as well as poetry and prose that were generated in response to the journaling prompts.

Site and participants selection. I recruited the participants for the study at the August 2021 meeting of the South Texas Equality Project (STEP). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, STEP meetings in 2021were all conduced virtually via zoom; participants were recruited online. See Appendix A for participant recruitment form and Appendix C for recruitment flyer. STEP is a grassroots coalition of organizations that advocate safe affirming spaces for LGBTQIA+ persons living in the four counties that comprise the RGV. Some of the organizations that comprise STEP include: TFA RGV PRISM, GENTX, Casa Orgullo, RGV Trans Closet, Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid (TRLA), LULAC RGV Rainbow Council, RGV Planned Parenthood, Mount Calvary Christian Church, and The Valley Aids Council. As member and vice-president (2021-2023) of STEP, I have developed meaningful, trusting relationships with the members and organizations that comprise the coalition. I drew upon my rapport with community leaders and advocates to recruit ideal participants for the study. According to Glesne (2016), rapport, and more specifically trust, are important in establishing a deep and relevant connection with participants that allows people to "tell their stories."

At the August 2021 meeting or shortly thereafter, eight persons showed interest by responding to a google form that collected their preferred name; gender, and sexual identity; if

they identified as Latina/o/x or Hispanic; age; RGV schools attended; graduation or last year attended; email address; and phone number. Over the next week and a half, I met with each person privately via zoom to explain participant requirements, informed consent, and the nature of the study. During the zoom meeting I also reviewed with participants the journaling process outlined in Appendix D. Lastly, to conclude the zoom meeting, I emailed each participant their own copy of the informed consent document, the journaling process outlined in Appendix D and my own responses to the journal prompts. By sharing my journal responses, I displayed and modeled vulnerability, and built further trust with the participants (Brown, 2006).

All eight participants were selected and consented to participate. Together they represent the broad spectrum that comprises the queer community. When asked to self-identify, the participants responses included: gay; bisexual, queer, nonbinary, two-spirit, genderfluid, and grey-asexual; genderfluid (trans) pansexual; transgender lesbian queer/nonbinary; and queer, trans-masc, non-binary. All eight self-identified at latino/a/x and were between the ages of 31-42. All attended public schools in the Rio Grande valley with a broad range of types including Montessori, magnet, and traditional. Some mentioned having attended the University of Texas – Pan American before it transitioned to the University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley. Participants also attended school in all four counties that comprise the Rio Grande Valley: Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy. Participants high school graduation dates ranged from 1997 – 2008. Lastly, all participants are involved in STEP or in one of the organizations that comprises the coalition and for the purposed of this study are considered community leaders and advocates. All eight participants and I identify as Latino/a/x and or Hispanic. Gender neutral pseudonyms were used to identify participants.

Ale identifies as bisexual, queer, nonbinary, two-spirit, genderfluid, and grey-asexual and uses they/he/she pronouns. They are in their early thirties and attended non-traditional schools in the upper RGV. They work in the legal field, are actively involved in STEP and are on the board of various other queer affirming organizations.

Beni identifies as genderfluid (Trans), pansexual and uses they/them pronouns. They are in their early thirties and attended a large urban school district in the upper RGV. Beni is active in STEP and works in social services.

Cris identifies as a transgender lesbian and uses she/her pronouns. She is in her early forties and attended a small rural school district in the lower RGV. She is currently a graduate student with interests in affirming public policy. She is active in STEP and on the board of various trans affirming organizations.

Dani identifies as queer nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns. They are in their early thirties and attended a large urban school district in the mid RGV. They work in higher education and are active in STEP.

Enri identifies as gay and uses he/him pronouns. He is in his early forties and attended a large urban school district in the mid RGV. He works in health and education advocacy and is an active in STEP and various other queer affirming causes.

Fer identifies as gay and uses he/him pronouns. He is in his late thirties and attended a large rural school district in the upper RGV. He works in education and is involved in STEP and other queer affirming causes and organizations.

Geri identifies as queer, trans masc, non-binary and uses he/him pronouns. He is in his late thirties and attended a small rural school district in the upper RGV. He works in education and is active in STEP and the queer affirming faith community.

Hada identifies as gay and uses he/him pronouns. He is in his late thirties and attended a large rural school district in the upper RGV. He works in higher education and frequently collaborates with STEP and other queer affirming organizations.

 I, Luckie, identify as queer, nonbinary and use they/them pronouns. I am in my late thirties and attended a large rural school district in the upper RGV. I work in education and serve on the board for STEP and TFA RGV PRISM.

The following table outlines participant information.

Table 4

Study Participants

Participant	Self-Identifies	Age	Schools Attended	Leadership/Advocacy
Ale	bisexual, queer, nonbinary, two-spirit, genderfluid, and grey-asexual. (they/them)	early thirties	non-traditional schools in the upper RGV.	legal field, STEP, & other queer affirming organizations.
Beni	genderfluid (trans), pansexual (they/them)	early thirties	large urban school district in the upper RGV	Social services & STEP
Cris	transgender lesbian (she/her)	early forties	small rural school district in the lower RGV	graduate student with interests in affirming public policy, STEP, & various trans affirming organizations
Dani	queer nonbinary (they/them)	early thirties	large urban school district in the mid RGV	higher education & STEP
Enri	gay (he/him)	early forties	large urban school district in the mid RGV	health/education advocacy, STEP, & other queer affirming causes
Fer	gay (he/him)	late thirties	large rural school district in the upper RGV	education, STEP, & other queer affirming causes and organizations
Geri	queer, trans masc, non-binary, (he/him)	late thirties	small rural school district in the upper RGV	education, STEP, & the queer affirming faith community.
Hada	gay (he/him)	late thirties	large rural school district in the upper RGV	higher education, STEP, & other queer affirming organizations
Luckie (researcher)	queer, nonbinary, (they/them)	late thirties	large rural school district in the upper RGV	education and serves on the board for STEP and TFA RGV prism.

Data collection procedures. The participants developed a written narrative by journaling over a three-week period about their experiences with homophobia in RGV public schools. Emails and/or text messages were sent intermittently throughout the three-week period to check-in with and encourage participants to add to their responses throughout the week: the goal being that participants offer a written account of experiences that were deep, descriptive, and meaningful. At the end of the three-week period, I collected participants' journaling prompt responses using a fingerprint secure USB to maintain security and confidentiality. All participants' responses were returned securely and confidentially by early October 2021. Six out of the eight participants responded directly to each of the journal prompts. One participant initially reviewed all five journal prompts and forewent responding directly to the last two prompts feeling their responses to those prompts were adequately addressed in their journal responses for the first three prompts. Lastly, one participant wrote a narrative piece and poem to address all five journal entry prompts at once. During my initial review of the responses, I verified that each of the participants did, in fact, address all the journal entry prompts within their own collective responses. Unfortunately, and though encouraged, no participant chose to include artwork, photos, or letters in their "text" response. Participants did, however, make references, to songs, lyrics, movies, and pop culture in their journal responses. Additionally, although the journaling prompts were spaced out over the three-week period, participants reported difficulty keeping to the scheduled timeline. One participant outlined their responses to all five journal prompts early in the three-week period and then revisited their responses throughout. Another reported that they tackled journaling over the weekends, initially writing on a Saturday and then revisiting their responses on a Sunday. Several of the participants stated that adhering to the schedule was difficult due to the stress of the ongoing global pandemic and their commitments to

work and additional leadership/advocate roles. In the end however, each participant shared that they understood and valued the importance of the study being done and ensured that their responses were detailed and descriptive. The collected files were stored on secure devices and participant names were excluded. Instead, a three number identifier was assigned to each file and a coding document was kept in a separate secure location.

Data analysis procedures. Over the Indigenous Peoples' Day extended weekend, I checked into a hotel room to code and analyze the data collected. I used *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Saldaña, 2016) to design and inform the coding process and the digital software NVivo (Bazeley & Richards, 2000) to collect and code the data collection.

Coding is heuristic, the purpose being to discover significant phrases in the data that make meaning of the participants lived experiences (Saldaña, 2016). As such the data collected was coded for patterns: "repetitive or consistent occurrences of data that appear more than twice" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 5). Coded data that look alike and feel alike were then categorized together to form categories of patterns with shared characteristics (Saldaña, 2016). Coding is cyclical and the data collected was coded a minimum of three times to allow for the collection to generate meaningful categories and themes (Saldaña, 2016). See Table 5.

Table 5

The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers (Saldaña, 2016)

Cycle	Description
Cycle 1	Pre-coding: rich and significant participant's quotes/passages are highlighted and annotated.
Cycle 2	Apparent patterns are coded and further annotated.
Cycle 3+	Coded data are categorized, and the collection further scrutinized to identify less apparent meaning and significance

Upon the first review I initially read through all the participant's journal entries and additional documents and made preliminary annotations by highlighting rich and significant participant's quotes/passages (Saldaña, 2016). I then began to look for patterns that emerged across the responses and placed identified codes or phrases on sticky notes. Table 6 below highlights code words/phrases that emerged in each of the five journal prompts.

Table 6

Initial Coding

Research Question	Journal Prompt	Code Word/Phrases
How do Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley experience homophobia?	1. Journal about an experience(s) of homophobia experienced in an RGV school.	conceal, policed, tribe, verbal bullying, teacher bullying, avoid, physical education, internalized homophobia
How does homophobia impact the social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing of Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley?	2. Journal about how homophobic experiences in RGV public schools impacted your social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing.	ghosts, overcompensation, trauma, depression, internalized homophobia, keeping busy
How do affirming policies and practices, if any, help Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley confront experiences of homophobia?	3. Journal about anything or anyone in RGV schools that helped you confront or improved your experiences of homophobia.	keeping busy, teacher support, teacher advice, teacher protection, teacher didn't know how to help, extracurricular activities
What strategies, if any, do Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley employ to confront experiences of homophobia?	4. Journal about any strategies or activities that you engaged in to confront or improve your experiences of homophobia in RGV schools.	music, keeping busy, tribe
How do Latinx GSDY perceive educational leaders in the Rio Grande Valley?	5. Journal about how school leaders (principals, assistant principals) improved or did not improve your experiences of homophobia is RGV schools.	source of homophobia, no admin support

Upon second review, I read through the entire data collection for a second time, refined codes,

further annotated the "text" (Dilley, 1999) and began identifying preliminary patterns (Saldaña, 2016).

The preliminary patterns that emerged were (1) Survival: the participants were focused on surviving the experience of homophobia; (2) Pay it forward: the participants recognized a need to make things better for each other and future generations; (3) Transmutation: the participants channeled energy to survive into positive outcomes; (4) Gratitude: the participants were grateful to have overcome the experience; and (5) Catharsis: the participants recognized that they grew from the experience.

Before continuing with additional reviews of the data I created a google document with my preliminary findings and shared it with the participants via a view only link. I also spoke to each participant either via zoom, a phone call, and/or text message to discuss what I had gathered from their responses and discussed the preliminary findings in more detail. Overwhelmingly, participants gravitated toward the word trauma and the idea of transmutation to describe their experience. In such a phone call one participant coined the phrase "We turned shit to gold."

In third and subsequent reviews, coded "text" (Dilley, 1999) was categorized, and the collection further scrutinized to identify less apparent meaning and significance (Saldaña, 2016). It was during the third review that I returned to my own journal responses. I read, coded, and categorized my own "text" (Dilley, 1999) to the codes and patterns that had immerged from the participant's collective "text" (Dilley, 1999). Since my own journal responses were in line and added to the findings, I made the decision to include my "text" (Dilley, 1999) in the data collection as well. Therefore, the pronouns "we" and "our" are used in chapter four when referring to the data/responses to indicate that my journal responses were also included in the data collection. Lastly, using the coded data, preliminary patterns, and categorized "text" a

subtheme per research question was identified as well as one unifying, overarching theme for the entirety of the study. The identified themes are shared in further detail in chapter four. As the themes were finalized, additional member check-ins (Boyd, 2008) occurred, again via zoom, phone calls, and/or text messages, to ensure validity.

Validity. Crystallization, in contrast to triangulation, was applied to cross-reference and interpret findings from the collected recollections of experiences. Denzin & Lincoln (2018) state that "crystals are prisms that reflect and refract, creating ever-changing images and pictures of reality. Crystallization deconstructs the traditional idea of validity, for now there can be no single or triangulated truth" (p. 762). Crystallization considers the very real and lived experiences of participants that can be in sharp contrast to the dominant discourse and accepted theory and therefore lends itself to this qualitative research framed within queer theory. Hence, crystallization was used as a validation technique; each participants' story – one of many facets coming together to tell of our lived experiences with homophobia (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). As I wrote, I pictured a gemstone on a turntable; our individual words catching light and together speaking to a greater truth.

Data Representation. In chapter four, the participants words have been presented using "multivocal" text (Pillow, 2003). This method allowed the participants to speak in one unifying voice and was done for two reasons. First, the community of queer affirming leaders and advocates in the RGV is small and directly connecting quotes of text to a specific participant (even with pseudonyms) would run the risk of breaking confidentiality and anonymity. Secondly, after the initial read of the journal responses, the data indicated that the emerging story was common to all participant and would speak stronger in unison. In reading the blinded data collection, it was difficult to tell where one participant's story ended, and another began. Often,

participants used similar words, phrases, and expressions in their writing. Therefore, interweaving the narratives into "multivocal" text would not only preserve the participants' confidentiality and anonymity, but could also make connections between the participants words and experiences and tell a deeper, richer, and more nuanced narrative about how homophobia is experienced and confronted in the RGV. I turned to the literature and found examples of how this has been achieved in past studies using "multivocal" text (Pillow, 2003). Like a chorus builds a wall of unified sound, so too does this study's narrative speak truth using a strong collective voice.

Borum (2006) used multivocal, interwoven text to weave together the experiences of African American mothers with deaf daughters, stating that "it permits and deepens the reader's ability to emotionally and spiritually connect with experiences and emotions" (p. 340) Weztel (2019) used multivocal text in the creation of a layered feminist historiography in which she combined multiple women's stories, experiences, and artifacts to tell a greater collective story. She chose this approach because it forces the reader to focus on the greater story being told and not on the experiences of individual participants (Weztel, 2019). Most recently authors Abdellatif Aldossari, Boncori, Callahan, Na Ayudhya, Chaudhry, Kivinen, Sarah Liu, Utoft, Vershinina, Yarrow, and Pullen (2021) wrote a multivocal paper to "vocalize the sound of change … represented in Kamala Harris's appointment as the first woman, woman of color, and South Asian American as the US Vice President" (p.1956). The authors wrote in unity about their collective concerns regarding gendered, racialized, and classed social relations. In these examples, multivocal text was chosen to highlight the collective greater story and give voice to the larger group that often gets marginalized and erased (Nunes, 2019). In this tradition and keeping with queer theory/text in mind, I too have chosen to present participants' words as

multivocal text. In doing so I encourage the reader to engage in "textual reflexivity" (Pillow, 2003) and examine and connect with the larger story being told and not dismiss/erase individual participant's experiences as singular one-off occurrences.

Lastly, "multivocal" text (Pillow, 2003) is in line with using crystallization for validity and supports the telling of a multifaceted collective story versus focusing on singular points of light. The aim of this research was to show how each facet adds to and tells the greater story of how homophobia is experienced in the RGV by Latinx GSDY, and to use those stories to enact positive and specific change. This study was designed to see and hear things from multiple sources and perspectives to make confident claims about the experiences of the study participants (Glense, 2016; Boyd, 2008).

Summary

Gay and Mills (2016) describe narrative research as "the study of how different humans experience the world around them, [that is] to tell the stories of their 'storied lives'" (p. 348). Collaboratively the researcher and participants construct a narrative about the experiences and the meanings of those experiences (Gay & Mills, 2016). According to Glense (2016), "qualitative researchers play an active role in producing the data they record through the questions they ask and the social interactions in which they take part" (p. 44). As such, reflective journal prompts (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Thorpe, 2004) were used to guide participants through a written interview (Schiek, 2014) process. Having the participants journal over a three-week period allowed for the collection of data which would have been sensitive to discuss and access in a brief face to face formal interview setting (Schiek, 2014). The use of journaling, over time, made it possible for participants to reflect and objectify experiences which may be difficult

to verbalize face to face (Schiek, 2014). It allowed me as a qualitative researcher to study the

lived, and at times hurtful, experiences of a marginalized group (Schiek, 2014).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Chapter three outlined a qualitative, narrative history study, framed in queer theory, in which I collected and examined participants' experiences with homophobia; the impact on their social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing; how affirming policies and practices/resiliency strategies, if any, were used to confront experiences of homophobia; and the role, if any, that educational leaders played to affirm participants' identities and experiences.

After coding and analysis five themes emerged to address each of the research questions and associated journal prompts. See Table 7 below.

Table 7

Emergent Themes Addressing Research Questions and Associated Journal Prompts

Research Question	Journal Prompt	Emergent Theme
How do Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley experience homophobia?	Journal about an experience(s) of homophobia experienced in an RGV school.	Homophobia in the RGV is systemic and pervasive not episodic.
How does homophobia impact the social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing of Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley?	Journal about how homophobic experiences in RGV public schools impacted your social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing.	Homophobia is experienced as trauma and is carried on into adulthood.
How do affirming policies and practices, if any, help Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley confront experiences of homophobia?	Journal about anything or anyone in RGV schools that helped you confront or improved your experiences of homophobia.	We transform trauma responses into coping strategies.
What strategies, if any, do Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley employ to confront experiences of homophobia?	Journal about any strategies or activities that you engaged in to confront or improve your experiences of homophobia in RGV schools.	We seek to build Community and Affirming Spaces.
How do Latinx GSDY perceive educational leaders in the Rio Grande Valley?	Journal about how school leaders (principals, assistant principals) improved or did not improve your experiences of homophobia is RGV schools.	School administrators offer no support and are often sources of homophobia.

The five themes that emerged include:

- Homophobia in the RGV is systemic and pervasive not episodic;

- Homophobia is experienced as trauma and is carried on into adulthood;

- We transform trauma responses into coping strategies;

- We seek to build community and affirming spaces; and lastly

- School administrators offer no support and are often sources of homophobia.

A reminder that I have chosen to present participants responses throughout the chapter as "multivocal" text (Pillow, 2003). The goal being to tell a unified story; for the reader to be immersed in the words and not know where one participant's experience stops, and another's begins. Additionally, "multivocal" text serves to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Furthermore, I believe that multivocal text allows for stronger crystallization (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) of data and text - each story told adding a facet to the greater narrative of how homophobia is experienced and confronted in the RGV.

The Findings

Homophobia In the RGV Is Systemic and Pervasive Not Episodic

The theme that emerged in response to the first research question and associated journal prompt was that homophobia, as experienced in the Rio Grande Valley, is systemic and pervasive and not episodic. While participants could give specific examples of instances of homophobia, the consensus was that homophobia was a way of life. As stated by one participant: "It is difficult to separate a single instance of homophobia from the environment I grew up in, in some ways it is like trying to describe a single drop of water while looking over the ocean."

Verbal harassment from other students, teachers, and administrators, was a commonly reported source of homophobia. Words like *faggot*, *fag*, *sissy*, and *joto* were reported by participants as examples of verbal harassment. At times the verbal harassment was direct, but more often it was described as indirect, occurring in whispers, rumors, and conversations held behind one's back. One participant noted the diminishing nature of such conversations: "several boys sat behind me and talked about me as if I wasn't there- saying I was gay and a fag." At

90

times verbal harassment spilled over into physical harassment: He "pushed me down into the ground" … "When the teacher had to step out for a bit, there were 3 classmates who would simply bob my head as they made pop sounds to signify me performing oral sex to them," … "Some shoving ensued that led to more physical aggression, and I fell back."

Most often though, the experiences with homophobia fell into two categories: outright teacher harassment and policing of gender performance and queer expression. Participants gave examples of how teachers expected students to switch off their queerness in the classroom: "a science teacher looked at me and told me that a student could be gay outside of her classroom but that when they entered her classroom, they had to be straight as no student was allowed to be gay in her class." One participant told of an ongoing experience with a teacher that targeted them for being queer. In this example, the English teacher would assign daily lunch detention keeping the participant from eating and from socializing with peers. The teacher went on to share personal and revealing private journal responses with the entire class and school administrators that resulted in off campus suspension. Over the course of their seventh-grade year, this participant went from loving school and English Language Arts, to being removed from honors/advanced courses and being placed on an instructional intervention plan. Generally, when asked to recall experiences with homophobia the participants "remember how very homophobic/transphobic teachers and administrators [were]; the machismo and discriminatory language and behavior was very common."

Policing of gender performance and queer expression was another common example of homophobia reported by participants. "Teachers in our schools policed queer students differently." … "You heard comments frequently from teachers who policed queer kids more strongly than the gay ones. From holding hands, to sitting to close together, you'd hear it all the

91

time." … "I wasn't a fan of dolls, and the teacher would always grab me by the hand and say, 'no, no…marbles are for boys, go play with the girls!'" Overall, participants gave examples of how they were expected to conform to heteronormative gender and sex roles in a school setting. The dominant message experienced in schools is that any deviation from the prescribed heteronormative standard would not be accepted or affirmed. It is also important to note that heteronormative coded spaces (physical education, locker rooms, activities segregated by gender-assigned-at-birth) were often the setting for examples with experiences of homophobia.

In summary, "experiences with homophobia in schools were pretty generalized. It wasn't one specific thing it was a million little things that were the constant … of growing up."

Homophobia Is Experienced as Trauma and Is Carried into Adulthood

Trauma is cumulative; foundations are laid in childhood and built upon well into adulthood (Schmitz & Charak, 2020).

> "Trauma and memory [are] like wanting to burn down one tree, but accidently lighting the entire forest on fire, forgetting most everything that happened around the terrible experiences."

The second theme that emerged addresses the impact homophobia had on participants' social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing. I was brought to tears many times during the initial reading of the participants' written responses; listening to the stories being told, I could not help but recognize the pattern of trauma that emerged. As stated by the participants: "I was absolutely terrified of being found out" … "I have forgotten or blocked most of my memories, whether to conserve brainpower or to conserve my sanity." … "It was just so deeply entrenched in how I was seen and treated that it caused me to be afraid of being me. Even the safest spaces

92

weren't safe." … "This all made school miserable for me, but I was often able to survive by being in denial about it." … "I still felt so much internalized shame and self-hatred because of who I was"

When asked about the impact of homophobia, the bulk of what participants described was experiencing depression and other mental health issues. Participants described episodes of feeling: "burnt out and overwhelmed" … uncomfortable with my body physically and emotionally, because it wouldn't 'behave' in a 'normal' way" … "the stigma and shame associated with being gay had a negative impact on my self-esteem and confidence." As best summarized by one participant, "homophobia, transphobia, and gender policing were a constant presence and … sometimes made me depressed, and significantly impacted my self-esteem." In general, the emotional toll of homophobia resulted in depression and other mental health issues which directly resulted in physical impacts as participants engaged in maladaptive behaviors to cope. Examples of maladaptive behaviors reported by participants included: eating disorders, cutting, and engaging in sex to maintain prescribed heteronormative expectations and appearances.

Socially, participants often felt isolated and unable to make genuine connections with other peers. Participants describe having to conceal and hide parts of themselves to survive school. Furthermore, they reported on having missed out socializing rites of passage such as dating and courtship, due to their inability to be out and authentic. As put by one participant: "All I can remember was just trying to survive. I had to learn new ways to get by, I was never a shy or quiet person before, I was really expressive and talkative and a bit of a know-it-all, but I had to learn to be silent, and coast, and just do enough to not get noticed."

93

Lastly, participants reported that homophobia had a dichotomous impact on academics. One participant coined the phrase *"Scholars in the Barrio"* to describe queer and academically gifted youth that were able to throw themselves into academics to find solace from relentless homophobia. As stated by participants: "My academics never suffered. I think, if anything, they benefited from the fact that I wasn't focused on my gender or sexual orientation." … "I was a pretty smart kid, and I was expected to get good grades and go to college. I did those things, and I did them well." … "I tested into the Gifted and Talented Program" … "Reading and writing were my natural talents, but science became how I coped."

Conversely, some participants also reported that homophobia had a negative impact on their academics. Participants stated that homophobia: "would affect my academia because I would get so burnt out being wrapped up in the idea of presenting "normal" that I would neglect my studies and my assignments." … "distracted me from learning or feeling safe at school." A direct example given by one participant was that "I would find any reason to miss school, I would fake being sick, I would run late, … I'd purposely not get ready. After a few months I had missed over 12 days of school, this then led to me going to court because I had missed so much school. I was falling behind in most of my classes, and they were going to take me out of the honors program."

To summarize, all participants described their experiences with homophobia in the Rio Grande Valley has having a traumatic impact on their social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing that continued into their adulthood. As best stated by one participant "I think we never heal from trauma. I think, if people are lucky and search for help, we learn to work through the trauma. The process of healing has no end especially if situations of abuse, and violence are pervasive."

Trauma Responses Transformed into Coping Strategies

A third theme that emerged was that participants transformed trauma responses into coping strategies. Interestingly, when participants were asked to describe anything that helped them confront experiences of homophobia, what consistently emerged from their written responses can be characterized as a response to a traumatic experience. A 2020 article in Psychology Today categorizes trauma response into four main types, namely, Flight, Fight, Fawn, and Freeze. "Flight includes running or fleeing the situation, fight is to become aggressive, and freeze is to literally become incapable of moving or making a choice. The fawn response involves immediately moving to try to please a person to avoid any conflict (Gaba, 2020). How participants confronted homophobia can be categorized into one of these four main types of trauma response.

The most prevalent trauma response type was to freeze. This trauma response type was employed by all participants to maintain safety and survival. According to Reynolds (2020), "resistance to suffering and oppression is always present as persons always act to guard their dignity and move towards safety" (p. 347). Walker (2018) states that "the freeze response, also known as the camouflage response, often triggers a survivor into hiding, isolating and avoiding human contact" (p. 117). Participants provided examples that demonstrated how they disassociated, isolated, and concealed themselves and parts of their identity to fit in and navigate homophobic and traumatic environments. "I kept it to myself and suppressed my feelings" … "when it comes to being gay, it helps to mute the colors." … "I needed to hide who I was in unhappy relationships. Better to be unhappy, than to be outed I guess." … ""I managed to hide my more feminine voice and mannerisms and act in a more typical manner expected for a boy my age." … "it was clear that certain parts of my personality had to be hidden if I wanted to have

any semblance of peace or at least be lower on the list of preferred targets." … "I felt I had to hold back on my true self." As indicated in their responses, participants learned early on to conceal and suppress key aspects of their identity to survive and get ahead. As stated by Gair (2004), "Many hide. When we hide, even in situations without a realistic risk of harm, we associate the need to hide with being wrong or bad. This is especially true if we are hiding from our own family, friends, and the very communities in which we reside" (p. 46). As I read the written responses, lyrics from the lead song of the aptly named Disney musical, *"Frozen"* popped into my head: *"Don't let them in, don't let them see; Be the good girl you always have to be; Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know!"*; The first time I heard the song "Let It Go" I was brought to tears because it resonated with my own experiences using concealment and self-numbing to confront trauma and persevere in school, work, and life overall. For gender and sexually diverse persons, hiding becomes a way of life and living authentically or being "known" can in fact be retraumatizing (Gair, 2004). A continuous pattern of hiding can also have the long-term effect of interfering with the development of intimate and committed relationships (Gair, 2004).

The second heavily reported trauma response type was flight. Walker, 2018 describes flight types "like machines with the switch stuck in the 'on' position. They are obsessively and compulsively driven by the unconscious belief that perfection will make them safe and loveable. They rush to achieve. They rush as much in thought [obsession] as they do in action [compulsion]" (p. 114). As stated by participants: "I kept a schedule that in retrospect was bordering on manic" … "I guess you can say I turned myself into being a busybody." … "I kept busy. I lived in the band hall, and I lived, ate, and breathed marching band. If I couldn't be queer, I could be the best damn drummer the school had ever seen. I made first chair as a freshman, and

squad leader as a sophomore." … "I used me hiding in the closet as a way to throw myself into everything else I was doing." … "Not that this made any sense, but I coped by staying so busy I didn't have time to realize I couldn't just be me." As illustrated by the participants' quotes, we all avoided homophobia by simply being too busy to deal with it. We invested all our time and energy into "the need to overcompensate with other 'right' acts." This is something that I continue to do to this day. As I write this dissertation in completion of a doctoral degree, I am fully aware that I am in part doing so it to keep busy and to avoid dealing with issues related to depression and the consequences of homophobia that I endured as a child and that have carried over into adulthood. I work in the school district in which I experienced my homophobia and really nothing has changed. It is not lost on me that my trauma and more importantly my preferred ways to respond to trauma continue well into the present day.

The third most prevalent trauma response type was fawn. Walker (2018), states that "fawn types seek safety by merging with the wishes, needs and demands of others. They act as if they believe that the price of admission to any relationship is the forfeiture of all their needs, rights, preferences, and boundaries" (p. 122). Participants reported examples of becoming people pleasers, lacking identity, and having little to no boundaries in relationships. One participant mentioned: "If I wanted to please my teachers, I would try to sit at the front of class and answer all of the questions asked, as correctly as possible, to get on their good side and get kept on their radar as a 'good student'." Another stated that they had "a really hard time saying "no" to fellow classmates, and basically made [themselves] completely available to anyone and everyone, for fear of being ostracized". The fawn trauma response type is the one we carried the most over into adulthood. I, "repressed my queer identity and I made up for it in other ways that I thought would be pleasing to others. To this day, I am a people pleaser at work. I may be the smartest

most capable person on the team, but I always feel like I must make up for being queer and so I have to work harder than everyone else and prove to everyone that I deserve to be there." And another participant that currently works in education stated that "administrators will overlook your defects as long as you are useful to them." Homophobia has made it so that our value and self-worth is often tied to our utility for others.

The last response type, fight, was not as prevalent but did make an appearance in a few of the written responses. Walker (2018) states that fight types are unconsciously driven by the belief that power and control can create safety, assuage abandonment and secure love" (p. 109). Some participants reported internalized homophobia and how they in turn abused others to remove the spotlight and appear less queer themselves. "There were … times where I made fun of other gay and queer kids when I was in junior high just to cover up my own queerness and try to fit in." … "when I started to make friends and be accepted by others and start to fit in, I sometimes made fun of other people. Part of this was because some of my friends were "mean girls" and I wanted to fit in with them and keep them as my friends. Other times it was because of my own insecurities. One of my biggest regrets is allowing homophobia to make me act, at times, cruel to other people."

Building Community and Affirming Spaces

A fourth theme that emerged is that we seek to build community and affirming spaces. This was initially done by seeking supportive peers, teachers, and spaces and then by seeking even better spaces for the future. As we process trauma, we can endure and channel that energy into something useful and meaningful (Schmitz & Charak, 2020).

The most common phenomenon described by all participants was that even though we all actively took measures to conceal and hide our queerness, we all found a tribe of likeminded and

supportive peers that were likely queer and hiding themselves. As best put by one participant: "I reached a point that I was subconsciously looking for my people, and I found them. I almost think that we all found each other. I think we became aware of who was being bullied and then we banded together by creating bonds and friendships. We also then learned who our allies were, and we stayed together." They go on to say "Reflecting back… , I think many of us were just helping each other out sort through all this "mess" that the adults were not assisting with. And this went beyond homophobia and transphobia. It was also like parents in jail, lack of money, transportation issues, death in the family, etc. Like we would pull through for each other. We didn't know what was going on or what to do, but we did something. And I think there is so much beauty there."

Additionally, participants referred to finding supportive representations in media. As put poignantly by another participant:

I think it's a very good trait to align oneself with the subversive, we embrace the antagonist because we are the villain in popular culture. I have always aligned myself with the maligned, the strong women and the aggressive femme. Perhaps an amalgamation of my upbringing and my sexuality, I feel quite comforted by the 'bitch'. My mother calls any woman with an opinion and a backbone a 'bitch'. I also tend to associate with what my aunt called strange people. My aunt said I collected "dregs of society." I took offence to that at first, but now I realize that me and my island of misfit toys support each other. The loudmouth, over the top, infinitely wrong[ed] and desperately scarred creatures have all become my inspiration and protection and ultimate salvation. These are bright lights in a dull

world. My experiences as a gay person of color doesn't seem do drab and dark when I'm surrounded by little chaotic fires. Together, we watch the world sizzle."

Moreover, we found few examples of supportive teachers. I found "strong female teachers … Although they did address bullying and often stopped it from outright happening, they always stopped short of affirming or supporting gay students or people. We had several gay teachers in high school, but none were out and open about their sexuality. Often these teachers told me and others to tone it down and not be too overtly gay. I suppose it was their way of protecting us, but ultimately the message sent was that we should be ashamed for being gay." As echoed by another participant: "My high school years were enriched by the attitude and quick wit of this Old School lesbian. She took me and my group of friends into her world and gave us guidance and clarity. This teacher told us to blend in and not make a big deal, and even though some people think you should stand up and fight, I thought it was the right advice to follow. I was not ready to sound the drums of war, I wasn't ready to fight for my right to be me--I didn't even know who I was." And yet another participant described having found a teacher that was the "Keeper of Misfit Toys" whom "Behind the scenes, … collaborated with teachers … to have a contingency plan to protect me when/if I came out of the closet." Generally, participants did report finding some support in a handful of teachers, however it must be noted that such support was about keeping us immediately and physically safe and stopped short of affirming our authentic queer experiences.

Gair (2004), discusses the importance of finding community for supporting and empowering gender and sexually diverse persons. They state that although we often appear outwardly like others in our communities, we may be vastly different internally. They go on to assert that it is important, especially for gender and sexually diverse persons who are often at

odds within their communities, to find community with others that share our intrapsychic and interpersonal characteristics (Gair, 2004). They state that this supportive community should be established in adolescence rather than waiting until adulthood. They argue that often self-destructive and maladaptive behaviors are too well established in adulthood to benefit from the formation of a supportive community (Gair, 2004). It follows then that supportive communities ought to be found in schools and as early as possible. "It is vital for lesbian, gay and bisexual people to have a base or anchor community that permits authenticity as well as a created family community where each individual feels well-known and valued. In its most productive role, a community can counter not only the harshness of earlier messages, but also the continuing daily reminders of marginalization" (Gair, 2004, p. 53).

Thirdly, we found safe and affirming spaces in extracurricular activities. All participants mentioned how an extracurricular activity provided access to safe spaces, teachers, and peers. As stated by one participant: "One place where queer kids hid, albeit not very well was in theater. You could express yourself, and not worry about what anyone thought. After all, it's where people went to just relax and play a character or just be themselves in some cases. The theater teacher… was always the one more open to creating a safe environment." And another stated: "I was grateful when I was promoted to Junior High so much because of the band hall. I would always go there in the morning and enjoy the peace as well as safety of being in a building."

In summary, what we all most desperately wanted was more affirming support from teachers and spaces where we could authentically exist and thrive. We wished teachers had more agency and professional development to engage in affirming practices. As stated by one participant: "I don't know if the teachers really knew [how to be affirming]; and if they did, if they cared or if they had the skills to address such a bigger problem… it almost feels, now, like

no one knew how to 'do life'. I don't know if they knew we would somehow make it through and eventually make it, hopefully, to our 'greater' selves." Another participant added, "As an adult I still feel as if it is a lot to ask, to have a teacher be present for her students, and provide that safe space for queer kids, but it should not be like that." … "Had I known a single teacher to be out in anyway, via their gender identity or love orientation, I probably would have been kinder to myself and had a better relationship with myself."

School Administrators Offer No Support and Are Often Sources of Homophobia

The last theme that emerged in response to the final research question was that school administrators offered no support to address experiences of homophobia and were often the sources of homophobia. Reponses in general to this prompt were short, direct and to the point. As participants put it: "I've been met with passive aggressive and dismissive principals." … "The principals and assistant principals were completely useless to me." … "They were the guardians of the status quo, who did next to nothing to protect students from bullies" … "If a student, presumably queer decided to defend themselves, they were punished just the same as their bullies." Furthermore, participants described overtly homophobic school administrators. One stated that teachers and school personal "only policed [queer students] differently because they got their cues from our school administrators. They sent queer couples who were holding hands to lunch detention or ISS. I'd see them turn a blind eye to straight couples, but queer couples didn't get the same lenience." Another stated, "I do remember … very homophobic/transphobic teachers and administrators; the machismo and discriminatory language and behavior was very common." And lastly, a participant that is currently an educator laments how this archetype of homophobic school administrator is still prevalent today: "My current principal, … is the living embodiment of Toxic Masculinity. The man's ego is so fragile and

warped that he aligns himself with Yes-men and women and will make anyone he deems a threat an outsider. A number of people have reported hearing him speak negatively about gay people on our campus." In my own experience:

> "There was one specific high school assistant principal that was always hostile
> towards me. He wanted me to "man-up" and although he never outright said
> anything, his homophobia permeated through his attitude and actions. He was
> always on my case about something and generally made it a point to make my day
> more difficult. As the openly out queer kid on campus I took the brunt of his
> aggression. It felt like my mere queer existence was reason enough for his attitude
> and harassment. I never felt safe around him and if anything, I avoided dealing
> with him and would police my gender performance even more so around him."

Years later I would become a school district administrator and work alongside that same man for ten years. My trauma response to this man and his homophobia never diminished. I always find myself guarded around him and often retreat into the closet in his presence.

Transmutation: Alchemy of the self

Trauma can also be a turning point and a catalyst for change and growth (Schmitz & Charak, 2020). After the initial reading of the participants written responses, I noticed that we were describing a phenomenon that was not originally accounted for in my literature review. Nowhere in my review of literature thus far had I read about or encountered that participants had taken their responses to homophobia/trauma and channeled them into something positive; Had homophobia somehow become the origin story for our superpowers? Somehow, we took our experiences with homophobia and the trauma responses they induced, and we transformed them into coping skills with positive outcomes. As stated by one participant:

"I work in education now at the regional level. I'm the only gender non-conforming person in our entire organization, and I don't step into the shadows for anyone ever. I'm happily married to the love of my life, and I mention her all the time in conversations where people normally mention their spouses. I'm not afraid to be who I am in the hopes that my story, the way I live my life openly gives someone else permission to leave the closet behind. I wear my hair short, I wear men's shirts, slacks, and shoes, and I'm convinced that what I'm doing is helping."

Another said: "I have come to the realization of how stronger I have become from being a little timid kid to a fearless adult who can break down barriers if need be." Through some alchemical process on the self, we took very real and negative experiences, transmuted them and, in the process, transformed ourselves into the archetypes of support and affirmation we so desperately sought in our formative years.

"I was walking through a school one time and a student pulled me to the side and said, "thank you for coming to our school, just thank you". I smiled and replied, "oh you're welcome". As I was about to leave, she responded, "I really like your hair" then walked away with her short haired head held high. It may not seem like much but being your openly queer self gives other people hope. Hope I didn't have when I was in school." … "I've made it my life's purpose to be as openly and visibly queer as possible, so I let other kids know it's ok to be fully who they've always been made to be."

Walker (2018) conceptualizes the four main response types (Fight, Flight, Freeze & Fawn) as continuums between positive and negative responses, shown respectively as follows:

- Fight: Assertiveness ←→ Bullying

- Flight: Efficiency ←→ Driven-ness

- Freeze: Peacefulness ←→ Catatonia

- Fawn: Helpfulness ←→ Servitude (p. 127).

In the written responses it is apparent that more often participants responses leaned toward the positive side of Walker's (2018) continuums. Especially as we grew older and gained more experiences with coping, our positive-leaning responses to trauma allowed us to survive. As adults, we have further embraced these positive response traits and are doing the work needed to minimize experiences of homophobia for others in hope that others can live more affirming and less traumatic lives. We expressed gratitude: "I am going to sound crazy for saying this, but I do feel I am a lucky individual with the experiences I have faced and overcome. You might be asking "Why? How?" I am grateful for my life: it's made me stronger, more aware of who to trust, I didn't turn to drugs or alcohol to cope with my childhood trauma and academic life, my experiences are a part of me but do not define who I am." Many of us became educators and now actively work to make schools safer and more affirming spaces for gender and sexually diverse youth and staff. Other participants are legal aid or social work professionals and directly work to positively impact the queer-informed experiences of others. As put by one participant: "I actually feel this so strongly that it is for this reason that I have decided to continue education towards social work, so that I can develop strategies for connecting RGV queer youth to resources I wish I had when I was younger." And as best said by one of the participants: "I have learned so much from my LGBTQIA+ community and I am so very proud of us. I hope we can continue to lift each other up to protect others who are coming." This is the overall message that echoed through

the written responses; that we've been through hell and back and yet we choose to rise, we choose to help.

In an autobiographical example, I applied for the doctoral program shortly after the 2016 election so desperately wanting to turn something awful into something positive; I turned back to what I knew I did best. I see now that I tapped into my preferred trauma response types and got busy. On the eve of the 2017 inauguration, I wrote a poem that spoke of change, shift, and rebirth. In writing this chapter, I was moved to tears as I reread prophetic words; because when faced with destruction we create...

From forth the Ashes

Awaken
Eyes blood shot and not from drinking
Tear-stained sheets, eye-smudged and lip-stained
That familiar nearly forgotten taste of copper splashing against the back of your throat
The racing heartbeat, the thump, thump, thump, in your chest
Your ears, veins of your temples beating THUMP adrenalin rushing
Nauseating, clammy hands and cold sweats
Dry heave once, and twice, and third times not the charm
Fear: permeating, emanating, suffocating.
Fear backed-up by hate
Staring down the barrel of a gun
And seeing a hate-filled aiming eye!
Breathing deep into the shallowness of your empty self
Simultaneous hyperventilating and asphyxiating
Teeth grinding, grasping, ever searching, seeking without finding
Walking down dirty streets, filthy alleys

Keychain clenching, car key grasped between two knuckles firmly and protruding

Emotions surging, flooding, damning

Rat tat tapping on familial doors

When evil comes a knocking

Destruction and Desolation

Demolition and Damnation

Rubble

Grit and dirt stuck to that tear-stained face

The smoke and soot and particulate air filling your mouth, your lungs

Breathing it in deep down inside

Down inside so deep you can't force it out

you can't will it out

You can't escape it

SCREAM

Stillness, Silence, Surrender

Breathe in gently, slowly

Rhythmic breaths and soothing motions and emotions

Rumble and vibrations, channeling fear, channeling hate, channeling misconstructs and misgivings

Soul prismatic and transforming, mutable, and alchemic

Ebbing flowing, lifting rising, ground rattling and earth shaking

Destruction knocks and We create

Fear to hope

And hate to love

Sorrow to joy

Pain to ecstasy

Where animus becomes power

And so, we shake off

Battle worn but battle ready

Thick scar-filled hides, tough and keratinized, impenetrable

We rise and we reject

We rise and we protect

We rise and we resurrect

More powerful and purposeful than before

Fire forged, hardened and tempered

Resilient and blinding, illuminating

Phoenix

Summary

Chapter four presented five themes that emerged from the data collection that addressed each of the research questions respectively. Namely that, homophobia in RGV schools is systemic and pervasive not episodic; that such homophobia is experienced as trauma and is carried on into adulthood; that those that experience such homophobia transformed trauma responses into coping strategies; that we seek to build community and affirming spaces; and lastly that school administrators offer no support and are often sources of homophobia. The overarching theme of the study was that RGV Latinx GSD community leaders and advocates were exposed to homophobia/trauma in RGV public schools and underwent a transmutational process by which their trauma responses were channeled into positive outcomes that benefited them and in the long-term the community which they serve. The final chapter discusses the importance, significance, and implications of the findings.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Going into the study, I anticipated finding examples and connections to Brown's Shame Resilience Theory (2006). In fact, her theory featured into my design for the study and formulation of the research questions. However, during the initial read of the data collection it became apparent that something else that I had not anticipated or accounted for was emerging from the data. Nevertheless, through an act of vulnerability and exercise in trust (Brown, 2006) I was able to step outside of my own shame and view the participants' experience through a different lens. Instead of the shame I identified with my own experiences of homophobia, I encountered examples of trauma in the participants' journal responses, and for the first time ever, I realized my own trauma. While I carry deep shame about being queer, like the participants, my experiences with homophobia also resulted in trauma, and like survivors of trauma, it informs my worldview and navigation through an intersectional life. Indeed, "LGBT people of color experience high rates of health disparities, including trauma, due to the intersection of racism, heterosexism, anti-transgender bias, and other systems of oppression such as classism and ableism" (Singh, 2017, p. 113).

<center>**Importance and Implications**</center>

Importance of the Findings

      What stood out most in the findings is how experiences of homophobia in RGV schools were traumatic and triggered trauma responses for participants.

      Trauma. According to Gair (2004), "most lesbian and gay people are traumatized by being raised in a society that denigrates and devalues their sexual orientation" (p. 46). They add: "when individuals are raised and live-in communities and cultures that shame and despise their sexual orientations, continuous traumas can occur" (Gair, 2004, p. 46; Singh, 2017). And "although support systems for people with same sex attractions and/or questioning have been available since the 1980s, the stigmatization around sexuality remains powerful and pervasive" (Gair, 2004, p. 46). Moreover, authors point out that the effects of trauma are compounded when persons face multiple oppressions such as being a gender and sexual diverse person and Latinx (Schmitz & Charak, 2020; Singh, 2017). Various studies have demonstrated that childhood trauma, including experiences of homophobia, is associated with a higher risk of anxiety and depressive disorders in adulthood and more importantly comorbidity of such disorders (Gair, 2004; Heim, Newport, Mletzko, Miller, Nemeroff, 2008; Hovens, Wiersma, Giltay, Van Oppen, Spinhoven, Penninx, & Zitman, 2010; Lorenzi, Miscioscia, Ronconi, Pasquali, & Simonelli, 2015; Schmitz & Charak, 2020; Van Beusekom, Bos, Overbeek, & Sandfort, 2018; Ventriglio, Castaldelli-Maia, Torales, De Berardis, & Bhugra, 2021). Homophobia experienced in schools is certainly traumatic and "trauma is most devastating when it comes from persons or events surrounding those persons [educators] who are the primary source of our safe boundary formation, our primary caregivers" (Scaer as cited in Gair, 2004, p. 46).

<center>110</center>

Traumatic experiences faced by gender and sexually diverse (GSD) people are further exacerbated because "unlike members of other marginalized groups whose parents are also in their group, our core selves do not fit our families' or society's teachings, and are devalued, entirely unmirrored, and invisible. This fosters such a deep and intense shame, and traumatizes the self" (Gair, 2004, p. 46). The silver lining however is that "certain combinations of identities may be sources of strength for LGBT people of color and may actually be supportive in times of stress." (Singh 2017, p. 114). This is perhaps the case in this study, as participants (Latinx community leaders and advocates) displayed a great degree of trauma resiliency.

I was puzzled as to why, but after watching Disney's newly released, 60th animated feature, *Encanto* I realized what had likely occurred.

Intergenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma is the idea that second and third generations inherit the post traumatic symptoms of their traumatized parents and grandparents (Jacobs, 2011; Gone, 2014; Waldram, 2014). Intergenerational trauma "describes the experiences of communities and ethnic groups exposed to large scale or repeated traumatic events and accompanying stresses" (Crawford, 2014). Studies done with Holocaust survivors indicate that second-generation children of survivors experience nightmares, guilt, depression, fear of death, sadness and the perseverance of intrusive images (Jacobs, 2011). Oftentimes older generations transmit trauma onto younger generations through obsessive storytelling coupled with deep emotional silence. Older generations continuously and graphically tell the stories of trauma so future generations may never forget (Jacobs, 2011). Therefore, how second and third generations exist, survive, and thrive in the world is in direct defiance to the experiences of violence and annihilation encountered by the first generation (Crawford, 2014; Jacobs, 2011; Gone, 2014;

Waldram, 2014). The root of intergenerational trauma for the Latinx community can be traced to the colonization of our indigenous ancestors, and ongoing discrimination (Saldivar, 2016).

For the participants in this study (Latinx GSD community leaders and advocates), our experiences and first-hand knowledge of intergenerational trauma likely primed our trauma response to homophobia. Although the participants journal responses did not specifically address intergenerational trauma, the idea became apparent to me after seeing the movie *Encanto*. Additional member-check-ins with participants verified that intergenerational trauma likely contributed to their experiences and responses to homophobia, although they were not consciously aware of this during their childhood or at the time of their journaling.

A major theme in the movie is how Abuela's response to trauma (losing her home and husband as a young, new mother to three) was to survive and protect. Thereafter the trauma, every magical gift and purpose bestowed upon "the family" was to secure safety, protect the family and extended community, and earn the miracle of survival. The movie can be viewed as an archetype of intergenerational trauma in Latinx families. We survive hardship and injustice. Older generations gave up everything and persevered seemingly insurmountable obstacles to secure better lives and opportunities for the generations yet to come. Younger generations are in turn tasked with preserving and passing on the "miracle". Surely if Abuela/o survived everything they encountered, we could survive experiences of homophobia.

The participants' journal responses support the idea that survival training induced by intergenerational trauma kicked in. When faced with homophobia we accepted our trauma responses as gifts and tooled them into a means for survival. Much like Isabela and Luisa (the movies third generation characters), we took on the roles of perfectionist (flight) and the strong one (fawn) to ensure that we not only survived and succeeded, but that we made our families

proud and paid back retribution for the transgression of being queer at the risk of tarnishing the "miracles" we pass on in Latinx families. Hence it is likely that by first experiencing the world as a Latinx person, we knew first-hand how to survive trauma; survival is a skill we have seen modeled for generations within our families.

This also resonated with two ideas I introduced and discussed in chapter two: culture capital and queer culture capital (Pennell, 2016; Yosso, 2005). The drive to survive and overcome is built into our family dynamics and how we see and experience ourselves in the world. In this example, intergenerational trauma and the resulting survival skills are examples of Latinx culture capital. Perhaps our ability to adapt and transfer those skills into queer experiences increased our queer cultural capital (Pennell, 2016; Yosso, 2005). Future studies are needed to investigate the idea that experiences with Latinx intergenerational trauma, informed participants' trauma responses to experiences with homophobia.

Implications for Practice

The most disheartening finding was that homophobia is so deeply entrenched in our Rio Grande Valley schools, as systems and tools of oppression often are. This is in line with the studies discussed in chapter two that indicate that homophobia continues to be pervasive in U.S. schools (Almeida et al., 2009; Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Kane et al., 2013; Kite &Bryant-Lees, 2016; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018). As stated by a participant: there wasn't "a horrific or climactic homophobic event in [our lives] like we often see in the movies. Rather it was a million little instances of being erased and regulated into obscurity that resulted in shame that [we] carry and cope with to this day." And what we asked for most, what we needed most was teacher and admin support. Many of us wondered how things could have turned out differently had we just been affirmed and gotten support."

Noddings (2012, 2013) and the Ethics of Care, hold a perspective in which ethics is relational and situated. How teachers relate to and care for students is informed by establishing relationships and understanding students' unique experiences and storied lives (Noddings, 2012, 2013). Mandating that educators act affirmingly is not enough, educators require professional development to understand, assess, and meet the unique needs of students on a broad spectrum of gender and sexual diversity (Noddings, 2012, 2013). Teachers and educational leaders require professional development on affirming policies and practices as discusses in chapter two (Castro, & Sujak, 2014; Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Kane et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2016; Young-Jones et al., 2015).

Ventriglio (2021) argues for "educational trainings on homophobia for secondary schools and universities" (p. 2). Findings from the study suggest that trauma, Latinx intergenerational trauma, and trauma response types contributed to how gender and sexually diverse, Latinx participants experienced and confronted homophobia in the Rio Grande Valley. Such experiences with homophobia are often included by authors into the *"minority stress model"* framework (Ventriglio, 2021). According to Meyers (1995) as cited in Ventriglio (2021), "minority stress derives from the conflict between being a minority and dominant social and cultural values, and may be based on homophobic experiences, harassment, maltreatment, discrimination, and victimization, all affecting individuals' physical and mental health outcomes" (p. 2). Therefore, as recently as 2021, Ventriglio argues for studies that "contrast homophobia and [address] its impact on mental health, in particular political initiatives, educational trainings, and scientific research … with a specific focus on mental health needs of people target of homophobia" (p. 1).

For future research I would like to investigate how skills used to process trauma and intergenerational trauma, and how the knowledge of the trauma response types might be used by gender and sexually diverse persons to confront experiences with homophobia in ways that result in positive outcomes and build resiliency. The ultimate goal would be to develop a professional development series on trauma resiliency (Singh, 2017) that may be used by GDSY to confront experiences of homophobia in the moment and not in retrospect. In the review of literature, I discuss how current affirming policies and practices and professional development primarily focus on white-majority suburban and urban spaces. Professional development for rural, Latinx affirming spaces does not yet exist and future work is warranted for its development.

Based on the findings the following professional development topics should be considered and developed to meet the unique needs of Latinx GDSY in the RGV:

- The broad spectrum of queer identities and how RGV GSDY persons view themselves in the world (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Hernandez & Kose, 2012; Hernandez, & Marshall, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2018;).

- How and where homophobia occurs in RGV schools: What does it look and sound like? (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Hernandez & Kose, 2012; Hernandez, & Marshall, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2018).

- Trauma and its effects, trauma response types, and positive v. negative trauma responses (Anderson, Haynes, Ilesanmi, & Conner, 2022; Singh, 2017).

- Creating and sustaining affirming communities and spaces in RGV schools that meet the needs of Latinx GDSY (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Hernandez & Kose, 2012;

Hernandez, & Marshall, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2018).

- Affirming School leadership (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Hernandez & Kose, 2012; Hernandez, & Marshall, 2017; Kosciwe et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2018).

Table 8 below outlines a possible professional development series for RGV Educational leaders that focuses on homophobia as a source of trauma and the use of trauma resiliency (Singh, 2017) to confront and mitigate experiences of homophobia

Table 8

Future Professional Development

Professional Development Topic	Research Question(s) Addressed
The broad spectrum of queer identities and how RGV GSDY persons view themselves in the world (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Hernandez & Kose, 2012; Hernandez, & Marshall, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2018)	1. How do Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley experience homophobia?
How and where homophobia occurs in RGV schools: What does it look and sound like? (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Hernandez & Kose, 2012; Hernandez, & Marshall, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2018)	1. How do Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley experience homophobia?
Trauma and its effects, trauma response types, and positive v. negative trauma responses (Anderson, Haynes, Ilesanmi, & Conner, 2022; Singh, 2017)	2. How does homophobia impact the social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing of Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley? 4.What strategies, if any, do Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley employ to confront experiences of homophobia?
Creating and sustaining affirming communities and spaces in RGV schools that meet the needs of Latinx GDSY (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Hernandez & Kose, 2012; Hernandez, & Marshall, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2018)	3. How do affirming policies and practices, if any, help Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley confront experiences of homophobia? 4.What strategies, if any, do Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley employ to confront experiences of homophobia?
Affirming School leadership (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Hernandez & Kose, 2012; Hernandez, & Marshall, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2018)	5. How do Latinx GSDY perceive educational leaders in the Rio Grande Valley?

While many resources, for professional development exist the rationale to reach out, find them, and use them does not (Almeida et al., 2009; Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Kane et al., 2013; Kite &Bryant-Lees, 2016; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018). Conservative schools in conservative communities along the blue Rio Grande Valley would rather erase the existence of queer students, teachers, and staff: sweep us under the rug so to speak (Cardenas, 2020; Martinez, 2018; Ramírez, 2017; Sealey, 2019). The RGV's education community has a need and obligation to speak truth and bring to light the reality of systemic homophobia and the negative experiences that results for gender and sexually diverse youth (Cardenas, 2020; Martinez, 2018; Ramírez, 2017; Sealey, 2019).

Additionally, many of the resources out there are tailored to white, suburban experiences and the few resources that exist for people of color are based upon urban and more liberal settings (Flores, H., et. al., 2021; Singh, 2017). Some resources may translate, but what we truly need are locally based and developed resources for gender and sexually diverse youth coming of age in predominately rural, socially conservative, Latinx communities (Flores, H., et. al., 2021).

"The hurtful socialization of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals, in most societies, is itself an example of trauma and as such, needs to be considered in terms of trauma work" (Gair, 2004, p. 49).

Implications for Future Studies

Future studies are needed to examine the experiences of persons not represented in the study, the mechanisms behind the transmutation process described in chapter four and tthe role intergenerational trauma may play in that process and in the lives of gender and sexually diverse Latinx persons.

The following questions for future studies emerged from the research:

- What of those that didn't make it?

- What triggers transmutation?

- How do we replicate transmutation?

Recall that studies discussed in chapter two indicate that GDSY continue to encounter high levels of homophobia in U.S. schools, feel unsafe, and experience negative outcomes due to homophobia (Almeida et al., 2009; Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Kane et al., 2013; Kite &Bryant-Lees, 2016; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018). It is unlikely that this study's participant group of community leaders and advocates uncovered the full dynamics and experiences of homophobia in RGV schools. Hence, additional research on members of the queer community that fell through the cracks is warranted. Perhaps their experiences with homophobia, along with being systemic and pervasive, were also highlighted with significant standalone events of homophobia. Or perhaps there is a threshold of experiencing homophobia at which transmutation is no longer possible. Lastly another question to investigate is whether there are degrees or levels of homophobia experienced in RGV Schools that contribute to the response outcome?

Stories that address these scenarios and questions must also be sought and told. However, how do you find these stories? As one participant stated: "some kids don't make it through. And they haven't made it through." How do you find and tell the stories of people whom homophobia has shoved deep into a closet or worse a coffin? It is too late to address homophobia in retrospect. It is far too long to wait into adulthood to tell and uncover stories of homophobia. We need a way to get into schools in socially conservative communities and work with queer youth

as the experiences are happening rather than waiting for the trauma to occur and set in (Flores, et. al., 2021).

Secondly, what triggers transmutation? I specifically looked at the experiences of community leaders and advocates for the queer community and so our stories are more likely to reflect the positive outcomes our lives have become. But what triggered the shift? What triggered the process of changing *"shit to gold"* as one participant so frankly put it. In future studies I would like to question participants about significant life events such as the 2016 election, that for me served as a catalyst for the alchemical process. Ultimately, we do the work on our own, but what outside factors influence our decisions and determinations to take something awful and rather than sit and suffer in it, transform it into something beautiful and meaningful for ourselves and others? I believe that intergenerational trauma plays in role in the transmutation process, but as previously stated further research is warranted to establish that connection and to uncover the full mechanisms that trigger transmutation. Overall, to help all persons that experience homophobia it is important to identify the queer philosopher's stone, so to speak, and the underlying processes that makes possible the *Alchemy of the Self* discussed in chapter four.

More importantly, if we can identify how experiences with homophobia differ and the triggers for transmutation, can we replicate the transmutation process for other queer youth? The reality is that we will not eradicate homophobia in our lifetimes (Almeida et al., 2009; Higa et al., 2014; Human Rights Campaign, 2013; Kane et al., 2013; Kite &Bryant-Lees, 2016; Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018), but perhaps we can learn and teach others enough about it to mitigate the effects of homophobia, and then, with the effects we are left with, can we teach others *Alchemy of the Self*? Can we teach queer youth to recognize traumatic experiences and

our trauma responses to them, and then the process by which how to use them to enact powerful changes for themselves and in turn others?

Siegal (1999) offers the "Window of Tolerance" model of autonomic arousal as a framework for understanding how persons process and cope with their experiences of trauma. For Siegal the "Window of Tolerance" exists between sympathetic hyperarousal and para-sympathetic hypoarousal. Between the two extremes exists a window of optimal arousal states in which emotions can be experienced as tolerable and experiences can be integrated (Siegal, 1999). On the upper end, sympathetic hyperarousal may include:

- Feeling emotionally flooded, reactive, impulsive, hypervigilant, fearful, and/or angry;

- Having entrusive imagery and affects, including racing thoughts;

- Experiencing flashbacks and/or nightmares;

- Engaging in high-risk behavior; and

- Efforts to reduce this state may include suicide planning, self-harm, and abuse of alcohol or opiates (Siegal, 1999).

In contrast, on the lower end, sympathetic hypoarousal may include:

- Having flat affect or feeling numb, "empty" or "dead";

- Experiencing cognitively dissociation or an inability to think;

- Having collapsed and/or disabled defensive responses;

- Feeling helpless and/or hopeless; and

- Efforts to reduce this state may also include suicide planning, self-harm, and abuse of alcohol or opiates (Siegal, 1999).

This study indicates that the participants experienced homophobia as trauma may have and continue to confront such trauma from within the "Window of Tolerance." However further

121

study is warranted to examine participants' experiences through the "Window of Tolerance" framework and determine how participants increase and optimize the window to integrate traumatic experiences and lead healthy productive lives.

Summary

It is unlikely that homophobia will be eradicated within the near future, but by understanding experiences with homophobia as traumatic, we can inform educators and improve school experiences and resources for GDSY. More importantly for Latinx GSDY, further research is needed to understand the role that intergenerational trauma may play in priming responses to other forms of trauma. The goal of this research was to examine how Latinx GSDY experience and confront homophobia to inform tailored professional development for educators. The study finds that educators and more importantly GSDY would be best served by professional development that centers on recognizing homophobia as trauma; positive responses to trauma; the processes of transmuting negative experiences into positive outcomes; creating and sustaining affirming schools; and affirming school leadership.

Epilogue

On my tenth birthday, I blew out my birthday candles and wished I wasn't gay; this year I turn 40, and I couldn't be prouder of my queer, nonbinary identity. For many years I contemplated taking myself out of the narrative… and now I've added to it. When I started the doctoral program, I didn't know what my study would evolve into, but I knew I wanted it to center on the educational experiences of gender and sexually diverse youth in the RGV. As I began writing my review of literature and engaging in scholarly analysis, it became clear that unless I got involved, my role as researcher would be passive and merely observational. I knew with surpassing certainty that unless I also did something outside academia, I would miss the

opportunity to speak truth and tell the narrative that needed to be told … I'd be just another scholar that missed the forest for the trees. So, I went to my first STEP meeting in October of 2018 and there I found a tribe of likeminded activist that wanted to see and help the RGV do better by its vibrant, loving, and caring queer community. This dissertation marks the end of a research study but not the end of my research goals. The end goal being to create a research-based professional development platform from where to enact positive change in public schools and provide queer youth, teachers, and administrators the tools needed to successfully recognize and confront experiences of homophobia/trauma and build upon trauma resiliency thus improving outcomes for students, their families and the larger community that is the Rio Grande Valley.

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APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

Exploring How Latinx Gender and Sexually Diverse Youth in the Rio Grande Valley Experience and Confront Homophobia: A Qualitative Study of Alumni Community Leaders/Advocates

Participant Recruitment Script

Hello, my name is Heraclio Flores, Jr, and I am a doctoral student from the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). I would like to invite you to participate in my research study to explore the experiences of homophobia encountered by Gender and Sexually Diverse Youth (GDSY) in Rio Grande Valley schools.

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UTRGV Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB).

In order to participate you must be18+ years of age; Latino, Latina, Latinx, and/or Hispanic; self-identify as gender and/or sexually diverse (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, etc.); and have attended a school in the Rio Grande Valley.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary, you may choose not to participate without penalty.

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in a three-week written interview process and journal about your experiences with homophobia in Rio Grande Valley schools. You will also be asked to participate in a follow-up interview to check-in on the accuracy of interpretations and findings. All data will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. Any sort of report made public will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. If we tape-record the interview, we will destroy the tape after it has been transcribed, which we anticipate will be within two months of its taping.

If you would like to participate in this research study, please complete the google form linked below or you may contact me via email at heraclio.flores01@utrgv.edu or via phone at (956) 500-0581.

Link to Participant Interest Form: https://forms.gle/FtnEhvZA7FXztWpX7

Do you have any questions now? If you have questions later, please contact me by email or telephone. You may also contact my faculty advisor Dr. Israel Aguilar, at israel.aguilar@utrgv.edu.

APPENDIX B

The University of Texas
Rio Grande Valley

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Exploring How Latinx Gender and Sexually Diverse Youth in the Rio Grande Valley Experience and Confront Homophobia: A Qualitative Study of Alumni Community Leaders/Advocates

Principal Investigator: Heraclio Flores, Jr.   Telephone: (956) 500-0581

Key points you should know
- We are inviting you to be in a research study we are conducting. Your participation is voluntary. This means it is up to you and only you to decide if you want to be in the study. Even if you decide to join the study, you are free to leave at any time if you change your mind.
- Take your time and ask to have any words or information that you do not understand explained to you.
- We are doing this study because we want to explore and document how Latinx GSDY experience homophobia in Rio Grande Valley school districts; how homophobia impacts their social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing; how affirming policies and practices, if any, help confront experiences of homophobia; and what strategies, if any, Latinx GSDY in the Rio Grande Valley employ to confront experiences of homophobia.
- Why are you being asked to be in this study?
  - We are asking you to take part because you are a self-identified Latinx Gender and Sexually Diverse alumni from a Rio Grande Valley school. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.
- What will you do if you agree to be in the study?
  - If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in three-week written interview process in which you will be asked to reflectively journal about your experiences as a Latinx GDSY at a Rio Grande Valley School. The interview will include questions about your demographics, your experiences of homophobia in RGV schools, the impact of homophobia on your social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing, how affirming policies, and practices schools, if any, helped your confront experiences of homophobia, and what strategies, if any, you employed to overcome homophobia. The written interview process will take place

- over a three-week period in which you will story journal entries on a private and secure USB device. After review of your written interview, a follow-up interview will be scheduled to check-in on the accuracy of interpretations and findings.
- Can you be harmed by being in this study?
  - Being in this study involves no greater risk than what you ordinarily encounter in daily life.
  - Risks to your personal privacy and confidentiality: Your participation in this research will be held strictly confidential and only a code number will be used to identify your stored data. However, because there will be a link between the code and your identity, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.
  - If we learn something new and important while doing this study that would likely affect whether you would want to be in the study, we will contact you to let you know what we have learned.
- What are the costs of being in the study?
  - There will be no costs to you by taking part in this study.
- Will you get anything for being in this study?
  - There are no direct benefits to you. However, the study may reveal findings that are significant in supporting current and future Latinx GSDY in Rio Grande Valley Schools.

Can the information we collect be used for other studies?
- Information that could identify you will be removed and the information you gave us may be used for future research by us or other researchers; we will not contact you to sign another consent form if we decide to do this.
- We will not use or distribute information you gave us for any other research by us or other researchers in the future.

What happens if I say no or change my mind?
- You can say you do not want to be in the study now or if you change your mind later, you can stop participating at any time.
- No one will treat your differently. You will not be penalized.

How will my privacy be protected?
- Your information will be stored with a code instead of identifiers (such as name, date of birth, email address, etc.).
- Even though we will make efforts to keep your information private, we cannot guarantee confidently because it is always possible that someone could figure out a way to find out what you do on a computer.
- No published scientific reports will identify you directly.
- If it is possible that your participation in this study might reveal behavior that must be reported according to state law (e.g. abuse, intent to harm self or others); disclosure of such information will be reported to the extent required by law.

Who to contact for research related questions
- For questions about this study or to report any problems you experience as a result of being in this study contact Heraclio Flores, Jr. at heraclio.flores01@utrgv.edu or at (956) 500-0581.

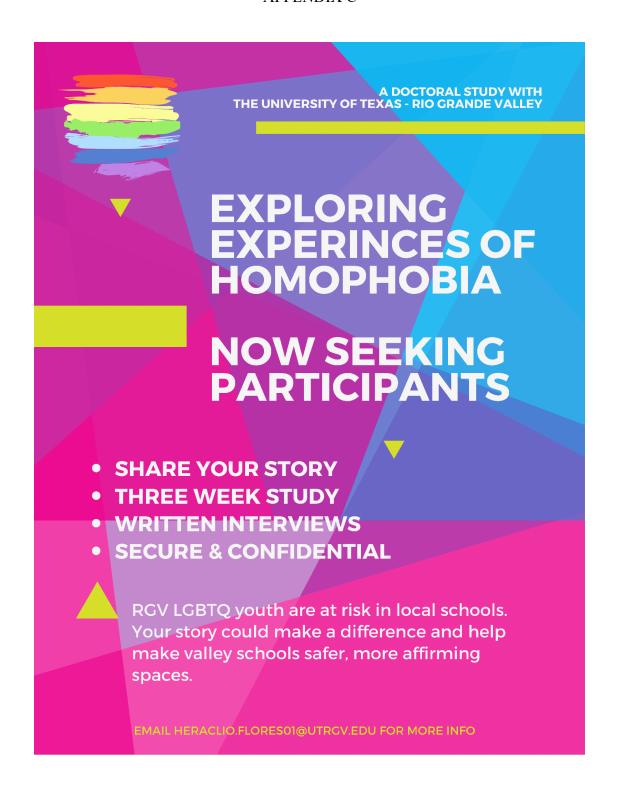Who to contact regarding your rights as a participant
- This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Protections (IRB). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel that your rights as a participant were not adequately met by the researcher, please contact the IRB at (956) 665-3598 or irb@utrgv.edu.

Signatures
- By signing below, you indicate that you are voluntarily agreeing to participate in this study and that the procedures involved have been described to your satisfaction. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this form for your own reference. To participate, you must be at least 18 years of age. If you are under 18, please inform the researcher.

_____   ____/_____/_____
Participant's Signature   Date

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX C

EXPLORING
EXPERINCES OF
HOMOPHOBIA

NOW SEEKING
PARTICIPANTS

A DOCTORAL STUDY WITH
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS - RIO GRANDE VALLEY

- SHARE YOUR STORY
- THREE WEEK STUDY
- WRITTEN INTERVIEWS
- SECURE & CONFIDENTIAL

RGV LGBTQ youth are at risk in local schools.
Your story could make a difference and help
make valley schools safer, more affirming
spaces.

EMAIL HERACLIO.FLORES01@UTRGV.EDU FOR MORE INFO

143

APPENDIX D

APPENDIX D

Dear Participant,

The goal of this written interview is to elicit deep, detailed, and meaningful recollections of your experiences with homophobia in Rio Grande Valley schools. As you respond to the prompts, please do so with mindfulness and attention to detail. Be as descriptive as possible and include as much detail as you can recollect. Often times memories are often associated with sights, sounds, smells, and other events of our past. Should an image/song/movie/poem/etc. come to mind as you recollect, please include them in your journal response. Should you be inspired to write your own poetry, lyrics, or prose, or inspired to draw, paint, illustrate, or be moved to create any personal works please do so as well. Should you be inspired and need any creative supplies do not hesitate to ask. Should have any questions about how to include something, do not hesitate to reach out via email (heraclio.flores01@utrgv.edu) or phone/text (956.500.0581). Think of this as your personal journal and make it your own. The goal is to explore how you uniquely experienced and confronted homophobia so that I may better understand how homophobia manifests in RGV schools.

You will visit five journal prompts over a three week.
   Week 1:
      • Journal about a/n experience(s) of homophobia experienced in an RGV school.
   Week 2:
      • Journal about how homophobia experiences in RGV public schools impacted your social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing.
      • Journal about anything or anyone in RGV schools that helped you confront or improved your experiences of homophobia.
   Week 3:
      • Journal about any strategies or activities that you engaged in to confront with or improve your experiences of homophobia in RGV schools.
      • Journal about how school leaders (principals, assistant principals) improved or did not improve your experiences of homophobia is RGV schools.

As you make time to journal, consider using a formal writing process and break up the process into chunks. Take time to brainstorm ideas, write and initial draft, and then revisit it throughout the week to add more detail and understanding. For the most part, do not worry about grammar rules and syntax so long as your intended meaning is intact and conveyed. Thank you again for your participation and foremost, thank you for allowing me to glimpse a part of your life that is understandably personal and may at times be painful. Trust that I will honor and cherish your personal accounts and at all times treat your responses with confidentiality and respect.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Heraclio Flores, Jr. (AKA Luckie) is a Rio Grande Valley (RGV) native and identifies as queer, nonbinary. They reside in western Hidalgo County and attended public schools there as well. Luckie received their undergraduate degree from the University of Texas - Pan American in 2004 with a B.S in Biology. Continuing at the University of Texas - Pan American, they completed their M.E. in Educational Administration in 2011 and their principal certificate in 2012. They have served as an educator in the RGV for the last seventeen years having been a classroom teacher, gifted education specialist, elementary assistant principal, and content area coordinator for social studies, science, and English language arts. They are presently the vice-president of the South Texas Equality Project (STEP), and Co-chair of Teach For America RGV PRISM, both organizations that serve queer and marginalized communities in the RGV. Correspondence may be sent to luckieflores@me.com.