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BUILDING AN AFFIRMATIVE LGBTQ+ LEADERSHIP PARADIGM:  
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

By

Joshua D. Covington  
B.A., The University of Kentucky, 2009  
M.A.Ed., The University of Kentucky, 2010

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Education and Human Development of the University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Doctor of Education  
in Educational Leadership and Organizational Development

Department of Educational Leadership, Evaluation, and Organizational Development  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

August 2023

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A Dissertation Approved on

August 3, 2023

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## DEDICATION

To Caroline and Quinn... May you always embrace your authentic selves and never waiver from who you are and who you want to be.

To my mom, Sherry... your daily sacrifices and support got me to this point. I am eternally grateful.

To my LGBTQ+ community members, both here and gone, you are seen, and you are loved for exactly who you are. Never stop being you, and may we never stop fighting for our place in the world and for what we know is right.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As I sit here reflecting on my journey as a doctoral student, my heart is filled with appreciation for my committee members. First, I would like to thank my committee co-chairs, Dr. Mary Brydon-Miller and Dr. Gianina Fink. This endeavor would not have been possible without their unwavering support, patient guidance, and dedicated effort to see me succeed. To all my committee members, thank you for helping to always guide me toward excellence, asking me the tough questions, and only allowing me to give my best. Your dedication to my progress is a testament to your selflessness and commitment to education. I am forever grateful for your kindness and mentorship, and I know that my achievements are a reflection of your unwavering support.

To my family and friends, I am filled with immense gratitude for your steadfast love, encouragement, and support. Your faith in me has been a source of great strength and comfort, pushing me even in the toughest times. Your moral support and uplifting words have kept me going and given me the motivation I needed to pursue my goals and see this to the end. I want to express my sincere gratitude to each and every one of you for sharing in my successes and struggles, for being my cheerleaders, and for always having my back. Your unconditional love and support have been a priceless gift that I will always treasure. I could not have made it this far without you. So, to my girls, my mother, my father, my brother, Taylor, Allen, Zach, Alex, Rachelle, and Shane – thank you from the bottom of my heart!

## ABSTRACT

### BUILDING AN AFFIRMATIVE LGBTQ+ LEADERSHIP PARADIGM:

#### AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Joshua D. Covington

August 3, 2023

This study is an autoethnography written in the form of layered accounts with a theoretical framework of queer theory. It was based on my journey as an LGBTQ+ individual and educational leader. The purpose of this study was to utilize my experiences as an LGBTQ+ educational leader to investigate the conditions that supported and limited my self-efficacy as an LGBTQ+ educational leader. Furthermore, this study investigated what things my experiences could teach us about building an affirmative LGBTQ+ leadership paradigm.

My autoethnography was written as three significant stages of my life. The first stage was my experience with education as a student. The second stage was my early experience as an educator. And the third stage was my experiences as an openly LGBTQ+ educational leader. For each stage, there were three distinct layers. Layer one consisted of my perception and memories of my lived experiences. Layer two consisted of other people's perceptions of my lived experiences. And layer three consisted of relevant literature being juxtaposed with my experiences.

Throughout the study, three areas help to frame the autoethnography and better explain what is happening with this phenomenon in terms of supporting and/or limiting



my self-efficacy as an LGBTQ+ educational leader. These areas are belonging, identity development, and the reciprocal interactions between people and their environments. Themes of living my authentic self, belonging to a community where I can freely express myself, and embracing my identity through changes or difficult situations are present throughout the data.

From my experiences as illustrated in my autoethnography, conclusions are drawn. These are that as an LGBTQ+ educational leader, I must have a sense of belonging with a group of people that support my true identity. My identity development took place over time and is still evolving to this day. Additionally, my experiences, environments, and reflection on those things helped and continue to help shape me into the person I have become. Further research is needed to explore others in the LGBTQ+ educational leaders' community and other aspects of this phenomenon.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be a queer leader, particularly in the field of education?

Pryor (2020) defines queer as “social practices that challenge the normative expectations of gender and sexuality” (p. 70). The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and plus (LGBTQ+) community challenges the heteronormative expectations of gender and sexuality, but this challenge of gender and sexual norms is not always seen in K12, public and private educational institutions. Lugg and Tooms (2010) have suggested approaches for exercising queer leadership through the enactment of inclusive ways that challenge heterogenderism in our educational systems. Pryor (2020) concludes that “previous explorations of queer leadership have provided minimal guidance in defining queer leadership” (p. 70). Thus, LGBTQ+ educational leaders have historically had minimal direction as to the conditions that support their leadership effectiveness.

As a bisexual male, I have experienced multiple facets of life from a marginalized viewpoint. I have experienced the fear of a closeted teenager in a small, private school setting that is located in a rural, religious community with a Southern Baptist leaning. Growing up in this environment, the only other person I experienced that was part of the LGBTQ+ community was a close friend. There were no visible adults in the LGBTQ+ community where I was raised, let alone a leader in my community that identified as LGBTQ+. The education system in my hometown mirrored that of the religious community. Even the mindset in my non-religious, private school about people who identified as LGBTQ+ was that they were experiencing a problem, and it was an

individual choice to be remedied within your church community or with a counselor. For the majority of my life, I believed that I was making a choice that had to be hidden. A choice that I had sought relief from through conventional, religious means. I lacked an LGBTQ+ role model to help me navigate a pivotal point in my life. And so, I kept it hidden and played the role I was led to believe I should.

Early in my career as an educator, my students would make assumptions or question my sexual orientation. While I know that certain traits are not indicators of my sexuality, I was conditioned by my experiences growing up that these things could very well expose such things. I was forever vigilant of my mannerisms, the pitch of my voice, and my word choice. To avoid talking too much with my hands, I utilized my pockets. To avoid a potential lisp that I saw a speech therapist for as a child, I used words that were less likely to allow a lisp sound to be made. To avoid speaking too high, I practiced talking lower and singing in the car to songs with a lower pitch. As I tried to further my career from a classroom teacher into administration, I was often told that the area I lacked most for getting that position was discipline, that I needed to be harder on discipline. This was surprising to me. I had good classroom management, had never shied away from breaking up fights, and maintained positive relationships with the students and parents. At the end of my sixth year of teaching, it started to make sense. A student walked up to me and said they had wondered all year if I was gay. But after getting to know me, they decided that I was cool and was not gay. Looking back at that encounter, I now realize many pieces that were at play. This student, who embodied a heteronormative persona, viewed me as different from him because I did not fit the mold. I was more feminine and communal in nature regardless of how hard I tried to hide it. My non-disclosed sexual

orientation, non-conforming gender identity, and stigma were playing into the context of my work environment.

In my current role as a director of school leadership and accountability and doctoral student, I have spent much time in reflection on this topic and the role that my personal experiences are playing in my current reality. I questioned whether or not I should attempt to research LGBTQ+ issues in education for fear of what it might mean for me. I asked myself if I was ready for my classmates and professors to know that I was a bisexual male. I questioned what the repercussions would be if my then superintendent, school colleagues, students, and their guardians found out about my sexual orientation. Would my job get more difficult if I became the target of a small-town community that fails to accept people that are different from their norm? Would my classmates and professors treat me differently or think differently of me if they found out? What would people's perceptions of me be one day if I'm hired for a job and they find out my dissertation was on LGBTQ+ issues? Would this limit my ability to advance in the field of education? When people ask me what my dissertation is about, old friends and complete strangers, am I ready for their reaction? Even before my literature review began, this dissertation topic caused me significant anxiety.

As a mostly out, bisexual male, I must ask how my life would be different had I experienced an LGBTQ+ leader through life. If I had experienced a leader that openly identified as LGBTQ+, I could have observed a leader who identifies as such. I could have better prepared myself for a transition into leadership. But I also could have learned how my attributes and experiences prepared me for my current role as an educational leader. Through this study, I will explore the experiences of myself as an LGBTQ+

educational leader to gather an understanding of those experiences and the conditions that support or limit my self-efficacy as LGBTQ+.

### **Purpose of Study**

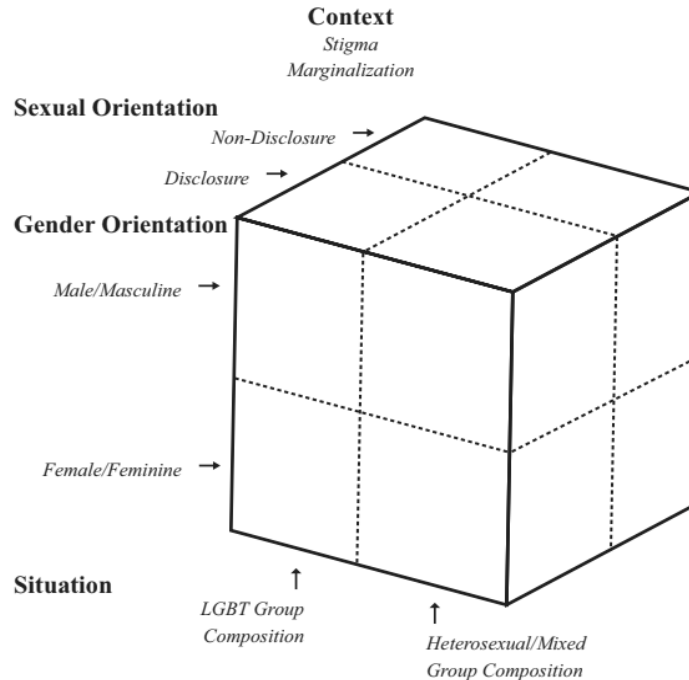
The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences that I have gone through as an educational leader and member of the LGBTQ+ community. In particular, I will seek to understand the experiences and circumstances that supported and limited my work and self-efficacy as an LGBTQ+ educational leader. In doing so, I will identify the support systems that I found and pitfalls I could have avoided in order to provide context to the literature on this phenomenon. These areas or themes will provide future research additional context into the experiences of LGBTQ+ educational leaders.

As leadership theory has evolved from that existing in a White, heteronormative world to include gender and racial minorities, it has further grown into something that's transformative and requires characteristics that are not possessed solely by one gender or one racial group. According to Fassinger et al. (2010), "western cultures have moved even further beyond transformational approaches to learning-based concepts of leadership... [that] require cognitive complexity, flexibility, agility, and rapid reformulation of both problems and solutions to respond to continuously changing contexts" (p. 203). Additionally, Fassinger et al. (2010) conclude the evolutions of leadership have coincided with the movements of women, African Americans, the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalized peoples. As the models of leadership have grown, it is essential to research and further expand the knowledge on the relationship between leadership and those who identify as LGBTQ+ as previously marginalized groups have done throughout history.

## **Research Questions**

My research questions for this study are (a) “What conditions supported and/or do support my self-efficacy as an educational leader who identifies as LGBTQ+?”; (b) “What conditions limited and/or limit my self-efficacy as an educational leader who identifies as LGBTQ+?”; and (c) “What can my experiences as an LGBTQ+ educational leader teach us about building an affirmative LGBTQ+ leadership paradigm?”. To study this, I will utilize a phenomenological, qualitative approach known as autoethnography to study my own lived experiences as an LGBTQ+ educational leader. This approach will seek to understand the essence of this phenomenon. While completing this study, I will have to exercise reflexivity to explore how my involvement directly influences my research through this autoethnography. This will also require a significant level of transparency to discover how my perceptions and past experiences impact my data collection and analysis.

In my review of the current literature, I have found qualitative research that focuses on single issues such as sexual orientation, gay males, lesbians, or gender identity. One model stands out as it attempts to understand participants’ experiences in a more holistic manner. It is a multi-dimensional model of affirmative LGBTQ+ leadership designed by Fassinger et al. (2010) that explores the context, sexual orientation, gender orientation, and situation, which is conceptualized as the leader’s group composition.



This model captures the multifaceted experiences of LGBTQ+ educational leaders. However, this model examines the LGBTQ+ experiences in terms of binaries explained in more detail below, and as we will see through my autoethnography, life is not as simple and easily categorized with binaries.

The Affirmative Model of LGBTQ Leadership Enactment as presented by Fassinger et al. (2010) consists of three dimensions and the overall context of the leadership experience. The context for the model is based upon Herek’s sexual stigma framework, which “addresses the denigration, disrespect, and disempowering of sexual minority individuals and groups” (Fassinger et al., 2010, p. 205). Through Herek’s framework (2009), context is provided through two types of stigma: the first being societal stigma that promotes heterosexuality as normal and LGBTQ+ persons as different, degenerate, or invisible; the second being individual stigma which manifests in three ways. The first manifestation is through enacted stigma or behaviors that can be

mild to violent. Examples of enacted stigma include discriminatory laws or workplace discrimination. The second manifestation is felt stigma, the feelings one feels from their awareness of stigma whether it is directed toward them or not. Examples of felt stigma would be the stress one experiences from self-protective measures and identity concealment. The third manifestation is internalized stigma or self-stigma. Examples of this include “self-hatred, identity denial, and identity concealment that characterize many sexual minority individuals at some point in their lives” (p. 206). The first dimension of the model is sexual orientation which analyzes whether the sexual orientation is disclosed or nondisclosed. The second dimension is gender orientation which “includes not only biological/physiological/assigned gender, but also gender roles, attitudes, cognition, behavior, and presentation - in short, the way in which each individual’s gender is expressed” (p. 210). The third dimension is the situation that analyzes the group composition as LGBTQ+, mixed, or heterosexual. This can include information on the interactions between the leader and followers, follower expectations, and the values of the group composition.

According to the Fassinger et al. (2010) study, marginalized groups of people like the Two Spirit in indigenous communities with a twenty-five thousand year position on life and family and the modern day LGBTQ+ community, can offer insight into the lived experiences of individuals both within that group and into the larger area of that field of study. For the purposes of this study, it is me as an LGBTQ educational leader. Anderson (2015) concluded the following:

There are important things to learn from taking seriously the perspectives of all marginalized groups—not just of various groups of women, but men and women

in postcolonial societies, men and women of color, gay men, and so forth. A system of knowledge that draws on their insights and starts from their predicaments will be richer than one that draws only on the insights and starts from the predicaments of privileged groups alone. (para. 2)

By providing this space for myself to share and analyze my experiences as an LGBTQ+ educational leader, knowledge can be drawn to provide richer contextualization of LGBTQ+ leadership in the field of education.

### **Definitions of Terms**

I use the following terms in the context of this study:

*Affirmative LGBTQ+ Leadership Paradigm* (Fassinger et al., 2010): This refers to a supportive model of leadership for individuals in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, and queer community.

*Autoethnography*: This refers to a style of research and writing that demonstrates multiple layers of consciousness and ties personal experiences to cultural ones (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

*Cisgender*: This refers to a person who identifies as the sex they were assigned at birth

*Closeted*: This refers to a person whose sexuality and/or gender orientation is not known to others or is hidden from others.

*Co-constructed Narratives*: This is a type of autoethnography that involves several authors who each write their own stories, based on their own revelations, followed by sharing and reacting to each other's stories (Bochner & Ellis, 1995; Toyosaki & Pensoneau, 2005; Vande Berg & Trujillo, 2008).



*Community Autoethnographies:* This is a type of autoethnography that is written by bringing together the personal accounts of researchers to define and lay out how certain socio-cultural aspects of a community are conveyed (Toyosaki, Pensoneau-Conway, Wendt, & Leathers, 2009).

*Cultural Stigma:* This refers to heterosexist assumptions that are deeply embedded in society through religion, laws, health, and the workplace and perpetuates heterosexuality as normal and natural in a way that renders LGBTQ+ individuals as invisible, sick, immoral, or evil (Fassinger et al., 2010).

*Enacted Stigma:* This refers to a person's behaviors that vary from exclusion to outright violence. An example is bullying (Fassinger et al., 2010).

*Felt Stigma:* This refers to a person's awareness of the shame or disgrace they might feel from being a member of the LGBTQ+ community and the consequences of that whether the person was targeted or not (Fassinger et al., 2010).

*Gender Orientation:* This refers to a person's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither; this can be the same or different than the sex assigned to them at birth (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).

*Indigenous/Native Ethnographies:* This is a type of ethnography developed "from colonized or economically subordinated people and are used to address and disrupt power in research, particularly an (outside) researcher's right and authority to study (exotic) others" (Ellis et al., 2001, p. 6). It rejects the notion of subjugating those who are studied to the mercy of the heteronormative, White male, Christian, and upper-to-middle class ethnographers (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008).

*Individual Stigma:* This is a personal and psychological experience of shame or disgrace they might feel from being a member of the LGBTQ+ community that “manifests in three distinct ways as enacted, felt, and internalized stigma” (Fassinger et al., 2010, p. 205).

*Interactive Interviews:* This is a type of autoethnography that is collaborative in nature and involves interactive interviews that equip readers with an intimate portrait of how people react to sensitive subject matter, like substance abuse or eating disorders, through conversation (Adams, 2008; Ellis et al., 2011). It often emphasizes what is learned from the interactions between the researcher and participants during the interview process by providing deep, detailed stories from the participants (Mey & Mruck, 2010).

*Layered Accounts:* This type of autoethnography is one that juxtaposes the researcher’s experience beside pertinent literature, data, and abstract analysis (Ellis et al., 2011; Ronai, 1995).

*Researcher’s experience (layer one):* This is the first of three layers within layered accounts. It conveys the experiences of the researcher in a narrative form (Ellis et al., 2011; Ronai, 1995).

*Responses of others (layer two):* This is the second of three layers within layered accounts. It explores how those around the researcher responded to the events which transpired in their experiences (Ellis et al., 2011; Ronai, 1995).

*What the literature states (layer three):* This is the third of three layers within layered accounts. It compares the experiences of the

researcher to relevant literature on the topic (Ellis et al., 2011; Ronai, 1995).

*LGBTQ+*: This is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and the plus, which also includes pansexual, genderqueer, intersexed, agender, asexual, and ally.

*Narrative Ethnography*: This type of ethnography is the outcome in a shift from observing just the participants to observing how the story is told as a method for studies within anthropology (Tedlock, 1991). While observing involvement in this way, “ethnographers both experience and observe their own and others’ coparticipation within the ethnographic encounter” (Tedlock, 1991, p. 69). His proposed procedural shift shows:

a representational transformation in which, instead of a choice between writing an ethnographic memoir centering on the Self or a standard monograph centering on the Other, both the Self and Other are presented together within a single narrative ethnography, focused on the character and process of the ethnographic dialogue. (Tedlock, 1991, p. 69)

*Organizational Situation*: This refers to the group composition of an organization as shown in the Fassinger et al. (2010) model of affirmative LGBTQ+ leadership enactment, which consists of either an LGBTQ+ group composition or a heterosexual/mixed group composition.

*Out of the Closet*: This refers to a person whose sexuality and/or gender orientation has been disclosed to others, willingly or unwillingly.

*Personal Narratives:* This type of autoethnography is noted as the most controversial type, partly due to the lack of “traditional analysis and/or connections to scholarly literature”, which are staples in traditional research (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 7). In this type, the academic and personal aspects of the researcher’s life are discussed in a way where the researcher functions as the phenomenon (Ellis et al., 2011). Personal narratives attempt to make sense of life and self as they relate to culture, and the researcher may connect with participants and rely on them as co-researchers (Ellis, 2004).

*Reflexive Dyadic Interviews:* This type of autoethnographic data collection method focuses on the emotional dynamics as and meanings developed during the interactions of actual interviews that take place (Ellis et al., 2011). Unlike many interviews where the importance is on the answers of participants, reflexive dyadic interviews reflect on the feelings of the researchers, which includes personal aspects of researchers like their inspiration for conducting the research, passionate responses to the interviews, ways in which the researcher was transformed by the interview process, and knowledge with the subject matter (Ellis et al., 2011).

*Reflexive Ethnographies:* Unlike reflexive dyadic interviews, this type of autoethnography focuses primarily on the ethnographer (Ellis et al., 2011). This is done by detailing how a researcher transforms during the research process (Ellis et al., 2011). This could be presented in multiple ways as a reflexive/narrative ethnography such as: a) a biography of the ethnographer, b) the ethnographer completing a simultaneous study of their life in comparison to those of cultural

members, or c) making memoirs that portray the ethnographer's research with a behind-the-scenes look as the focal point of the research (Ellis, 2004; Van Maanen, 1988).

*Sexual Orientation:* This refers to a person's innate and fixed emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

I utilize a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach called autoethnography to explore the meaning of an LGBTQ+ educational leader's experiences, specifically through my lived experiences. The vulnerability to open oneself up when in places of leadership in the field of education will provide my study with a depth of knowledge from the lens of my LGBTQ+ educational leadership experiences. As an autoethnography, I will be the main participant the study follows. Because of this, there will not be an equal distribution from all groups across the LGBTQ+ community spectrum. A strength of this in-depth study using an autoethnography is to be able to honor and learn from my lived experiences.

Another strength of this study is the use of queer theory, a relatively new theoretical framework (Watson, 2005). The very nature of queer theory is such that it allows traditionally binary categories like gender and sexuality to be examined as not fixed and uneasy to categorize. Queer theory explores the fluidity of gender and sexuality. This will challenge readers that are not familiar with a culture that is outside of the heteronormative society that permeates the world. This will also create complexity for the readers which reflects the lived experiences of all people as the lives of humans are each unique.

Using an autoethnographic approach allows me to find common themes to be analyzed and expressed in a way that is narrative and draws in the reader of the study. According to Dunn and Mellor (2017), the emotional and symbolic aspects of people's experiences aren't always captured by the traditional methods of research. Eisner (2008) suggests that methods like an autoethnography potentially do a better job of capturing complex subtleties such as the intersectionality found in the affirmative model of LGBTQ+ leadership enactment. Additionally, the narrative form of autoethnography allows for data collection that is non-binary or categorical in nature and lends itself to queer theory, unlike previous studies like Fassinger et al. (2010). It provides a safe, flexible space for me to engage with my experiences and allows for the reflection and processing of my stories. Some scholars might not consider the findings as meaningful to the scholarly literature because they dismiss it as being insufficiently rigorous, too artistic, too emotional, or for doing too little fieldwork with others (Buzard, 2003; Ellis, 2009b; Fine, 2003). However, I believe it to be a strength since it is on the cutting edge of social research.

As an educational leader and researcher, I will not compromise my experiences as a member of the LGBTQ+ community or my integrity as a researcher by conceding to impartial thinking and writing on this topic. My beliefs and work as an educational leader largely stem from my experiences as an LGBTQ+ community member. It is these very experiences that have led me to this point where I have chosen to study the experiences of LGBTQ+ educational leaders. My hope is this will bring value and passion to this study's participants and readers. The limitations for this study included a lack of access to pertinent information from my childhood, sometimes a lack of memory, cultural shifts in

society, time moving continuously, science has progressed but remains limited, my failures to draw other successes and individualized views on self, which in turn influences others and how they interact with me. To help aid this limitation, I utilized layered accounts to provide validity through the responses of others and a comparison to the research literature.

Just as I don't fit the heteronormative mold in my sexuality, I might not fit the academic researcher mold through my dissertation. A potential weakness I fear of this approach is that it will produce data that is typically considered less robust in its ability to objectively be reliable and valid, because it's less tangible than traditional forms of social research. This approach challenges the dominant conventions surrounding what is traditionally thought of as scholarly research, knowledge, and impact, which some may view as a weakness. I do not see this as a weakness and instead view it as an opportunity to expand what we view as authentic and meaningful research, especially as it pertains to queer theory and the LGBTQ+ community.

### **Positionality Statement**

While considering the framework for this research study, it is critical to explain what I bring to the study. Through my personal experience as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I bring preconceived notions of the LGBTQ+ experience from my rural, religious, upbringing. I have experienced work environments as both a disclosed and nondisclosed bisexual. I have experienced harassment in schools as an employee and as a student. I have dealt with the stigma of being in the LGBTQ+ community and the marginalization of such. These experiences have impacted the methods with which I have chosen to perform this research study on LGBTQ+ educational leadership. The impact

has led me to a place where I recognize the power of story and its connection to research literature. It has led me to share my story to add context to the literature on the experiences of LGBTQ+ education leaders through an autoethnography, reclaiming the voice of the researcher and expanding the literature.

My personal experience will require reflexivity as I collect data, analyze my data, and communicate my findings. Throughout the entire process of my research, I will be self-critical and self-consciously analytical about my relationship with the field, characters in my story, and data by using a structured ethical reflection grid (see Appendix B for the specific structured ethical reflection grid). Using this structured ethical reflection grid, I will utilize a field journal and personal vlogs to record data on my feelings, reactions, and overall thoughts throughout the writing of my autoethnography.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

I organized my dissertation in to eight chapters. Chapter one includes an introduction that explains my personal reasoning for pursuing the topic of this study, the purpose of this study, definition of terms, and current identified strengths of the study. Chapter two reviews the literature on the LGBTQ+ context in the United States of America, the LGBTQ+ context in education, belonging, identity development, Social Cognitive Theory, and Queer Theory. Chapter three is an explanation of the research design, data collection, data analysis, and the procedures for this study. Chapters four through six are my autoethnographic layered accounts broken into three significant stages of my life as it pertains to education. These three layers consist of my account, others' reactions to what happened, and a comparison of my experiences to the literature.



Chapter seven consists of a discussion around my research questions and my observations from the study as they are situated in the research literature. And chapter eight concludes with my summary, conclusions and implications for change, recommendations for future research, and my reflections on the research process.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

My literature review begins with a brief exploration of the historical context of the LGBTQ+ experience in the United States and then discusses in more depth our current political trends and LGBTQ+ happenings. Next, the literature on LGBTQ+ issues for students and educators is surveyed to provide a context of the LGBTQ+ experience in education. After this, I explore the literature on the topics of belonging, identity development, and Social Cognitive Theory. Then, I discuss the tenets of Queer Theory, discussing the key researchers that developed it and exploring its application in social sciences research, educational research, and educational leadership research. Lastly, I summarize my literature and explain its implications for this study.

### **LGBTQ+ Context in the United States**

There is a history of so called “sexual deviance” outside of the heteronormative that spans the traditionally taught history of North America. There is documentation as early as the time of Christopher Columbus about behaviors that we would currently label LGBTQ+ (Bronski, 2011; Bronski & Chevat, 2019). Since that time, our understanding of LGBTQ+ behaviors, our language to describe such behaviors, and our acknowledgement of the rights of people who now identify as LGBTQ+ have evolved.

### ***History of LGBTQ+ Rights and Freedoms***

Many puritan beliefs took hold during the colonization of North America and to the birth of a nation. Also, during this time, a new form of masculinity emerged during the Revolutionary War. The new “American Man” was a rugged, bold fighter who was

not afraid to assert himself (Bronski & Chevat, 2019). In the budding culture of this new American nation, gender norms and sexual norms for men and women were being defined and barriers, such as sodomy laws, helped to ensure adherence to these norms as previous European gender and sexual norms strongly tied to political alliances and family structures gave way to ideas of freedom for intimacy and passion in sexual relationships (Hardwick, 2020).

In the indigenous community, the history of Two Spirit individuals holds a profound significance in the context of the LGBTQ community and its history. Two-Spirit is a term many Indigenous cultures across North America embrace to describe individuals who embody masculine and feminine qualities, transcending traditional gender norms (Mesa-Miles, 2018). Within their communities, Two Spirit people historically held respected roles as healers, teachers, and spiritual leaders. They were often regarded as possessing unique insights and a deep connection to the natural world and spirituality. However, with the arrival of European colonizers and the imposition of rigid gender binaries and homophobic ideologies, the status and visibility of Two Spirit individuals were eroded (Mesa-Miles, 2018). Today, there is a growing movement among Indigenous communities to reclaim and celebrate the cultural heritage of Two Spirit people, fostering an inclusive understanding of gender and sexuality that honors both traditional values and contemporary LGBTQ rights activism (Pullin, 2014). By acknowledging and embracing their rich history, the Indigenous LGBTQ community aims to promote healing, resilience, and a renewed sense of identity and belonging for Two-Spirit individuals.

As the United States grew and expanded westward, a community of sorts was beginning to emerge. Early on during the Gold Rush, San Francisco was known for its tolerance of illegal behaviors and predisposed itself as a non-conforming culture with tens of thousands of men and only a few hundred women (Bronski, 2011). Bronski goes on to note that the existence of all-male bathhouses, acceptance of same-sex dancing, and entertainment from cross-dressing were part of the culture that would cause some to label San Francisco the “Sodom by the Sea” by the year 1885 (p. 46).

In the broader context of American society, sexual deviance from the heteronormative was still not accepted. Post World War II America became apprehensive of any *un-American* activity, one of which was homosexuality, as the United States continued its practice of discharging homosexuals from the military (Bronski, 2011; Faderman, 2016). Soldiers would be provided a “blue ticket” discharge, which was neither honorable or dishonorable, and labeled as “unfit for service” (Bérubé, 1991). However, in the decades following World War II, society in the United States was changing. The Civil Rights Movement, with the emergence of national organizations fighting for change, prompted the LGBTQ+ community to systematically create their own organizations to face prejudice against their own community (Yurcaba, 2021).

For those in the LGBTQ+ community, the Stonewall “riots” that took place in June of 1969 were the impetus for the gay rights movement. After this event, the LGBTQ+ community began organizing faster than in the previous decades and feverishly fought for their rights. Even in the midst of same-sex marriage being banned in multiple states, the LGBTQ+ community kept fighting to protect their own people (Morris, 2009).

In the 1980s the LGBTQ+ community was rocked with the AIDS epidemic that drew the community closer together but also increased a stigma from the outside (Byard, 1997). In the 1990s, the Georgetown Law Library (2020) chronicles the numerous setbacks dealt with by the LGBTQ+ community, specifically the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” mandate in the U.S. armed services and the Defense of Marriage Act, which banned the recognition of same sex marriages. While some view the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” mandate as a step forward from being banned from serving at all in the military, it still did not allow for LGBTQ+ members to serve as their authentic selves.

By the late 2000’s, the LGBTQ+ community was seeing changes to their rights through the repeal of the “Don’t ask don’t tell” and marriage equality laws being passed. Within the last decade, transgender soldiers have been allowed to join the military, same-sex marriage was declared legal by the Supreme Court, and the first group of openly gay Olympic athletes competed in the Rio de Janeiro Olympic games (GLSEN, 2017). But even through all of that progress, there were still multiple setbacks that came about and are hindering the LGBTQ+ community in our current political climate.

### ***Current Political Trends***

In our current heteronormative national climate, LGBTQ+ persons have seen a fluctuation in their rights and protections according to Griffin (2019) in the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) congressional scorecard for the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress. Whether it is from changing political ideologies in power in our political institutions or the inconsistencies from state to state in the union, Griffin (2019) notes in his opening letter of the report that the past two years have been difficult for the LGBTQ+ community and “the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress has done little to advance LGBTQ equality, while allowing a great

deal to be done that undermines the rights of the most vulnerable members of [the LGBTQ] community” (p. 3).

Additionally, the Human Rights Campaign “Congressional Scorecard for Measuring Support for Equality in the 115<sup>th</sup> Congress” (2019) concludes that the LGBTQ+ community has recently seen attacks on its rights and freedoms from the banning of transgender people from serving in the military to allowing the outright discrimination of those in the LGBTQ+ community. Examples of this discrimination are found most recently in a study by the Center for American Progress called “The State of the LGBTQ+ Community in 2020”. Some of the most alarming statistics pointed out by Sosin (2020) include that one in three LGBTQ+ Americans experienced discrimination in some form at work, school, or other public place in the past year, 52% of those surveyed expressed that the discrimination wore on their mental health, and 54% of LGBTQ+ members went as far as hiding their personal relationships for fear of being discriminated against.

Even when LGBTQ+ rights were expanded under the Clinton and Obama administrations, Miller et al. (2018) note President Trump’s “administration has been publicly hostile towards the interests of LGBT people, and especially towards trans and gender queer public-school students” (p. 346). For example, in the final two weeks that President Trump was in office, he finalized a rule that rolled back protections of LGBTQ+ families in the Department of Health and Human Services in regard to their ability to benefit from federally funded programs that deal with things like adoption (Thoreson, 2021). While the LGBTQ community as a whole experiences discrimination,

people identifying as trans have received heightened attention in the current political climate.

### ***Current LGBTQ+ Legal Challenges***

The current trend for groups of minorities in our court systems is moving toward a more conservative ideology with the significant increase of conservative judges being appointed to the bench in local, state, and national levels (Stevens, 2020, para. 1). Three significant U. S. Supreme Court cases were decided upon during the 2019-2020 docket. *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia, Altitude Express Inc. v. Zarda*, and *R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes Inc. v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission* are the three major cases reviewed to determine whether individuals that identify as LGBTQ+ are protected under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-2. These cases were ruled upon on June 15, 2020 and determined that LGBTQ+ persons are a protected class of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This allows LGBTQ+ persons to maintain a job and advance in their career more easily because they are protected from discrimination in the workplace based on their sexuality or gender orientation.

In at least ten states, laws have been passed that discriminate against transgender people. In Kentucky for example, Republican lawmakers recently voted to override the governor's veto of a bill referred to as the "most extreme anti-LGBTQ bill in America" by Kentucky democrats (Drenon, 2023). The bill restricts discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools, bans transgender medical treatment for minors, and prohibits transgender students from using bathrooms, locker rooms, or shower rooms that match their gender identity (Drenon, 2023). LGBTQ groups have fiercely protested the

law, which is part of a wider trend in the US of laws aimed against the trans community. Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear vetoed the bill, arguing it would strip freedom from parents and increase the suicide rate among Kentucky's youth, but Republican legislators overrode his veto with a supermajority vote (Drenon, 2023). This bill on transgender youth is one example of bills being introduced continually across the country and could be significant with far-reaching consequences in the United States.

The outcome of these cases should ease some fear and anxiety that LGBTQ+ persons feel regarding whether industry or educational leaders disclose their orientation or identification to their employers. However, the movement in state legislatures across the country is alarming. It is imperative that we understand the conditions that support or penalize leaders who identify as LGBTQ+ to support this community of students and educational leaders when faced with an adverse political climate like the one we are seeing today.

### **LGBTQ+ Issues in Education**

In the research literature on LGBTQ+ issues, you can find a relationship between that of the larger political culture and students in *K12* education. LGBTQ+ students have faced difficulties in school from their peers and even their educators. LGBTQ+ educators have faced similar if not the same difficulties as their student counterparts. I summarize these perspectives, supports, and experiences below.

In the field of education, there has been a similar occurrence for those in the LGBTQ+ community with the connection between their educational environments and the current political climate. In my experience as an American government and history teacher, queer history is not represented with equity if it is even represented at all in our



public and private schools. The U.S. Department of Education, under the leadership of Betsy DeVos, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Justice, under the leadership of then Attorney General Jeff Sessions, targeted some of our most vulnerable members by rescinding guidance the Obama Administration issued to protect transgender students until Title IX through their “Dear Colleagues Letter” (Battle & Wheeler, 2017), which is an official letter sent by a lawmaker to provide guidance or interpretation regarding legislative requirements.

In this letter, the Department of Education and the Department of Justice rescinded the previous guidance provided through two dear colleague letters from 2015 and 2016. The letter took the stance that any guidance from those letters on the treatment of transgender students should come from state legislatures and not these two departments. Through multiple levels of the governmental and educational bureaucracies, LGBTQ+ persons are experiencing an erosion of rights.

### ***Perspectives of LGBTQ+ Students***

In 2012, the Human Rights Campaign completed a groundbreaking study called *Growing Up LGBT in America* that “reported on the experiences of over 10,000 LGBTQ-identified youth aged 13-17 and painted a stark picture of the difficulties they faced” (Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2017, p. 3). In 2017, the Human Rights Campaign, in conjunction with researchers from the University of Connecticut, completed a follow-up study of over 12,000 students from the ages of 13-17 in the United States. The survey consisted of over 150 questions and was open for completion from April to December of 2017 (HRC, 2017, p. 22). Only respondents that self-identified as LGBTQ+ youth through qualifying answers were able to complete the survey. From the first study to the

most recent, the research showed the persistent, serious, and challenging issues LGBTQ+ youth face on a daily basis in their homes, schools, and communities. One finding of the *2018 LGBTQ Youth Report* is that “78% of youth not out to their parents as LGBTQ hear their families make negative comments about LGBTQ people” (HRC, 2017, p. 4). The report shows that nearly all LGBTQ+ students suffer from mental illness, sleeplessness, or sexual violence. One youth is reported as saying, “The counselors at my school have never said whether we can come to them about LGBTQ subjects or not. So you really don’t know if they are well educated about the LGBTQ community” (HRC, 2017, p. 7). Students have significant challenges yet are lacking knowledgeable adults to help them through these.

The HRC study found that only an alarming “26% of LGBTQ youth report that they always feel safe in the classroom” (2017, p. 8). Additionally, only 19 states have established anti-bullying laws to protect LGBTQ+ students, and only 13 have established non-discrimination laws to protect LGBTQ+ students (HRC, 2017). Many trans youths also report issues being able to use the restrooms and locker rooms in their school with one respondent even saying, “I wait until I get home to use the bathroom, even when I’m at school for 10+ hours... I wear my gym clothes over my normal clothes to avoid changing in locker rooms” (HRC, 2017, p. 15). With a mix of laws and local policies surrounding LGBTQ+ persons in less than half of the United States, both helpful and less than helpful, trans youth and trans adults are the least protected in public schools (Adelman & Lugg, 2012). The majority of students, meaning both those that do not fit into the heteronormative ideas of sex and gender as well as youth that are cisgender, are unhappy with gender norms and restrictive school policies (GLSEN, 2016).

As you walk through the hallways of a secondary school, you are likely to hear phrases like “that’s so gay” or derogatory slurs spoken towards other students like “homo” or “faggot”. These phrases and the negative culture in which these occur are damaging to students. The majority of LGBTQ+ students feel unsafe in their schools and have been harassed because of their sexuality (Bortolin, 2010; HRC, 2012; HRC 2018; Lugg & Tooms, 2011; Marston, 2015). This type of environment is seen nationwide for LGBTQ+ youth.

In the United States, there is a lack of LGBTQ+ curriculum that teaches students about variations in sexuality or combats prejudicial treatment of non-heterosexual students. This may be because educators are not comfortable with trying to teach the content surrounding the LGBTQ+ community, educators’ own biases around the subject, or the lack of support from the system as seen in things like the new Florida “Don’t Say Gay” legislation. Bortolin (2010) and Snapp et al. (2015) make note of the absence of an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum and that “the majority of teachers in this study were not dealing with issues of harassment against LGBTQ youth, and some even took part in promoting a hostile school climate themselves” (p. 217). Hall and Rodgers (2019) studied teachers’ attitudes toward LGBTQ+ students and found that teachers’ views have become more approving over time but are still largely negative. Of the multiple predictors analyzed, “teachers’ political orientation seemed to be the strongest predictor of attitude... [as] LGBTQ rights have historically been supported by political liberals and opposed by conservatives” (Hall & Rodgers, 2019, p. 35). When it comes to the LGBTQ+ students’ educational experience, they are lacking an inclusive curriculum and dealing with harassment from their own teachers.

Schools can be a difficult place to express gender and sexual identities that fall outside of the heteronormative paradigm. Greteman (2019) reflected on the 2008 murder of Lawrence/Latisha King, a 15-year-old child who had only recently begun experimenting with gender transgressive behaviors. King was bullied and harassed for effeminate mannerisms by classmates, such as student Brandon McInerney. On February 11, 2008, McInerney pulled a gun from his backpack in their computer class and shot King in the back of the head twice. King died two days later after removal from life support. Greteman found that even the teachers expressed “a palpable disregard for King’s well-being and safety because King’s way of being was viewed, quite ‘simply,’ as wrong” (p.44). Hatchel et al. (2018) found that “one in three transgender youth experience victimization and almost half of them presented with depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation in the past year” (p. 2473). Whether the challenges are coming from other students or from the educators that students should be able to trust to look out for their well-being, schools can be a difficult place for LGBTQ+ students.

Marston (2015) found throughout the academic literature that LGBTQ+ students’ experiences are centered around homophobic and transphobic bullying defined as the repeated harassment over time to cause harm or distress to the victim. Marston (2015) suggested “the persistent focus on negative outcomes for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans young people also overlooks the fact that these young people have agency... [and] are leading the charge in changing their school environments for the better” (p. 166). Instead, Marston suggested research move beyond studying the homophobic and transphobic bullying and harassment to studying the safe, fun, fulfilled experiences and environments of the LGBTQ+ community.

Steck and Perry (2018) found multiple occurrences across the United States of the existence of hostile school environments for LGBTQ+ students. With the less positive outcomes for LGBTQ+ students in hostile school environments, Steck and Perry (2018) articulate three recommendations to challenge heteronormativity in schools and create a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ students. These three recommendations are:

- Disrupt the practice of silence by supporting the legitimacy of sexual diversity, implementing policies that are supportive of LGBTQ+ students, and improve school personnel's response to incidents of harassment and bullying
- Create and maintain safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students like specific teachers' classrooms, Gay-Straight Alliance clubs, and areas for emotional support
- Implement system-wide policies and practices to include LGBTQ+ content in the curriculum, set expectations for staff response to incidents of bullying, and supporting school activities that promote awareness and acceptance of sexual and gender minorities (Steck & Perry, 2018)

Challenging heteronormativity and creating a safe environment for students and staff through these recommendations demands bold, proactive means.

### ***Educational Supports of LGBTQ+ Students***

Not all LGBTQ+ student experiences are defined by bullying and suicide; some are living healthy, supportive, and fulfilled experiences. It is imperative that schools are a safe and supportive environment for all students and adults. Stuart (2010) concludes that *in loco parentis* means that:

School districts must have an environment that reflects and enforces the basic welfare of their students. This objective leaves less discretion for the courts than

appears at first blush. It means that school districts must draft not just standards for prohibiting bad behavior to avoid discipline, but also guidelines that reflect a higher order of behavior. A school is fundamentally avoiding its basic educational mission if it does not have both aspirations and prohibitions for its students. These aspirations must reflect the needs of a safe environment and current civil rights laws. (p. 1001)

Your educational experience will leave a lasting impression into adulthood that can impact your civic engagement or perceptions thereof. Supportive school structures include LGBTQ+ representation in the school curriculum, supportive teachers, high expectations, parent/guardian support, and diversity groups like the Gay-Straight Alliance (Day et al., 2019; Fenaughty et al., 2019; GLSEN, 2016; Hanna, 2017; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Steck & Perry; 2018; Woolley, 2017). Kosciw et al. (2018) found that those structures had a positive impact on sexual and gender minority students, such as increased academic achievement, increased aspirations, and increased sense of school belonging.

The research literature has examined ways in which to disrupt the heteronormative space of school. McHaelen et al. (2020) list several programs and interventions that support LGBTQ+ students in K-12 and post-secondary education, including: (a) non-discrimination policies, (b) all gender or gender-free bathrooms, (c) preferred name policies, (d) pronoun protocol, (e) inclusive hiring practices, and (f) inclusive curriculum. One such way is through the high school English classroom. Through Helmers' (2016) study of a gay and lesbian high school literature course, creating a counter-narrative through selective literary texts is a way to disrupt the

heteronormative space of silence and marginalization that many LGBTQ+ students face on a daily basis. Another common thread through multiple research articles is having strong, supportive relationships (Dragowski et al., 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2019; Jackson, 2017; Kroeger, 2019; Price et al., 2019). Strong relationships and a positive school climate must be intentionally built through professional development to ensure LGBTQ+ students have the support they need (Payne & Smith, 2011; Pennell, 2017). These supports must be systemic and will not happen naturally in a heteronormative society.

### ***Research on LGBTQ+ Educators and Their Experiences***

Creating school environments that are safe and supportive of LGBTQ+ students is also important for educators working in these same environments. Sexuality and schools have long presented dilemmas for those in leadership positions. While times have changed over the past few decades, acceptance of sexual minorities in schools has been slower to progress. Sexuality does exist in schools, but it tends to take on the image of the community around the school. Some schools might offer a total program built around the idea of abstinence while others might be freer in their stance to represent safe sex practices and even those of sexual minorities. Myers (2002) questioned when or if school leaders should intervene in the sexual behaviors of staff members. Myers concluded that if such actions could potentially cause repercussions for the school, then the school leader has the authority to intervene. Additionally, Myers (2002) draws attention to instances where teachers have experienced isolation and harassment for assumptions over one's HIV status as a gay man. For decades, sexual minorities in the school environment have dealt with the stigma that comes with not fitting the heteronormative narrative so prevalent in our society.

LGBTQ+ educators face vulnerability and potential harassment in their schools (Piper & Sikes, 2010; Wright, 2010). Wright (2010) outlines the major findings from a quantitative study of 514 educators who self-identified as LGBTQ+. These findings are:

1. Homophobia was experienced by 75% of respondents.
2. Younger LGBTQ+ educators feel more supported than older educators.
3. Prohibiting homophobic language was not consistent across all states.
4. LGBTQ+ educators experience personal safety and job safety differently than their heteronormative colleagues.
5. The years of experience attained impacts the LGBTQ+ educator's job safety by providing an increase in job stability as experience increases.
6. LGBTQ+ educators' sense of personal safety depends on where they live and work.
7. Elementary LGBTQ+ educators perceive more threats to their job security.
8. LGBTQ+ educators with more involvement in diversity clubs like the Gay-Straight Alliance perceive having more job security. (Wright, 2010)

In the last finding by Wright (2010), there could be a possible correlation of those that feel more job security getting involved in diversity clubs. These findings also help show the experiences of LGBTQ+ educators and the obstacles or mindsets they must work through every day while supporting all students.

As an educational leader in San Francisco, Goodman (2005) provides an example for school principals in creating a safe environment for LGBTQ+ students and staff by protecting a teacher from a parent's homophobia and teaching both the parent and student about the diversity of families. Goodman (2005) also reminds the reader that "it is a gift



to your school to have a teacher who has the courage to be a lesbian or gay role model for all students and staff” (p. 116).

Teachers are oftentimes considered leaders in their communities because they are leading students along their educational journey. Additionally, teachers are involved in extracurricular activities like coaching sports teams, leading academic clubs, or participating in school-based leadership roles such as professional learning community leaders, instructional leadership team members, or grade-level team leaders. DeJean (2004) provides a qualitative study on the fear that gay, male high school teachers experience while leading in their more expansive roles like coaching and mentoring students. In his study, DeJean (2004), who acknowledges his role as a formerly closeted teacher, relates his personal experience to the fear felt by some gay men in the classroom. His teaching experience began with expressions of hate through harassment like having “faggot” and “queer” painted on his classroom windows or having “faggot” carved into his classroom door.

His early experiences led him to avoid interactions with coworkers and students as he would arrive early to work alone. He also experienced the masking of fear through professional perfectionism. Tying his personal experience to his research study, he contacted five gay male teachers within his district and ended up conducting interviews with 3 of them that had 11 to 29 years of experience. According to DeJean (2004), fear manifested itself in multiple contexts. One such was fear when entering the profession. Participants experienced feelings of isolation and letters on official school letterhead, placed by coworkers, in teachers’ mailboxes about how homosexuality should not be tolerated in their school. The gay male teachers also experienced hiding within the school

structure by covering their identities and playing the game by bringing female dates to school functions.

These gay male teachers experienced harassment while in the school structure, both as a student themselves and as a teacher. For example, one teacher was fired from the school for being a gay man. While fear was a common thread among all three gay men, teaching with compassion was another thread because of how their experiences have shaped how they teach. Each recognized that compassion was central to helping create spaces for respect, safety, and inclusion. Through the narratives of educators, we see elements that could potentially limit LGBTQ+ educational leaders' effectiveness because fear transcends a multitude of contexts, from being a classroom teacher to an administrator, and situations like a non-affirming school culture to an accepting educational environment that encourages diversity.

In some instances, the disclosed sexuality of the educator has been a positive experience. Turner (2010) utilized an auto-ethnographic narrative approach to provide insight into his experience as an out college professor of future teachers and influence the decisions LGBTQ+ educators must think through and make around their sexuality. When Turner was presented with the opportunity to remain silent or reveal his sexuality during a class discussion, he decided to be open as remaining silent felt like a lie. Through his experience, Turner (2010) notes:

When queer teacher educators embrace what makes us who we are, when we acknowledge how our life experiences have shaped us or suborned us, when we can help preservice teachers hear a sound where there is silence; it is only then can we become teacher educators of some consequence; it is

only then that we can, in equal measure, inspire and confound, instigate, and originate. Only then, do we become part of the change we wish to see.

(p. 298)

What Turner (2010) expresses is deeply personal yet needed to effect change in the educational profession in support of other LGBTQ+ educators. Educators must weigh their openness to trust others and share intimate parts of themselves that make them different from the heteronormative culture in which we live or wait in silence as a means to protect ourselves (Turner, 2010).

An educator's decision to disclose or conceal their sexual or gender orientation has been shown to have many underlying reasons and potential consequences depending on the context of their environment. LGBTQ+ educators consider it safer to disclose their sexual or gender orientation in cities compared to rural areas (Bower-Phipps, 2017). Many additional factors contribute to LGBTQ+ educators' decisions to conceal their orientation like workplace discrimination, job security, isolation, and limited promotional opportunities (Bower-Phipps, 2017; Ferfolja & Stavrou, 2015; Gorski et al., 2013; Hooker, 2018). Ferfolja and Stavrou (2015) report that LGBTQ+ educators have experienced "ridicule, verbal abuse, physical and sexual assault, property damage, demeaning actions, homophobic 'jokes,' and differential access to employment rights" (p. 114-115). The risks that LGBTQ+ educators face from disclosure of their sexual or gender orientation could potentially have life-long consequences.

### ***Research on LGBTQ+ Leaders***

For the purposes of this study, leadership is broadly defined as "an influence process in which an individual moves others in a particular direction (attitudinally,

cognitively, or behaviorally)” (Fassinger et al., 2010, p. 201). My study will focus specifically on the LGBTQ+ leaders in the field of education. Today, there is no shortage of LGBTQ+ leadership if it is broadly defined as above. From early crusaders like Joan of Arc, who refused to stop cross-dressing even to her own demise (Feinberg, 2005), to a more recent example like Pete Buttigieg, who was the first openly gay United States presidential candidate, LGBTQ+ leaders have existed in pockets throughout history, even if a label had not specifically placed them in the LGBTQ+ community at the time. Most of these leaders have been associated with an individual movement like Ellen DeGeneres “coming out” or the economic revivals of cities or neighborhoods that experience an increase in LGBTQ+ residents (Portelli, 2003). To date, not one LGBTQ+ individual has become the symbol for this community like Martin Luther King, Jr. is for the civil rights movement or Elizabeth Cady Stanton was for the suffragist movement.

Leadership within the LGBTQ+ community tends to be informal in nature and sometimes even unintentional. Fassinger et al. (2010) conclude there is a lack of specific scholarly research because of the vast differences among the community and what that leadership is for. As shown by Shilts (1987), some leadership in the LGBTQ+ community emerges from groups that share a common concern like HIV/AIDS where a grassroots movement leads to an individual finding themselves in a formal leadership role (Baker & Greene, 2007). One such example is that of Harvey Milk, a San Francisco politician who rose to power in the 1970s and became the first openly gay man to be elected to public office in California. Fassinger et al. (2010) note that there are many LGBTQ+ leaders, but their roles may or may not be related to issues within the LGBTQ+ community. Some LGBTQ+ leaders may decide to lead local organizations that assist

LGBTQ+ youth like Louisville Youth Group, while others might decide to lead in non-related organizations like the U.S. Military. In any organization, there exists a polychotomy of factors that define and influence the leader and followers. Leadership research exists that explores the relationship between leaders and followers when accounting for minorities and an abundance of research exists on the relationship between leadership and gender (Chin, Lott, Rice, & Sanchez-Hucles, 2007). Currently, there is little research on the LGBTQ+ leadership paradigm. Additionally, we have not seen any individual to date who has risen and galvanized broad-based support for LGBTQ+ leadership in the field of education administration within K12 public or private schools.

Leadership paradigms have shifted through the years. In the 1940s and 1950s, transactional-based models entered scholarly research literature with “democratic ideas of command and control approaches based more on earned formal authority and the personal power and expertise of the leader” (Fassinger et al., 2010, p. 202). This is compared to the definition of leadership that further evolved from the 1950s into the 1960s with situational models, which focused on “flexible leader behaviors matched to the purposes of the group and the developmental needs of followers” (Fassinger et al, 2010, p. 202). As the study of leadership further evolved into the 1970s, the transformational model began to appeal “to higher-order ideals, such as equality, justice, and empowerment... [and] focused on empowered followers joining with leaders to find paths to mutually established goals” (Fassinger et al., 2010, p. 203). With the transformational model of leadership in recent years, it denotes the followers’ ability to choose and join the leader, and leaders in this model must consider their followers’ commitment and motivations (Fassinger et al, 2010). There is more to consider than the

give and take of the transactional model such as higher-order ideals like justice and equality. Fassinger et al. (2010) state that, “concepts of transformational leadership involved a heightened emphasis on inclusion, power-sharing, collaboration, two-way communication, inspiration, role modeling, meaning-making, the setting of high expectations, and fostering collective identity” (p. 203). As leadership paradigms shift, the field must also look to how this impacts educational leaders, and in particular LGBTQ+ educational leaders as well as how these leaders in turn help to create these paradigm shifts.

Leadership has further developed into a traits-based concept where the different attributes of a leader, combined with certain traits and situations, determine the decision making that occurs between followers and leaders in ambiguous and chaotic situations (Fassinger et al., 2010; Zaccaro, 2007). Fassinger et al. (2010) specifically centers around LGBTQ+ leadership. In general, leadership has become a complex topic with the leader as both a learner and facilitator of learning that allows followers to take the resources the leader can provide and collaboratively come up with a solution. In this more advanced model of leadership, the leader takes into account the diverse needs, perspectives, and styles of their followers.

According to Brown (1989), three elements of the LGBTQ+ experience profoundly influence individuals’ lives which would impact how they function as an individual, interact in relationships, and make decisions as leaders themselves. The first element is marginalization, the ability for a sexual minority to see outside of the cultural norms and possibly challenge the heteronormative wisdom. The second element is a bicultural perspective, the ability to see things from both a minority and a majority

perspective with the potential to see new possibilities in solving problems. The third element is normative creativity, the ability to make up rules as you go because there are no set norms on how to be LGBTQ+. These elements, highly relevant to leadership and a person's ability to navigate complex situations, are described by Fassinger et al., (2010) as

gender-transgression - that is, defiance of societal norms regarding 'acceptable' behavior based on one's gender (how one is supposed to self-present in appearance or manner, how one's genitalia are supposed to look, with whom one is supposed to engage sexually). (p. 204)

While gender and leadership have had decades of research and findings, those who identify as LGBTQ+ are limited in the scholarly base of leadership literature. Fassinger et al. (2010) proposed an affirmative model of LGBTQ+ leadership enactment from a synthesis of the literature that aims to include LGBTQ+ leadership studies.

Fassinger et al. (2010) provide LGBTQ+ leadership research with a focus and direction for future studies through their affirmative model of LGBTQ+ leadership enactment. This provides a framework steeped in scholarly literature that future scholars may build upon. Additionally, they provide relevant bodies of research that pertain to LGBTQ+ leadership studies with the potential to contribute to its understanding. While they do provide potential issues for research in this area, they note that virtually every part of their affirmative model of LGBTQ+ leadership enactment needs empirical research, including in the area of education administration.

Barrantes and Eaton (2018) provide insight into the growing acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in the United States in recent years. They also note that the scholarly literature in this area currently lacks sufficient research. As research on

minorities and the challenges they deal with in the workplace continues, research into LGBTQ+ leadership has the potential to further support improvements for minorities as a whole. Research in this area can help improve workplace outcomes for minority employees, provide the knowledge base for future protections in federal and state law, and provide a broader understanding of discrimination in the workplace as sexual minorities potentially face similar discrimination as other minorities (Barrantes & Eaton, 2018).

### ***Research on LGBTQ+ Leaders and Their Gender Orientation***

Barrantes and Eaton (2018) allow readers to analyze the gender orientation from Fassinger et al.'s affirmative model of LGBTQ+ leadership enactment. Stereotypes of gay men tend to be that they express themselves as heterosexual women (Kite & Deaux, 1987). Similar to Fassinger et al.'s (2010) gender transgression, Barrantes and Eaton (2018) discuss gender inversion where once a man is believed to be gay, perceivers' "expectations of his preferences, abilities, and personality invert to those of the female gender" (p. 550). According to Blashill and Powlishta (2009), this perception of gay men is a stereotype that they are like a woman or gender-atypical. Eaton and Matamala (2014) note that part of being a masculine man is to be active heterosexually and eager to participate in such while heterosexual urges are defined by heteronormative gender roles. Thus, if a man is gay, our societal norms lead us to expect them to be gender-atypical, and a gender-atypical man to be gay (Barrantes & Eaton, 2018).

Two types of studies emerged to support this gender inversion theory. The first asks participants to rate their perceptions of gay subjects and the other asks participants to guess the sexual orientation of their subjects. In the first, participants saw gay men as



more feminine, warm, and communal. In the second, participants assumed men that behaved or appeared as gender-atypical were gay. Conversely, participants saw lesbian women as competent and having less warmth and assumed women who displayed more heteronormative masculine behaviors and appearance as lesbians. To further confirm gender inversion, Kranz et al. (2017) found that men who were seen as more sociable were considered to be most likely gay compared to those that were less sociable and more stoic. In addition to gender orientation and the context of follower perceptions, stereotypes of a traditional leader in the United States are of a heterosexual, White male (Fassinger et al, 2010; Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008). Because of this engrained prototype, of a traditional leader in our culture, gay men are more likely to be considered less appropriate for roles that have traditionally been filled by White, heterosexual men.

For Barrantes and Eaton's (2018) study, they used a one-factor, four-level, between-subjects design that was hosted online for 341 college student participants. Targets, which are the fictional LGBTQ+ leaders, were manipulated to create a vignette for each target where the target was either "gay", "gay and out", "gay and closeted", or "heterosexual". When participants rated the target's suitability for leadership roles in stereotypical masculine or feminine managerial positions, the findings confirmed previous research studies that perceptions exist about how gay males were more suited for feminine leadership roles defined by warmth and communion like healthcare and social reform is perceived. One interesting finding from their study is that while gay men are perceived as more feminine, they are not perceived as less stereotypically masculine compared to heterosexuals. Shown from the conclusions by participants from their completed surveys, gay men are suited for more stereotypically feminine leadership roles

but not necessarily less suited for stereotypically masculine leadership roles. One implication for educational leadership is that the perception of gay men is that they are not less suited for education administration and could potentially be well suited for more stereotypical feminine leadership roles in education.

Morton (2017) focused on the perceived leadership effectiveness of gay male leaders by comparing participants' homonegativity and the sexual orientation of their target leader. Morton concludes that "scholarly research on the perceptions of the leadership effectiveness of gay and lesbian leaders in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts is virtually nonexistent" (Morton, 2017, p. 159). For example, Kite and Deaux (1987), similar to Barrantes and Eaton's (2018) study, found that gay men are typically stereotyped as more feminine and less masculine than heterosexual men. Morton's study goes a step farther by explaining the characteristics that gay men are associated with. For example, female leaders being viewed as more communal in leadership style and feminine, gay men are associated with being more communal and feminine in leadership style. This is because the stereotype of gay men portrays them as more characteristic of heterosexual females, displaying characteristics such as "passive, communal, and interpersonally sensitive" (Morton, 2017, p. 162). And according to Anteby and Anderson (2014), scholars are advocating for more research on sexual minorities in the workplace. Morton also acknowledges there is little known on how LGBTQ+ leaders are evaluated for effectiveness compared to those that identify as heterosexual. He concludes that additional research can help inform us on the evaluations of LGBTQ+ leaders compared to their heterosexual counterparts.

Morton (2017) states that the leadership categorization theory allows “evaluators [to] make judgments about a leader based on preconceived ideas of the characteristics and behaviors of a typical leader” (p. 161). These preconceived ideas can originate from the evaluators’ own personal experiences and belief systems. When leaders personify the characteristics of the evaluators’ preconceived ideas, the leader is more likely to be seen positively than someone who does not. As a leader, you will have certain behaviors, responses to events, and characteristics that distinguish you from another leader. Lord and Maher (1991) find that “it is these features as perceived and utilized by others - not as they occur in any objective sense - that are crucial in explaining leadership perceptions” (p. 27). Thus, it isn’t the behaviors, events, or characteristics of the leader alone that explain followers’ perceptions, but instead, it is how these behaviors, responses to events, and characteristics are perceived by the followers (Barrantes & Eaton, 2018).

Homonegativity has received little attention in scholarly research (Morton, 2017). Morrison and Morrison (2011) define homonegativity as “negative affect, cognitions, and behaviors directed toward individuals who are perceived - correctly or incorrectly - to be gay or lesbian” (p. 2573). Morrison and Morrison (2011) distinguish between “old-fashioned” homonegativity and “modern” homonegativity where “old-fashioned” is based on moral objections and “modern” is based on the belief that LGBTQ+ discrimination no longer exists and that LGBTQ+ persons need to assimilate to the dominant culture. In Morton’s (2017) study, he found there was a statistically significant interaction between the homonegativity rating of participants and the experimental conditions of having a heterosexual or gay male as the leader (p. 165). Specifically, Morton's findings suggested that participants who held more negative views towards

homosexuality were less likely to view gay men as effective leaders, thus advocating for a reconsideration of the role of homonegativity in organizational behavior and leadership practices. This research supports the context element of stigma and marginalization as playing a role in Fassinger et al.'s (2010) affirmative model of LGBTQ+ leadership enactment. These results have important implications for exploring the impact of biases against gay men in leadership positions and highlight the need for further research and interventions at the individual and organizational levels.

### ***Research on LGBTQ+ Educational Leaders***

Tooms (2007) introduces the idea of *the right kind of Queer* as an educational leader. This educational leader is one that struggles with ideas like “don’t ask, don’t tell” and hides their identity behind an image of overachiever and workaholic. Tooms (2007) even goes so far as to say that *the right kind of Queer* lives with a different and lesser set of civil rights than others. As LGBTQ+ educational leaders navigate the reality of their situation, how do they handle a situation where they are at the grocery store with their partner and run into the school board chair with deep, conservative views? These situations are a daily reality for LGBTQ+ educational leaders. Lugg (2006) notes that these daily situations increase the chances of putting that LGBTQ+ educational leader at risk of alienation and possible job loss. Few educational leadership preparation programs address the topic of sexual diversity for educational leaders but do focus on sexual diversity for students (Fleig, 2016; Jennings, 2012; Lugg & Tooms, 2010). While literature exists on the environment for LGBTQ+ students and LGBTQ+ teachers, there is a gap in the research about LGBTQ+ educational leaders and the conditions that support or limit their effectiveness.

Creating equitable environments for LGBTQ+ students and staff is more than having an absence of hate. LGBTQ+ educational leaders need to see themselves reflected in their curriculum in leadership preparation programs, in personnel policies, and the critical everyday interactions that these leaders have (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). In the decade since Lugg and Tooms article in 2010, there has been little research on LGBTQ+ educational leaders. In 2009, deLeon and Brunner mentioned this as a concern in their research:

Over the past several decades, research has focused on the experiences of LGBT youth and teachers, as well as on the policies and laws that purport to protect them from harassment and discrimination... However, until recently, there has been little research done on the world of LGBT public school administrators and almost no discussion of the impact formal and informal distinction on their personal and professional lives can be found.  
(p. 157)

Most of what we know about the LGBTQ+ educational leader's experience is drawn from comparisons of the research on students and teachers. There is a need for further research on the experience of LGBTQ+ educational leaders as still very little exists (Best, 2019; Duarte, 2020).

While studies have focused on policies and laws for protecting LGBTQ+ students and teachers, the world of LGBTQ+ educational leaders and the potential impacts of their personal and professional lives have been largely overlooked. As a result, there is a critical need for further research aimed at understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ educational leaders. One such area is how those experiences contribute to or detract from

a sense of belonging. Understanding the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ educational leaders in their workplace is essential to developing equitable environments that foster belonging for all members of the educational community.

## **Belonging**

Brené Brown (2020) defines belonging as:

the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance. (p. 37)

The need to belong is a powerful, fundamental, and ubiquitous motivation for humans (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Slavich and Cole (2013) conclude that this need to belong is found deep within our biology, even within our human genome. Belonging has been shown to contribute to psychological well-being, persistence in school, better physical and mental well-being, and occupational success (Akiva et al., 2013; Hausman et al., 2007; Karaman & Tarim, 2018; Kitchen et al., 2015; Long, 2016; Moallem, 2013). Conversely, a lack of belonging has been shown to increase the risk of mental and physical health problems, specifically increased risk of mental illness, antisocial behaviors, weakened immune systems, depression, poor sleep, cardiovascular problems, and premature death (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003; Cacioppo et al., 2011; Cacioppo et al., 2015; Choearom et al., 2005; Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Hari, 2019; Hawkley &

Capitanio, 2015; Holt-Lunstad, 2018; Leary, 1990; Slavich, O'Donovan et al., 2010).

Belonging is essential to our own mental and physical health.

Allen et al. (2021) created an integrative framework for belonging that consists of four categories. These categories are defined by Allen et al. (2021) as:

1. Competencies for belonging (skills and abilities);
2. Opportunities to belong (enablers, removal/reduction of barriers);
3. Motivations to belong (inner drive); and
4. Perceptions of belonging (cognitions, attributions, and feedback mechanisms – positive or negative experiences when connecting). (p. 91)

Competencies for belonging are skills like communication and alignment to social norms (Blackhart et al., 2011). Opportunities to belong are things like membership to an activity or organization, such as required attendance at school (Akar-Vural et al., 2013; Bowles & Scull, 2019). Additional opportunities include sharing social capital, connections through similarly lived experiences, movements like pride month, or sharing similar trauma experiences (Claridge, 2018; Gerber & Wheeler, 2009; Hagerty et al., 2002; Putam, 2000; Roffey, 2013). Motivation to belong comes with a desire to seek out interpersonal connections, positive experiences with others, and resist the loss of attachments, but even those with the most traumatic experiences that limit this desire can still be driven to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The last competency is a person's perception of their belonging. All people will evaluate if they belong or fit in with those around them, either consciously or subconsciously (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Walton & Brady, 2017). People's perceptions of their own belonging could greatly impact the other three components. Negative experiences could limit their motivation to seek out opportunities

to belong. And their perceptions of these experiences will work as a feedback mechanism to increase or decrease one's desire to connect with others (Allen et al., 2021).

### **Identity Development**

Erik Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development is a well-known model that attempts to describe the full spectrum of the human life cycle regarding the relationship between the psychological and social aspects of life (Knight, 2016). There have been nearly 50 years of research to support his development theory linking it to personality development, identity formation, culture, and life cycle development (Conway & Holmes, 2004; Hearn et al., 2012; Josselson, 1987; Kenyon, Clark, & de Vries, 2001; Knight, 2016; McAdams, 1985; McAdams, et al., 1997; O'Brien, 2010; Peterson, 2002; Sokol, 2009). Erikson's (1963) eight stages of development are summarized in Table 1.

***Table 1***

*Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development*

<b>Stages</b>	<b>Stage Description</b>	<b>Virtue</b>
Infancy	Basic trust vs Mistrust	Hope
Early Childhood	Autonomy vs Shame and doubt	Will
Play age	Initiative vs Guilt	Purpose
School age	Industriousness vs Inferiority	Competence
Adolescence	Identity cohesion vs Role confusion	Fidelity
Young Adulthood	Intimacy vs Isolation	Love
Adulthood	Generativity vs Stagnation/self-absorption	Care
Old age	Integrity vs Despair	Wisdom



In Erikson's model, each stage is a period of life that can overlap and possibly be revisited during certain times in life. These stages are triggered by a "crisis" or turning point as an individual balances the two opposing dispositions, like trust versus mistrust or identity cohesion versus role confusion (Erikson, 1963). Erikson et al. (1986) also describe the virtue as "the most essential overall outlook on life" (p. 33) as the individual balances the two dispositions in that stage of life.

McAdams (2001) argues in his life story model that identity takes the shape of a narrative, complete with setting, acts, character, story line, and theme. He also asserts that "life stories are psychosocial constructions, coauthored by the person himself or herself and the cultural context within which that person's life is embedded and given meaning" (p. 101). It is in Erikson's fifth stage that individuals confront the issue of identity versus role confusion. According to McAdams (2001), it is at this point that individuals are confronted with conflicting roles and relationship and how their own identity fits into those in the present and how those are integrated across time. This is not to say that there is no "self" because children are well aware of who they are, their traits, relationships, favorite activities, hated foods, etc. However, McAdams (2001) notes that he and Erikson use the term identity to refer "to a particular quality or flavoring of people's self-understandings, a way in which the self can be arranged or configured" (p. 102), and as different from "self". Essentially, identity formation is later in life when an individual begins to situate their self in relationship to outside factors. And according to Erikson and Freud, the timing of this identity formation is linked to sex (Erikson, 1963; Freud, 1953).

LGBTQ+ individuals can often experience a complex and difficult process in identity formation and integration. LGBTQ+ youth struggle with accepting their sexual

identity because of the vast contexts of ignorance, bigotry, and violence against those in the LGBTQ+ community (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Hueber, Rebchook, & Kegeles, 2004). Identity formation and integration consists of an acceptance of the unfolding identity, its endurance over time and contexts, and a longing to be known by others as such, given that identity integration involves a commitment and solidarity with who one is (Erikson, 1968, 1980). Rosario et al. (2011) expresses two main concerns around LGBTQ+ identity formation and these are:

1. Youth who initiate their sexual identity development at an early age because they may lack the coping skills necessary to negotiate the stresses of this development
2. Those who have only recently initiated LGBTQ+ identity development (regardless of age) may be at greater risk for poor psychological adjustment because it takes time to work through and accept the new identity (p. 4)

Additionally, individuals in the LGBTQ+ community that experience stressful events like rejection, ridicule, and discrimination have been linked to poor psychological adjustment among persons in the community (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Huebner et al., 2004; Mills et al., 2004; Ueno, 2005).

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

Social Cognitive Theory has multiple perspectives in the literature, but for the purpose of this study, my research is limited to the social cognitive theory proposed by Albert Bandura (1986, 1997, 2001). Two major components of Bandura's theory (1977, 1986) are self-efficacy, which refers to an individual's belief in their abilities and their

capacity to reach their goals, and the concept of reciprocal interactions between three influences, which are behavioral, environmental, and personal. Additionally, according to Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020), a central idea of Bandura's theory is that "individuals strive for a sense of agency, or the belief that they can exert a large degree of influence over important events in their lives" (p. 2).

Bandura (2002) distinguishes between three modes of agency, which are "direct personal agency, proxy agency that relies on others to act on one's behalf to secure desired outcomes, and collective agency exercised through group action" (p. 270). He found that all three forms of agency will be utilized every day regardless of what culture an individual lives in. Additionally, he found that individuals will behave both communally and individualistically in their lives but will contribute more communally if it is toward others that are part of the same community compared to outsiders of that community. Lastly, Bandura found strong connections between individuals and their occupations. He concluded that occupations are a "major source of personal identity... structure a good part of people's social relations... *and* play a highly influential role in occupational development and pursuits" (p. 279).

The reciprocal interactions component simply put means that people's thoughts can impact their actions and environments, actions can influence people's thoughts and environments, and environments can affect people's thoughts and actions. These three influences are interconnected. Personal influences include goals, self-evaluations, self-efficacy, social comparisons, values, expected outcomes from actions based on prior experiences, and the perceived attributes contributing to the outcomes (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). They described behavioral influences to include choices of

activities, perseverance, achievement, and self-determined environmental parameters.

Lastly, they concluded that environmental factors include things like modeled actions by others, the manner in which information is presented, external feedback received, rewards for accomplishments, and the ability for self-evaluation and reflection.

### **Queer Theory**

Queer Theory gives us a unique perspective on the lives whose very existence is by nature counterintuitive to the heteronormative experience that dominates our vast array of research literature at present (Adams & Jones, 2011; Hall, 2003; Lauretis, 1991). Queer Theory has application in social sciences and educational research, but there is a current lack in application to research in educational leadership. In this section, I summarize Queer Theory's application in social sciences, education, and the need for it in the field of educational leadership research.

Similarly, Fassinger et al. (2010) considers the voices of marginalized groups by giving importance to "how lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identities might contribute to a shared experience of marginalization that potentially influence leadership" (p. 203). Queer theory can be utilized to provide a voice to marginalized groups like LGBTQ+ leaders. We can begin to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ educational leaders, which currently have a deficit of information in the scholarly literature.

Queer theory also explores the fluidity of gender and sexuality and challenges the traditional binary categories of gender and sexuality so they can be explored as not fixed or easy to categorize. The experiences of the LGBTQ+ community are paramount to the culture that queer theory helps to explore (Wozolek, 2019). LGBTQ+ voices have been present in the social sciences and through popular culture for years, even if they weren't

labeled as such at the time (Watson, 2005; Wozolek, 2019). Queer theory is relatively new in research, appearing in the last few decades and growing in popularity (Chase, 2005; Wozolek, 2019).

### *An Overview of Its History*

Queer theory began in the early 1990s as a way to make sense of the challenges and pushback to the normalities of the time (Watson, 2005). Queer theory began questioning the ideas of a naturalized self when thinking of nature and biology (Watson, 2005). Watson draws the conclusion that it is a descendent of these ideas and emerged “directly out of liberal ideas of equality, building on feminist and other liberatory political movements, that pursued questions of identity categories and how power is distributed among and between them” (p. 69). Queer theory took shape during a time when LGBTQ+ activism was on the rise as the AIDS crisis took hold of the LGBTQ+ community. The term queer helps to avoid a binary proclivity when referring to humans and sexuality. Turner (2000) states, that queer allows “for the possibility of keeping open to question and context the element of race - or class, age, or anything else - and its often complicated, unpredictable relationship to sexuality” (p. 133). Queer theory allows for the complexity of life and sexuality to be explored on a continuum and not in a clearly defined category. Watson (2005) goes on to say that queer theory allows the status quo to be challenged by:

producing reverse-discourses - using the explanatory modes that produce us as particular subjects in order to resist that categorization; and by producing competing discourses (i.e., collections of stories from experience that challenge the ‘truth’ of the discourse), exposing the

falsehood of the idea that an original gender (or heterosexuality) exists. (p. 72)

Queer theory interrupts the normative relationships between sex, gender, and sexuality (Miller, 2019; Watson, 2005). While queer theory has endless possibilities of adding to the scholarly research, Turner (2000) notes that queer theory also gives rise to significant anxiety to individuals uncomfortable with the ideas of gender and sexual fluidity.

Queer theory analyzes the stories of the LGBTQ+ community to provide a queer perspective on participants' lived experiences (Adams & Jones, 2011). Adams and Jones (2011) further conclude that queer theory is "a dynamic and shifting theoretical paradigm that developed in response to a normalizing of heterosexuality and from a desire to disrupt insidious social conventions" (p. 110). Queer theory has the ability "to signal, signify, and sound the concerns of diverse subjects and subjectivities on questions of race, ethnicity, class, sex, desire, gender, and ability" (Adams & Jones, 2011, p. 111). Using this theory will allow the study to explore the paradigm of a non-heterosexual leadership model in education that interrupts the traditional social conventions of heteronormativity. Additionally, it will provide context to concerns of those in education administration that identify as LGBTQ+.

### ***Its Application in Research***

In social science research, queer theory allows for the analysis of any situation through social, historical, contemporary, and self-reflexive lenses (Wozolek, 2019). Wozolek (2019) also finds that queer theory allows questions related to "equity and access for some of the most vulnerable youth" (p. 2). The stories and accounts of the

LGBTQ+ community are central to the counterculture that queer theory helps to illuminate (Wozolek, 2019). Queer voices have always been present in social sciences research and through popular culture, even if they weren't labeled as such at the time (Watson, 2005; Wozolek, 2019). Additionally, queer theory has allowed the disruption of heteronormative patriarchy that had previously dominated the scholarly literature while providing space for sociocultural implications by providing a "collective and corrective counternarrative against the cis-hetero patriarchy in schools" (Wozolek, 2019, p. 8).

Watson (2005) states that a strength of queer theory is its ability to apply to relational fields. The field of education is relational at its core, and queer theory provides a framework for understanding identity formations, for disrupting heteronormativity, and for group analysis that exists outside of the cisgendered, heteronormative research that exists. Wozolek (2019) reiterates that strong qualitative research tends to be fluid in its analysis, in its epistemological and ontological findings, and queer theory further supports strong qualitative research through its explicitly fluid tendencies. A strength of queer theory in its application to educational research is its "potential for political action and reflection on sociocultural norms and values" (Wozolek, 2019, p. 6). Part of the responsibility for educators is to ensure the success of students after their schooling is complete and the continuation and improvement of the community.

Queer theory in education also allows for the investigation of the absence of LGBTQ+ perspectives from the school curriculum and its impact on learners, and subsequently the experience of LGBTQ+ educators (Wozolek, 2019). Lastly, Wozolek (2019) notes the "necessity of queer theory in educational spaces as a form of resistance in the highly conservative and highly reactionary field" (p.8). Talburt and Rasmussen

(2010) build upon this idea that educational research and queer theory follow traditions that often combine queer research and ideas of educational improvement and political progress. O'Malley et al. (2018) note that “queer knowledges and methods are largely untapped intellectual resources in the wider educational research field that hold rich potential for expanding research practices oriented toward questions of justice, inclusion, transformation, and equity” (p. 573). Queer theory provides a lens for improvement in the ever changing political and educational landscape.

While the current scholarly literature is inadequate on the specific application of queer theory in the realm of educational research, there are implications that can be drawn from the literature on LGBTQ+ students and disrupting the heteronormativity that permeates the field of education. The lack of scholarly literature for this application of queer theory helps to solidify the need for my research topic on an affirmative LGBTQ+ educational leadership paradigm using the theoretical framework of queer theory.

### ***Queer Theory and Social Cognitive Theory***

Queer Theory allows researchers to focus on institutional practices that further advance heteronormativity and homophobia that exists in society (Siedman, 1994). It does so by calling into “question the hegemonic forces that restrict and mandate sex, desire, and gender” (Murray, 2015, p. 48). Internalized ideas of heterosexuality can exist within members of the LGBTQ+ community because these individuals have internalized the prevalent heteronormative messages and symbols in society (Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008). Heteronormative ideas and discussion are often had and reinforced in schools through direct statements or silence when the opportunity arises to challenge statements that exclude or reject LGBTQ+ individuals (Surtees & Gunn,



2010). And according to Brant and Willox (2021), such messages can have a negative impact on LGBTQ+ community members' sense of self, their self-efficacy, and their perception of support from their environment.

### **Summary of Literature Review Findings & Research Questions**

The historical context of the rights and freedoms of the LGBTQ+ community were stagnant in their expansion for hundreds of years while a conservative ideology dictated laws and customs that did not promote freedom for those that deviated from heteronormative sexuality and gender expression. From the very early stages of the exploration and settlement of this country, heteronormativity was being embedded and reinforced through coercion and legal means to control any difference from the majority of European settlers. Eventually, the ideas of gender expression were determined with the former European sophistication as seen through the elitists in power giving way to the rugged American man. Women during this time retained practically no rights to their own bodies and sexual identity through the heteronormative realities that existed. As women and racial minorities began expanding upon their rights, the LGBTQ+ community pursued the same.

Our current political trends have left the LGBTQ+ community wanting more strides to be made toward equality. While strides were made under the Obama presidential administration, there were many setbacks under the Trump presidential administration. It could be said that the LGBTQ+ community takes one step forward and then has to take two steps back in the current political climate.

There is ample research on the experiences and supports of the LGBTQ +student community in the scholarly literature. This literature makes it clear that disrupting the

heteronormative paradigm is key to opening ways to increase LGBTQ+ student supports and protections. Additionally, there is research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ teachers, but there is a gap in the literature on the conditions that support or limit the effectiveness of LGBTQ+ leaders. Further research is needed to determine an affirmative leadership paradigm for LGBTQ+ educational leaders.

Throughout the literature, qualitative methods are utilized in the exploration of LGBTQ+ issues, many utilizing queer theory as their theoretical framework as well. The advantages of utilizing a qualitative study through the lens of queer theory is that this allows for fluidity in capturing the essence of the people's experiences to get a whole picture of what is happening within the lives and relationships of the LGBTQ+ persons studied. There have been a number of quantitative studies exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in education. However, these have mainly been completed by non-governmental, advocacy organizations. There is a significant gap in the scholarly literature that looks at the LGBTQ+ experience in non-biased ways to determine best practices for the LGBTQ+ community.

As the rights and freedoms of LGBTQ+ community members expand and our younger generations become more accepting of sexual minorities, our LGBTQ+ educational leaders need to be in positions that allow them to support our students in increasingly complex situations. Our LGBTQ+ leaders need to understand the conditions that support and limit their effectiveness to create organizations that consistently demonstrate exceptional reliability by implementing robust and effective operational processes and systems in our communities to enhance the educational attainment of all students and not just those that fit the heteronormative paradigm. Understanding the

conditions that support LGBTQ+ educational leaders will help us build policies to systemically support these leaders and provide a disruption to the heterosexual norms that have prevailed for hundreds of years and stifled innovation. We must also gain an understanding of the conditions that limit the effectiveness of our LGBTQ+ educational leaders as well. This will allow us to predict, prevent, and mitigate these conditions to ensure our LGBTQ+ educational leaders are highly qualified and effective.

In order to contribute to the literature and add a voice to the experiences of LGBTQ+ educational leaders, my research questions for this study are:

1. What conditions supported and/or do support my self-efficacy as an educational leader who identifies as LGBTQ+?
2. What conditions limited and/or limit my self-efficacy as an educational leader who identifies as LGBTQ+?
3. What can my experiences as an LGBTQ+ educational leader teach us about building an affirmative LGBTQ+ leadership paradigm?

As we transition from discussing the research literature on LGBTQ+ educational leaders to delving into the methodology in the next chapter, it is important to note the significance of the method of research I have chosen to utilize, which is autoethnography. This methodology is a form of qualitative research that centers on the author's personal experience and their cultural context, blending autobiography and ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It allows for personal narratives to be used as a means of understanding a particular phenomenon or experience, in this case, the experiences of me as an LGBTQ+ educational leader in the education system. As I examine the ways in which

autoethnography can contribute to the understanding of this important topic, it is crucial to consider the unique perspective and insights that this method of research can offer.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I discuss the use of Queer Theory as my theoretical framework. Next, I provide an explanation of what autoethnography is, including a history, how it should be written, and what it is not. Then I explain why I have chosen the use of autoethnography and its connection to Queer Theory. I discuss the phases of my research design, which includes data collection and data analysis. Lastly, I will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of my methods and summarize my research design.

### **Theoretical Framework**

My theoretical framework comes from an identity-based theory, known as queer theory. According to Dixson and Seriki (2013), identity-based theories will “provide a space for the voices of the marginalized group they represent” (p. 212). Additionally, knowledge is formed through the interaction of the researcher and those being researched. Because of the sensitive nature of this research, it will be imperative to be transparent with my research process so there is clarity for participants, colleagues, and the intended audience (Dixson & Seriki, 2013).

Ultimately, my desired purpose of the understanding I build around this area of research will be to improve outcomes for LGBTQ+ educational leaders or “to aid people to improve society” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 25) through the production of a featurette. Riessman (2008) concludes that one function of a narrative is to claim a point with the

purpose of encouraging a marginalized group to initiate change. To do this, my study will utilize autoethnography as a means to collect information and present to readers a collection of narratives that help to breathe life into the experiences that have supported and limited my self-efficacy as an LGBTQ+ educational leader and provide a better understanding of this phenomenon while also contributing to the body of knowledge on this topic.

### **Autoethnography as a Method**

Autoethnography is a research methodology that connects personal experiences to cultural contexts (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It goes beyond just recounting events and strives to evoke emotions and memories in the reader (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), autoethnography, as a research and writing style, is fundamentally different from an autobiography. While autobiographies describe events in an individual's life without regard for their wider cultural context, autoethnographies seek to uncover personal epiphanies, revelations, and sociocultural implications that are of broader value to society and the individual (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Overall, autoethnography is more than just storytelling - it is a thought-provoking method of inquiry that has the power to reveal new insights into the mysteries of human culture and behavior (Ellis et al., 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

### ***History of Autoethnography***

Autoethnography has its roots in the postmodern era, according to Ellis and Bochner (2000). During this time, academic researchers began scrutinizing the ontological, epistemological, and axiological boundaries of conventional research in the social sciences (Hayes, 2016). Traditional research oftentimes took the form of research-

oriented colonialism, a term based on the research of Conquergood (1991), Ellis (2007), and Reidmann (1993). Research-oriented colonialism is defined as a form of imperialism with an ethical guise where a researcher enters a cultural terrain in a disengaged manner solely for the sake of practice (Conquergood, 1991; Ellis, 2007; Reidmann, 1993). Hayes (2016) notes that ironically, the researcher ends up exploiting the culture with financial profit and academic recognition by leaving and writing about the culture they studied without mentioning their involvement or relationship with the members of the culture.

For example, when a conventional researcher goes and performs research on a minority culture like the LGBTQ+ community, the conventional researcher makes observations, draws conclusions, and determines generalizations about that culture without consideration for how they may have impacted members of the culture they were studying. By the same token, the conventional researcher assumes their observations are unbiased and not impacted by the culture simply because they do not participate in the routine cultural customs they were studying. Even though the researcher may not participate in the routine cultural customs, they are still visible, and their absence from participation in the routines does not necessarily make them more credible (Conquergood, 1991; Ellis, 2007; Reidmann, 1993).

Geertz (1988) and Rosaldo (1989), who Conquergood (1991) used to base his research, spoke to the broader side of ethnography which helped to create autoethnography. Rosaldo (1989) wrote that the previous prevalent notion of an impartial researcher utilizing unbiased language to interpret “raw” data has been superseded by an alternative endeavor that strives to apprehend human actions as they occur over time and in proportion to their significance for the individuals involved. Geertz (1988) expanded

upon the anthropological research foundations of colonialism by explaining that the end of colonialism brought about a significant shift in the social dynamics between the observers and the observed while the waning trust in pure facts, established methods, and subjective knowledge in the fields of humanities and academia, revolutionized the perspective of the observers and the observed on their objectives. It was during this shift in research that researchers started to recognize that the world is home to a diverse array of individuals who hold various perspectives and beliefs and that traditional research practices, which were restricted, constraining, and insular, cannot effectively capture this complexity of the human experience (Geertz, 1988). Ellis et al. (2011) make note of a multitude of researchers who ascribe different assumptions being made by different kinds of people to:

race (Anzaldúa, 1987; Boylorn, 2006; Davis, 2009), gender (Blair, Brown & Baxter, 1994; Keller, 1995), sexuality (Foster, 2008; Glave, 2005), age (Dossa, 1999; Paulson & Willig, 2008), ability (Couser, 1997; Gerber, 1996), class (hooks, 2000; Dykins Callahan, 2008), education (Delpit, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999), or religion (Droogsmas, 2007; Minkowitz, 1995).  
(p. 2-3)

Ellis et al. (2011) also suggests that in reality, those endorsing traditional and standardized research methods are promoting a viewpoint that is “White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-class, Christian, and able-bodied” (p. 3). Conventional social science approaches have clear sectarian implications, and a sense of superiority is often inferred, which undermines other knowledge systems by suggesting that they lack



sufficiency and credibility (Ellis et al., 2011; Hayes, 2016). In my research, this is something I am directly trying to avoid to the best of my ability by using queer theory.

Social science researchers reexamined their traditional views on what constituted acceptable research, given the contradictions in the field, and widened their research by aligning more with literature than physics (Bochner, 1994). By doing so, they created a hybrid of ethnography and autobiography that we now call autoethnography, which is the inverse of what Ellis et al. (2011) referred to with more conventional approaches. Adams (2005) and Wood (2009) make note that autoethnography relinquishes the traditional definitions of what is valuable and significant in research by opening up additional realms of what is valuable like the voice of the author as it is situated in the context of the cultural phenomenon they are studying. Readers also are able to get engaging, first-hand accounts of the cultural phenomenon (Adams, 2005; Wood, 2009). Additionally, the first-person writing style employed in autoethnography subverts the bias present in traditional approaches, thereby mitigating perceived biases (Hayes, 2016).

### ***How Autoethnography Should Be Written***

To provide a clear understanding of how an autoethnography should be written, you must first consider autobiography and ethnography, its parents. By examining autoethnography's parents, it becomes, in a sense, unmasked and more transparent. It is also important to have an understanding of what an autobiography and an ethnography are so that you can understand what an autoethnography is not, because it is not a simple tell-all of one's life stories.

## *Autobiography*

Autobiography is a retrospective and meticulous recounting of previous experiences in an author's life. It is a genre of literature that primarily utilizes hindsight and introspection to produce a narrative that showcases the author's personal journey (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989; Ellis et al., 2011; Freeman, 2004; Wood, 2009).

Autobiographical writers often consult personal interviews, journals, recordings, and pictures to aid their recollection of events (Delany, 2004; Didion, 2005; Goodall, 2006; Herrmann, 2005).

The portrayal of epiphanies and life-altering events that have significantly impacted the author's life is a critical component of autobiographical writing (Ellis et al., 2011). Epiphanies, while subjective and relative, reveal ways in which a particular experience may influence a person's perceptions, recollections, memories, images, and feelings. This enables the author to provide readers with an insight into the intense situations and effects that linger long after a crucial incident is over (Bochner, 1984).

An engaging autobiography employs various literary techniques, including plot development, character, and story progression, to stimulate reader interest (Didion, 2005; Ellis & Ellingson, 2000). Moreover, a well-crafted autobiography utilizes the author's epiphanies to connect similar existing storylines and bridge gaps in the story (Goodall, 2001). The use of different perspectives, such as first, second, or third person, is yet another way to create a compelling autobiography. It can help readers immerse themselves in the narrative and experience firsthand the emotions and lessons learned by the author. Through these varied perspectives, autobiographers enable readers to draw meaningful insights from their lives, gain new perspectives on experiences, and

ultimately connect with the author's story (Caulley, 2008; Glave, 2005; McCauley, 1996; Pelias, 2000).

### ***Ethnography***

Ethnography is a research methodology that seeks to explore the relational practices of a specific culture, by immersing the researcher in the culture and actively participating in its activities and beliefs (Geertz, 1973; Goodall, 2001; Maso, 2001). This approach entails documenting and engaging in the customs, traditions, and beliefs of the culture to provide clarifying insights for members and non-members alike (Geertz, 1973; Goodall, 2001; Maso, 2001). To achieve this, the researcher may conduct interviews with members of the culture, analyze audio recordings, make observations, and analyze videos or photographs (Berry, 2005; Nicholas, 2004).

Although rooted in anthropology, ethnography was implicated in research-oriented colonialism, which contributed to anthropology's imperialist underpinnings (Asad, 1973; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989). The discipline has produced a rich and complex body of work, but it also struggled with the political implications that came alongside it (Conquergood, 1991). Consequently, ethnographers searched to find ways to address this productively (Conquergood, 1991).

For reformistic ethnographers, this period of conventional autoethnography was labeled as “a *felix culpa*” of “fortunate fall” (Conquergood, 1991, p. 179). Different from their traditionalist colleagues, reformistic ethnographers implemented new themes in their approach that included the Return of the Body, Boundaries and Borderlands, the Rise of Performance, and Rhetorical Reflexivity (Conquergood, 1991, p. 180). The Return of the Body highlights the importance of privileging “the body as a site of

knowing" (Conquergood, 1991, p. 180) and involves the ethnographer's participation in the everyday activities of the observed cultures. *Boundaries and Borderlands* reimagine the peripheral to emphasize the culture's subtler aspects instead of decentering the "metropolitan typifications" (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 207) that the observers carried with them in their observations (Conquergood, 1991, p. 184). *The Rise of Performance* allows the researcher to use "the language of drama and performance" (Conquergood, 1991, p. 187) to illustrate how people perform roles in their daily lives (Turner, 1986). Lastly, rhetorical reflexivity challenges research-oriented colonialism and acknowledges the limits of ethnography by recognizing that the ethnographers' culture influences their interpretation of the cultures that they study (Geertz, 1988). Ultimately, ethnographers aim to provide thick descriptions, which are comprehensive accounts of the patterns of occurrences, feelings, stories, and cultural experiences to give insiders and outsiders alike a greater understanding of a specific culture (Jorgenson, 2002).

### ***The Progeny Known as Autoethnography***

Autoethnography combines artistic, reminiscent, and detailed descriptions to communicate personal and interpersonal experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). One standout feature of autoethnography is its accessibility to a wider audience (Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 1995; Goodall, 2006; hooks, 1994). Traditional research is often targeted at practitioners, scholars, and facilitators within a specific field, which may inadvertently exclude diverse audiences (Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 1995; Goodall, 2006; hooks, 1994). By making personal and cultural experiences more meaningful and relatable, autoethnography can inspire social and personal change (Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 1995; Goodall, 2006; hooks, 1994).

A well-written autoethnography requires more than following format standards; it also entails accounting for the author's personal influence on the who, what, where, when, and how, as opposed to feigning detachment (Ellis et al., 2011). This juxtaposes the observational research approach, which is premised on the belief that inserting oneself into a culture may result in bias. Complete removal from the observation process may also prove to be equally influential (Conquergood, 1991). Autoethnographers immerse themselves into the culture and acknowledge their involvement, reflecting the ethnographic aspects of autoethnography. To add to existing research, autoethnographers compare and contrast their personal experiences with entrenched beliefs derived from years of quantitative research, facilitating information-rich data that can challenge or complement the existing body of knowledge (Ellis et al., 2011; Ronai, 1995).

### ***Validity, Reliability, and Transferability***

In the realm of autoethnography, the characteristic of validity refers to the ability of a work to create the impression of plausibility, eliciting in readers the sense that the depicted experience is realistic, convincing, and feasible, and that the representation offered could potentially be true (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnographic layered accounts are employed as a device for addressing validity by enabling the comparison and questioning of numerous sources of pertinent literature against the experience of the researcher instead of perceiving the literature as an object for undoubtable truth (Chang, 2008; Charmaz, 1983). Additionally, to ensure that validity is supported, coherence in the narrative structure is important, with the autoethnography serving as a guide by which the reader is taken on a journey through the author's unique vantage point (Ellis et al., 2011; Plummer, 2001). In addition, the story told in the autoethnography must be useful,

thereby offering the potential for improvement in the lives of readers, participants, or even the author (Bochner, 2002; Ellis, 2004).

Reliability in autoethnography, distinct from its conventional social science counterparts, pertains to the author's credibility, also known as dependability in qualitative research (Ellis et al., 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It entails evaluating whether the events recounted by the autoethnographer are plausible or whether the account reads more like fiction than truth (Ellis et al., 2011). As autoethnographies are often the result of recollections of memories, images, and feelings of specific events long after they occurred, readers must bear in mind that they are based on the researcher's subjective perspective (Bochner, 1984; Hayes, 2016). One caveat to consider for readers is quotation marks. In the context of autoethnography, these are not used to signal verbatim quotes from the researcher or those being researched but are instead employed to distinguish shifts in voice, like that between first, second, and third person, generating "thick, multidimensional descriptions of the researcher's experience" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 5). Thus, accurate assessment of reliability in autoethnography requires an informed understanding of the researcher's intentions, recollections, and the context in which the autoethnography was produced.

Some may question my ability to accurately recall and describe events from my past for the reader. Many of these events live engraved on my mind through the trauma experienced by them. To further reinforce the accuracy of my recollection of experiences, I created a timeline included in the appendices, which describes events in relation to where I was on my educational journey. This includes dates, ages, timeframes, and other details to place my experiences where they happened in a chronological order. I then used

this timeline to verify the accuracy of my recollections through informal conversations with family and friends, social media posts, electronic correspondences, personal journals, and audio-visual data sources like pictures and home videos.

Autoethnography diverges from traditional social sciences in its approach to transferability. Rather than relying on large, randomized samples of respondents, autoethnography assesses its transferability through comparison of readers' experiences with those illuminated by the author (Hayes, 2016). This assessment allows readers to discern the applicability of the cultural experiences and processes explained by the author (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis & Ellingson, 2000). Consequently, the evaluation of autoethnography's transferability is based on its impact on readers' perspectives rather than a statistical significance. The concept of transferability, in essence, is established by the readers' capability to relate to the author's portrayal and ascertain similarities with their own experiences.

### **Why Autoethnography?**

From the beginning of my doctoral journey to today, I can confidently say that I have grown and learned to accept who I am as a member of the LGBTQ community and what that means for me as an educational leader. Through that acceptance, I have begun the process of unpacking my journey from childhood through the present, and my experiences in educational leadership have been greatly impacted by my own acceptance and the acceptance of others as to how I identify as an individual and as a leader. While researching LGBTQ+ leadership, there have been moments of pain as my own experiences align to the literature but also moments of freedom.

In the last 9 months, I have changed careers within the field of educational leadership and have proudly allowed others to know how I identify in my new educational organization. Through my transition from one employer to another, I have deeply felt the impact that an organization's climate and culture can have on one person. I have personally experienced the things that can hinder and support someone who identifies as LGBTQ+ in the field of educational leadership.

While I was going through this transition, I was helping with the production and research for a documentary called *Conversion*. This documentary film follows the stories of five survivors of conversion therapy. Working with these amazing people and helping to share their stories has been life changing for me. It has empowered me to want to share the details of my story as I study the phenomenon of LGBTQ+ leadership.

A quote from *Arabian Nights* by Tahrir Shah (2009) which says, "Stories are the communal currency of humanity" (p. 138) helps drive our work at the production company where I help on the side. I have found this mindset penetrating the other parts of and communities in my life. I have watched our executive director, my close friend, relive his experiences in conversion therapy and have been inspired by his willingness to sit in that pain to provide hope for others. Poulos (2021) in his book *Essentials of Autoethnography* notes that "humans are hungry for stories" (p. 16). It is through stories that we exchange ideas, find acceptance, and learn from the patterns and products that come from stories.

It is my desire to contribute to this field of study on LGBTQ+ educational leaders through my story. As Poulos (2021) states, "autoethnographers probe and mine the personal and relational meanings of everyday observations of human social life,



conversations, memories, stories, and artifacts that are, in the researcher's judgement, worthy of study" (p. 33). Using a deep, ethical reflection, I will get at meanings that cannot be grasped objectively from a distance to help readers engage with and better understand the phenomena of LGBTQ+ leadership in education. In addition to my personal reasons to utilize autoethnography for my dissertation, I have also found there to be quite a few academic reasons, which I find worthy of documenting.

Autoethnography contributes to the scholarly conversation about LGBTQ+ individuals working as leaders in the field of education (Adams et al., 2015). I will attempt to capture the essence of my experiences to gain an understanding to address my research questions determined by a need in the literature. By exploring my experiences as a member of a marginalized group, such as an LGBTQ+ individual in educational leadership, we have the opportunity for greater insight in the broader field of educational leadership (Anderson, 2015).

I am embracing vulnerability to generate a better understanding for researchers, participants, and readers of the experiences I am studying of the conditions that support and hinder the effectiveness of LGBTQ+ educational leaders (Adams et al., 2015). My personality, beliefs, and history have formed me into a person that not only wants to work through my own anger, pain, or confusion but also to offer others ways of working through their feelings in similar situations. By embracing this vulnerability, I can provide a deeper look into the experience of an LGBTQ+ educational leader.

Autoethnography allows the author to reclaim voice in existing research by adding nuanced personal perspectives to fill in experiential gaps (Adams et al., 2015). The autoethnography will allow me to describe this phenomenon with a rich personal

description and with the overtones that exist in the larger picture of my life. I want to make my research accessible to anyone and everyone that can benefit from it. Goodall (2004) states that “cultivating readers means communicating with them and for them, not above them or beyond them. For this reason, we need to train our next generation of scholars to become better storytellers.” (p. 191). I want to be a part of that next generation of scholars. I want to become a better storyteller that will provide people with more academic research that conjures, arouses, or elicits vibrant images, deep meanings, and intense emotions to show the world in a richer, fuller, more meaningful way.

### **Research Design: An Autoethnographic Study**

For this study, I will complete an autoethnography, which allows readers to have an understanding from within the experience of an LGBTQ+ educational leader (DeJean, 2004; Poulos, 2013). Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) summarize autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (p. 1). Adams et al. (2015) further define autoethnography as:

A qualitative research method that: 1) uses a researcher’s personal experience to describe and critique cultural belief, practices, and experiences; 2) acknowledges and values a researcher’s relationships with others; 3) uses deep and careful self-reflection – typically referred to as “reflexivity” – to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political; 4) shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles; 5) balances intellectual and methodological

rigor, emotion, and creativity; and 6) strives for social justice and to make life better. (p.2)

An autoethnography allows for deep, meaningful research through the process of writing. Simply put, the job of an autoethnographer is to craft vibrant stories from their own experiences that bring light to the specific phenomenon being studied. By an author taking the reader into the depths of a scene with thick descriptions and evocative writing, it will lead the reader to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through the eyes of the author as it's situated in academic research.

### ***Evocative Autoethnography & Queer Theory***

Though there are many forms of autoethnography, there are two central forms known as evocative and analytical (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Pace 2012). I have chosen to write an evocative autoethnography to allow me to write a detailed, emotional, and personal narrative through the lens of multiple experiences over the course of my life that maintains a critical, interpretative lens and attention to the cultural discrepancies at work (Bochner & Ellis; Ellis; Pace). Evocative autoethnography also allows me to convey the multifaceted messages of frustration, hope, isolation, community, anxiety, perseverance, and empowerment that I have experienced on my journey.

Additionally, there are generally considered nine types of autoethnography, which I have detailed in my definitions section. I have decided to use layered accounts for this study. Using this type of autoethnography will increase my reliability through three layers of information. The first layer entails of my experiences. The second layer is the response of others to my experiences. And the third layer is the juxtaposition of my

experiences to pertinent literature, data, and theoretical analysis (Ellis et al., 2011). While the reader might experience feelings of redundancy, this is done on purpose to analyze the experiences through three different lens to provide the reader with the ability to see the experiences in the context of the cultural phenomenon and relevant literature.

Similar to the established ethnographic methodologies, autoethnographies will utilize things like participant observation, field notes, narrative collection, interviews, informal focus groups, and journal entries for data collection (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Poulos, 2021). In addition to these established ethnographic methods, autoethnographies will also utilize the recovery of memory, close examination of personal trauma, emotional introspection, poetic and performative writing, family stories, explorations of identity and meaning, self-reflexivity, and everyday encounters for data collection. Attached to this document is a table outlining what autoethnography is, and what it is not (see Appendix A).

Autoethnographies are rooted in a range of philosophical and epistemological orientations. For the purposes of my study, my autoethnography will be rooted in phenomenology to study the phenomenon of myself as an LGBTQ+ educational leader through the lens of conscious experience and written in a narrative form to have a sequence of events, development between sequences leading to a conclusion, and a memorable description of events. As humans, we are fundamentally storytellers as we ourselves experience this life as a story existing in the past, present, and future that is driven by memories and action.

It is also important to note that autoethnography and queer theory share mutual ideological commitments. Adams and Jones (2011) share that these mutual commitments are present in the current scholarly literature. These mutual commitments are:

- 1) Autoethnography tries to disrupt traditional and dominant ideas about research and how it should be done while queer theory advocates a similar sensibility in its attempt to disrupt traditional and dominant ideas about what is considered normal (Alexander, 2008; Browne & Nash, 2010; Diversi & Moreira, 2010; Ellis, 2009a; Jeppesen, 2010; Richardson, 2009).
- 2) Queer theorists reappropriate existing research, language, texts, practices, and beliefs in novel and innovative ways just as autoethnographers tell and recast personal experiences in novel and innovative ways, simultaneously critiquing and filling gaps in existing scholarship (Alexander, 2008; Browne & Nash, 2010).
- 3) Autoethnographers handle identities and experiences as uncertain, fluid, open to analysis, and able to be modified as queer theorists share this mindset by working against fixity and firmness, certainty and closure, stability and rigid categorization of identities and experiences (Adams, 2009; Butler, 2004; Ellis, 2009a; Goodall, 2004; Hanmer, 2010; Plummer, 2005).
- 4) Queer theorists advocate for compassionate, fair change and consider ways research, texts, and bodies can serve as places of ideological and discursive trouble just as autoethnographers also try to make this same

discursive trouble while also creating humane and equitable ways of living. This ideological and discursive trouble is at the heart of a critically reflexive approach to research in which a researcher acts as a reformer (Denzin, 2003; Jeppesen, 2010; Plummer, 2005).

- 5) Lastly, autoethnography and queer theory share interrelated criticisms as well as complementary responses to these criticisms that stem from their commitment to reflexivity (Adams & Jones, 2011).

Through the shared commitments of queer theory and autoethnography as well as my own mindset, desires, and convictions, I feel strongly about the use of autoethnography for my dissertation. A major part of my doctoral journey has been situated in the context of self-discovery and self-acceptance. And while some might argue that autoethnography is self-indulgent, simplistic, and too personal, many academics, including myself, emphasize “the reciprocity of the “I” and the “we”, the reciprocity of story and theory, and the reciprocity of the personal and the political” (Adams & Jones, 2011, p. 111).

### ***Data Collection***

My study is designed to engage my readers through evocative autoethnography. I will intertwine the written narrative of data with its interpretation for the reader “to enter into dialogue with *my* existence as well as their own” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 82). It is a making of human knowledge that enters into the extensive series of utterances that is the story of human discourse. And as such, it will be entirely pieced together through the eyes of the researcher and my interpretation of the data collected.

The layered accounts written in this chapter describe the most salient events that lead to the formation of my understanding of education and what it meant to be a leader.

Each narrative will reveal the most important information comparable to the literature regarding belonging, identity, social cognition, and queer theory. The concept of layered accounts entails conducting both analysis and data collection in tandem, while also considering relevant literature as a means of generating comparisons and questions, rather than taking it as absolute truth (Charmaz, 1983).

The narratives will be in chronological order. Periodically, I will incorporate art designed through artificial intelligence and a deep description to provide readers with visual clues into my experiences and mind. The subsequent chapters will cover my journey as I transitioned into early leadership roles then into educational administration and my doctoral program. This chapter and subsequent chapters will stylistically be comparable to Ronai's (1995) layered account. I will start by detailing my experience (layer one), communicating the responses of others (layer two), and then concluding with research comparable to my experiences (layer three). Ronai used asterisks to indicate "a shift to a different temporal/spatial/attitudinal realm" (Ronai, 1995, p. 397). I will be using asterisks for the same purpose.

My autoethnography will be structured as a chronological, evocative narrative that takes place during three periods of time that have profoundly impacted my journey in the world of education:

1. Kindergarten through College (public and private schools)
2. Career as an educator into early leadership roles
3. Educational Administrator through my Doctoral Journey

These time periods all play a distinct role in the formation of my leadership abilities and perceptions. The narrative consists of key events that led to this formation and detail the supports and barriers to my self-efficacy as an LGBTQ+ educational leader.

To collect and organize my data, I will follow the notion presented by Bochner and Ellis (2016) that “the storyteller is the architect and engineer who takes the raw material of experience and builds a structure to contain it that puts the parts in their right places” (p. 93). To organize my three time periods into an evocative narrative with a sequence of events, I will first build a timeline with key events to determine themes across all three time periods. Next, I will utilize the practice of journaling and reflexivity to memory mine about these events. To aid in exploring my memories, I will collect and analyze home videos, pictures, keepsakes, communications, and my own social media accounts. And just like an autobiographer or novelist, I will utilize this practice to mine for the elements of description, setting, plot development, pacing, rhythm, character development, dialogue, and action to develop my evocative narrative (Poulos, 2021).

To gather my data, I utilized multiple sources. For the earliest years of my life, I used scrap books created by my mother and my grandmother. I also had access to a memory chest with report cards, gifts I had made, notes I had written, and endless other keepsakes that my mother has held onto throughout my life. From early on in my years as a middle school student, I had a digital camera where I stored important pictures and videos and kept journals with my notes and thoughts about the things I had been experiencing. Throughout my later years, I have boxes of mini-vhs tapes with video recordings, multiple hard drives with two decades worth of pictures and videos, photobooks created with pictures and captions, and social media content as far back as



the fall of 2004. I enthusiastically consider myself a digital hoarder or pack-rat. I keep a digital record of almost everything I can and have done so from the beginning of my time with computers. This includes my ability to record voice memos, jot down quick notes, or access all kinds of files in the cloud. Should I have a thought, reflection, or suddenly remember an experience as I go through this research study, I will be able to record my data instantly.

It is through my writing that I can practice a deep ethical reflection. Not only of myself and my actions but also of my perceptions of others and their reactions to my lived experiences. In my writing, I will be transparent and vulnerable with the details of the stories I share to really get at the emotional and underlying themes from these experiences.

Denzin (2014) cautions that “experience, lived and otherwise, is discursively constructed.” (p. 2). In order to reconcile this note, Denzin (2014) continues that there needs to be a “commitment to the position that interpretative social science scholars study real flesh-and-blood people who have real-life experiences” (p.2). Through my systematic reflexive introspection, I am committed to representing real people through my real-life experiences to explore the phenomenon of LGBTQ+ educational leadership.

### ***Data Analysis***

For data analysis, I will utilize a “thematic analysis of narrative” approach suggested by Ellis (2004, p. 196) while keeping in mind Chang’s (2008) concept that data collection and data analysis are not always sequential or separate from one another. The data collected from my timeline, themes identified, reflexivity through journaling and memory mining, and autoethnography will be analyzed for “themes that illuminate the

content and hold within or across stories” (Ellis, 2004, p. 196). A benefit of utilizing this analytical approach is the “potential to expand understandings, engage audiences, and provoke new learning experiences” that can reach a wider audience for personal and social changes (Prendergast & Belliveau, 2013, p. 200). Ellis et al. (2011) go on to say that the thematic analysis makes the “personal experience meaningful and cultural experience engaging” (p. 4). My narrative will combine the sequential presentation of my autobiographical data while also analyzing its implications towards understanding the phenomenon of my experiences as an LGBTQ+ educational leader.

The critical analysis of my data is based on the following suggestion from Hatch (2002): (a) review the data to identify themes (b) write analytical and reflective journals for each theme while identifying its key characteristics (c) study these journals for the interpretation of my themes and (d) summarize my findings. The collection of journals detailing the interpretations and themes will be linked to my autoethnographic narrative and my literature review. From this analysis, implications for change, recommendations for future research, and my reflection on the research process will be contextualized and discussed.

### ***Coding For Recreated Dialogue***

When using the method of autoethnographic layered accounts, most of the analysis takes places simultaneously during the writing process, but further analysis was necessary to assist in identifying the relationship between my experiences and belonging, identity development, and social cognitive theory across chapters four, five, and six. To represent these major themes found through my coding, I utilized recreated dialogue, further explained in chapter seven.

My analysis required conducting open coding on the first layer of each autoethnographic account, which details my experiences as a gay man in relation to the realm of education as a student, educator, and educational leader. The open coding process involved assigning pseudonyms to each approach code stemming from my journaling and repeatedly reading Chapters four, five, and six until patterns emerged from my experiences as an LGBTQ+ educational leader. The purpose of the pseudonyms is to match the themes I found with the characteristics of the other people I talk to during the recreated dialogue in chapter seven. The generated codes serve to represent data properties, with the respective pseudonyms characterizing these properties. Table 2 lists the open codes, categories of codes, and categories of data. In Table 3, further information is provided on the data properties that make up each code, accompanied by narrative excerpts highlighting the properties of each code. This methodology was employed to facilitate a deeper understanding of the experiences of an LGBTQ+ educational leader and provide a more nuanced analysis of the data.

***Table 2***

*Open Codes Used to Analyze Narratives*

<b>Open Code</b>	<b>Category of Code</b>	<b>Category of Data</b>
SES	Self-Efficacy	Self-Efficacy Supports
SEL	Self-Efficacy	Self-Efficacy Limitations
ITC	Sexual Disclosure	In the Closet
OTC	Sexual Disclosure	Out of the Closet
EDU	Education	Timeframe in Education

In order to better comprehend my personal experience, I closely scrutinized each open code, along with its corresponding narrative excerpts. Through this careful examination, I was able to develop an overall portrait of my journey by organizing and condensing the data properties into a sequence of distinct constructs. These constructs were formed by interweaving the narrative excerpts and served to provide a greater understanding of my experiences in a more organized manner. To represent my relationship to the field of education, I assigned pseudonyms which were utilized twice - once to reflect my time in the closet and again, after I had come out. For a more detailed understanding of these pseudonyms and their role in my narrative, see Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Open Coding, Frequency, Data Properties, and Narrative Excerpts*

No.	Approach Code and Assigned Pseudonym	Freq.	Phase Code	Data Properties	Demonstrative Narrative Excerpts
1	SES (Brent)	48	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OTC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interest in dressing up and wearing high heels sparked a feeling of invincibility</li> <li>• I displayed a creative flair</li> <li>• Shared passions and hobbies leading to lasting friendships</li> <li>• Strong relationships and support system of family and friends (Dragowski et al., 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2019; Jackson, 2017; Kroeger, 2019; Price et al., 2019)</li> <li>• Freedom to express myself authentically</li> <li>• Ability to socialize without judgment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The confidence I felt from a mere two-inch boost to my height was indescribable... in those shoes, the world was my oyster.”</li> <li>• “I embedded myself into the religious community around me where I had found acceptance for who I <i>appeared</i> to be.”</li> <li>• “As a director of school leadership in this organization, I can show up as my authentic self.”</li> <li>• “My colleagues... are interested in my life and supportive of my sexuality.”</li> <li>• “It feels fantastic being able to use my creative skills while being authentically me!”</li> </ul>

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			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of purpose (Allen et al., 2021)</li> <li>• Hope for living</li> <li>• Found community in the LGBTQ+ space</li> <li>• Acceptance and comfort from my doctoral cohort</li> <li>• Belong occurred when my authentic self was able to be shown (Brown, 2020)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Our conversations began delving deeper into topics such as identity and expression...including drag culture... reconciling myself as a gay man and living authentically on the outside regardless of the environment in which I find myself”</li> <li>• “The world of drag permitted me to embrace parts and identities within myself without any shame or guilt.”</li> <li>• “My girls accepted my identity without judgment or hesitation”</li> <li>• “My heart tells me there is no greater leadership opportunity than to lead them as their father”</li> </ul>
2	SEL (Danny)	24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ITC</li> <li>• I was discouraged from certain mannerisms considered by family as more feminine</li> <li>• Struggling with same-sex attraction while trying to conform to societal norms of cisgendered, heterosexual expectations</li> <li>• Difficulty fitting in</li> <li>• Stress, suicidal ideation, rejection, hostile environments due to non-conformity to binary gender societal expectations (HRC, 2017)</li> <li>• Denial of identity cost personal well-being (Fassinger et al., 2010)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I would instead use my grandmother’s jewelry and high heels as my favorite dress-up items. Unfortunately, neither of my parents were overly enthusiastic about this proclivity. I couldn’t help but notice wondering glances from my mother and father when they witnessed the spectacle.”</li> <li>• “I was the oddball out of the class... I did not fit in... I knew I was different.”</li> <li>• “I found myself drawn to the things that were traditionally considered feminine - music, fashion, and makeup.”</li> <li>• “My hope quickly died as other student started... calling me faggot”</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transition to Louisville was daunting with a loss of community</li> <li>• Rejection by not fitting societal norms in the community I worked in</li> <li>• Anti-LGBTQ+ laws and regulations being passed across the country</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The insults hurled at me from [my assault] diminished but never stopped... I was never able to express [my sexuality] because I didn’t trust anyone to handle that knowledge with respect and dignity.”</li> <li>• “The price was for me to conform and hide my identity as a gay guy. I was taught that homosexuality was a ‘sin’ that I had the choice to not be... [and] I could be ‘fixed’ of this ‘sin’” if I tried hard enough.</li> <li>• “I sensed I was different from the other male teachers in my building”</li> <li>• “I was dying knowing that I was not this man I portrayed. I wanted more than anything to live an authentic life, but thought the only way to do that was to change what was on the inside to match what I showed on the outside.”</li> <li>• “For most of my time in the principal role, I felt like I was not able to be my authentic self... I had gone back into the closet for the sake of my job.”</li> </ul>
3	EDU (Betty)	32	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ITC</li> <li>• OTC</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I knew I was different from the other students around me</li> <li>• Struggling with same-sex attraction while trying to conform to societal norms of cisgendered, heterosexual expectations in my</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I was the oddball out of the class... I did not fit in... I knew I was different.”</li> <li>• “My hope quickly died as other student started... calling me faggot”</li> <li>• “The insults hurled at me from [my assault] diminished but never</li> </ul>

- school and as an educator
- Difficulty fitting in
  - Stress, suicidal ideation, rejection, hostile environments due to non-conformity to binary gender societal expectations (HRC, 2017)
  - Denial of identity cost personal well-being (Fassinger et al., 2010)
  - Did not meet gender expectations of some educational administrators as a teacher
  - Rejection by not fitting societal norms in the community I worked in
  - Anti-LGBTQ+ laws and regulations being passed across the country
  - Found belonging through authenticity in my educational organization
- stopped... I was never able to express [my sexuality] because I didn't trust anyone to handle that knowledge with respect and dignity."
- "My years at the University of Kentucky... I searched for answers to be changed."
  - "I sensed I was different from the other male teachers in my building"
  - "To my students and colleagues, I wanted to appear as a cisgendered, heterosexual guy."
  - "I was shocked when my principal told me that I was too feminine and not enough in my classroom"
  - "At Shawnee, I found a home. I was starting to worry less about how I sounded or my mannerisms."
  - "For the first time in my own educational learning environment, I was able to be a student who identified as gay."
  - For most of my time in the principal role, I felt like I was not able to be my authentic self... I had gone back into the closet for the sake of my job."
  - "As a director of school leadership with this organization, I can show my authentic self...the relationships are nurturing and bring me life."
-

Next, I continued the coding process by utilizing axial and selective coding. From this coding process, overarching themes were determined. Table 4 below illustrates the next two steps in the coding process.

**Table 4**

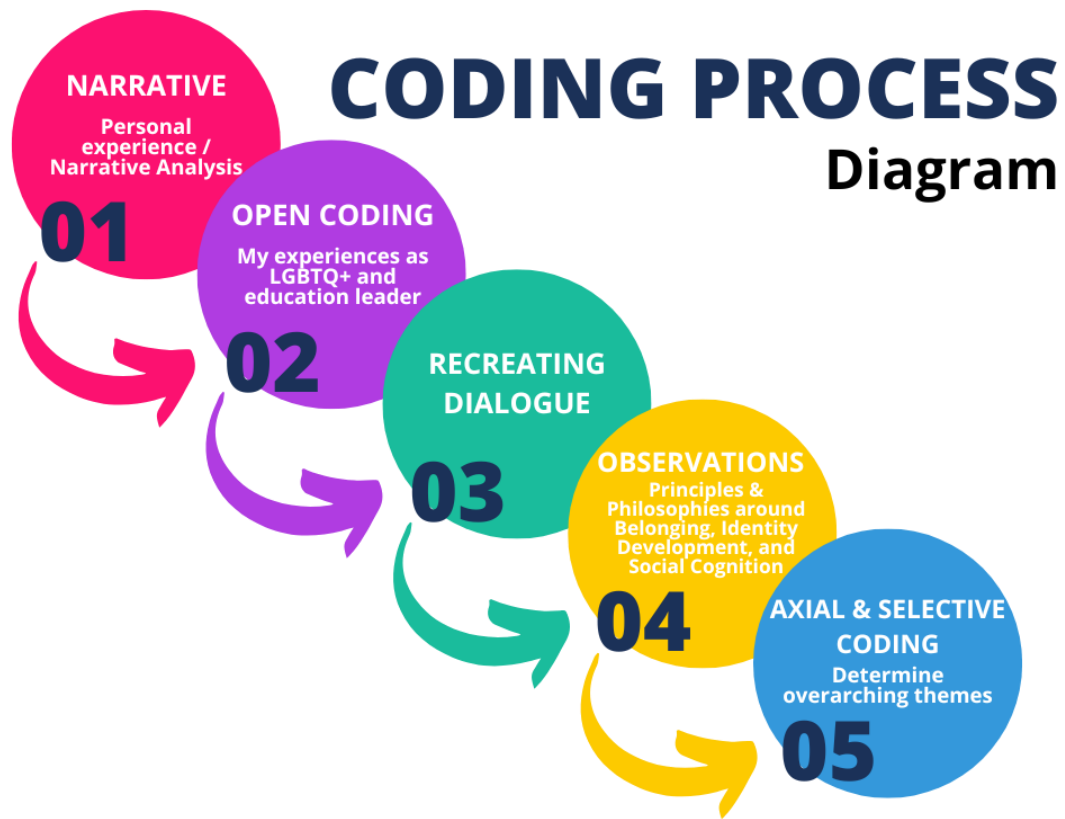
*Open, Axial, and Selective Coding for Narrative Analysis*

<b>Open Code and Assigned Pseudonym</b>	<b>Axial Code</b>	<b>Selective Code</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SES (Brent)</li> <li>• SEL (Danny)</li> <li>• EDU (Betty)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hiding my identity created mental hardships</li> <li>• Religious involvement that was accepting of me but with conditions</li> <li>• LGBTQ+ community involvement accepting but without conditions</li> <li>• Authenticity of self allowed me freedom in my expressions and in my job</li> <li>• When I was in constant battle within my own mind and life over my sexuality, I was unsure of who I was and lacking self-efficacy</li> <li>• My identity development was not linear and varied based on my environment and life-circumstances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A sense of belonging as my authentic-self helped contribute to my improved mental health and self-efficacy</li> <li>• Understanding my authentic-self fueled my motivation to belong to the LGBTQ+ community and be a better leader</li> <li>• Belonging to my religious organization came with conditions (conditions that I be someone I was not)</li> <li>• My comfort with my identity as an LGBTQ+ community member is directly correlated with the people and experiences around me</li> </ul>

To provide a clearer understanding of how I analyzed the data and the order in which I did so, Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this process. The arrows in the figure illustrate the process as it flowed from one step to the next but also the interdependence of these steps throughout the analysis process.



**Figure 1 – Overall Coding Process Diagram**



*Note:* This diagram illustrates the interdependent, step by step process used to code the data. Adapted from Hayes (2016) autoethnographic study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Because I am completing my dissertation as an autoethnography, there is a need for deep ethical reflections about myself and those that happen to be a part of my story in the past, the present, and potentially the future. As a researcher, I will be acting from my heart and mind to acknowledge not only my experiences, but also the relationships with others that play a role in those experiences. Denzin (2003) notes that autoethnographers must have an ethic of care. In order to do this, I will hold human dignity as central to my study seeking to understand both my experiences and those which are part of my

community and story. Certain topics the author deems too traumatizing to explore or irrelevant to the study could potentially be off-limits in an autoethnography, but this is solely up to the author to decide. According to Christians (2011) and Denzin (2014), autoethnography explores new social ethics based around values of caring and relationships. And as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, it is my responsibility to honor the diverse values held within the community while also representing these in a way that brings enlightenment to those outside the LGBTQ+ community. It is also important to note that I will not be discussing events that I feel do not necessarily pertain to my experiences as an LGBTQ+ individual that also impact my future sense of self-efficacy as it relates to my leadership.

In autoethnography, the researcher is both the researcher and the participant. Ethically speaking, this opens up the ability of difficult topics to be discussed because the researcher is in total control of what details are shared from difficult experiences, which also helps build trust and solidarity with the readers of the study (Lapadat, 2017). Autoethnographers are also likely to be more credible when discussing their experiences and subsequent reflections compared to a third party that is also interpreting said experiences. At the same time, it is also possible that other perspectives could be overlooked or ignored if they are different from the researcher's, because this particular method of research is exploring that of the researcher and not others. In this instance, it is imperative to represent the researcher's perspectives with a compelling narrative that sheds light on the phenomenon being studied with honest vulnerability.

While some ethical considerations of autoethnography show care and provide protections for the researcher as the participant, there are still multiple ethical challenges

according to Tullis, 2013). As a person, I am no island. I have friendships, colleagues, family members that are inherently part of my story. While it is difficult to protect the anonymity of others in my story and certainly my story to share, I must carefully consider needs and concerns of these others (Andrew, 2017). According to Méndez (2013), “the primary ethical standard against which any autoethnography should be evaluated is ‘an ethic of accountability’ in which the writer should write his or her truth as if all...people involved in those events were listening to him or her” (p. 284). As I write, I will do as Ellis (2009b) suggests and openly and repeatedly reexamine the decisions I’m making through a process of completing my initial writing, reflecting on that writing through an ethical lens, and then rewriting that section based upon my reflections to try and ensure the most ethical decisions are being made. As I am completing my narratives, I will also utilize informal conversations with family and friends to solicit feedback on my writings. Differences in accounts, will be dealt with through reflection and ultimately through the perspective that I bring from my understanding of the events. Another challenge I will face is that while my point of view can change through time of the experiences I write about, once my dissertation is submitted, the text will be frozen in time without the ability to change its perception as mine does.

One ethical consideration that must be examined is my own vulnerability. The stories and details of my life that I choose to share will be ones that I can no longer take back. I will be offering a window into my life and experiences in a potentially vulnerable way. The consequences of this could be minimal but could also impact my future depending on the reader and their interpretations of my stories. Lapadat (2017) even suggests that completing an autoethnography will open me up to public scrutiny by those

that read my study. It is possible that opening up the wounds of my past could create vulnerabilities in the moment of writing but also innumerable times in the future. While I can attempt to write in a way that is honest and yet protective of myself, there is always the chance that I will experience unanticipated consequences from sharing my story.

I will be utilizing multiple resources to help with the ethics surrounding my autoethnography. Tullis (2013) describes several steps as a starting point:

Do no harm to self and others; consult your IRB; get informed consent; practice process consent and explore the ethics of consequence; do a member check; do not present publicly or publish anything you would not show the persons mentioned in the text; [and] do not underestimate the afterlife of a published narrative. (pp. 256-257)

Using these guidelines as a starting point, I will have to make difficult decisions on whether something I write could cause harm but be outweighed by the value it could bring in the service of others for positive change. Additionally, I will need to utilize the expertise of my committee members, family and friends, colleagues, and current literature to guide me. Since autoethnography rides a fine line between research in the social sciences and literary writing, I need to be open to additional or changing ethical considerations throughout the entirety of my study.

## **Summary & Conclusions**

In summary, my conceptual framework is based on my experiences as an educational leader that identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. I will be utilizing queer theory as my theoretical framework to capture the non-binary and complex intersectionality of educational leadership and the LGBTQ+ identity. Through

journaling, writing, rewriting, and the analysis of personal artifacts like home videos, pictures, communications, and my social media accounts, I will write an evocative autoethnography to draw the reader into the experience and the emotions felt as if they are watching the story unfold before their eyes. This autoethnographic method requires me to reflect on my personal experiences within my community and consider the ethical implications of sharing those experiences. This process requires a deep commitment to an ethic of care, human dignity, and accounting for the potential consequences of sharing sensitive personal information. While autoethnography offers unique insights into my experiences, it also presents a number of ethical challenges that must be carefully considered in order to ensure that no harm is done to me as the researcher or others who are part of my story. In chapter seven, I will utilize a “thematic analysis of narrative” to discover themes that illuminate the phenomenon and hold across the stories presented in my autoethnography and then discuss my findings. Lastly, I will summarize my study, discussion implications for change, recommendations for future research, and my reflection on the research process in chapter eight.

#### CHAPTER FOUR: WELL, IF THAT'S THE PERSON YOU WANT TO BE

In his closet, a man does dwell,  
His secret hidden, no one can tell,  
He walks with care, he talks with fear,  
For judgement looms, always oh so near.

But in the darkness, where no one sees,  
His true self revels in all its decree,  
He dances freely, he loves with pride,  
And in this sanctuary, he cannot hide.

Yet with each step he takes outside,  
Trepidation grips him, he cannot hide,  
The world so cruel, so dark and mean,  
A perilous place, it must be seen.

But as he lays his head to rest,  
In the quiet of his cozy nest,  
A dream takes hold, like none before,  
And in its grasp, he cannot ignore.

A light so bright, it fills the room,  
And in its glow, he feels no gloom,  
For in this dream, he is himself,  
And nothing more, nothing else.

As he wakes, his heart does race,  
The dream so real, it leaves a trace,  
He knows he must, at last, be free,  
And show the world his true identity.

### **I Dreamed a Dream**

Walking down the hallway toward my childhood bedroom, everything around me felt hazy except for the hunter green carpet that somehow never aged. Pictures of me and my older brother still hung on the walls but appeared blurry as I tried to look at them. I get to my bedroom door. My grandmother's antique bedroom suite was still located exactly where I remember from all the times I spent in there when in middle and high school. The bed was made with the same navy blue, geometric bedspread and pillows my mom had ordered for me.

It was almost as if I had stepped back in time but with one glaring difference. There was a hole about the size of a softball near the closet door. It was as if someone had punched through the wall revealing a room I didn't know existed. As I leaned down, I began peering into this hidden space. It was an abandoned bathroom. It looked like it had been built in the 1970s with the original house and then boarded up. I could see a window with boards over it, blocking most of the sun from entering the bathroom. I could

see the dust floating in the air as it moved through the small rays of light that happened to sneak past the boards. The bathroom didn't look used, but it certainly looked lost to another time.

It is clear that the bathroom had been designed with a bit of flare and a clear purpose but has never been used. Why had it been hidden and not lived in through the years? I see a door to get in and find myself now standing in the middle of this room wondering where to begin. Do I clean first? Or do I pull the boards down and let in the sun?

I go to pull the boards down off the window and can tell they are nailed securely for the purpose of keeping everyone and everything out of there. But I am determined. I pull harder and can feel the wood start to give way. As I hear the crack of the wood give way and feel my body start to fall backwards, I wake up.

For months, I had been having this same dream. A hidden bathroom in the house where I grew up? Right on the other side of the wall of my bedroom? How was this possible? At first, I was a bit confused by what this dream could mean. I am by no means a Sigmund Freud or expert dream interpreter. But I have decided that this dream is a calling for me to open up a part of me that has been hidden away most of my life. It is time for me to break down the boards, let the sun in, and welcome life into this room.

As a 37-year-old man, I have only been "out of the closet" for just under five years. Most of my life, I tried to hide this part of me from everyone. I did everything I could to keep it hidden. I tried speaking in a lower tone. I dated girls, only girls. I got married. I had children. I never dared to tell anyone how I really felt. But there came a time when I could not do that anymore.



**Figure 2 - A Dream Revealed**



*Note:* This image was created by myself using Midjourney AI Art Generator. This is a visual representation of what I saw in my dream.

Through my autoethnography, the reader will notice three distinct layers. The first layer is my experience. The second layer is my experience through the lens of others and their reactions to my experiences. The third layer is my experience juxtaposed with the academic literature. These layers are present throughout the remainder of this chapter and chapters five and six.

### **That Boy is Gay: Layer One**

It's my mother's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday party. I'm five years old. The house is a mixed bag of our traditional Halloween decorations with an additional layer of cliched "over the hill" decorations on top. Family friends are crammed into the living room of our three bedroom, two bath ranch with its typical 1980's décor. I'm sitting next to my mom on the stone covered hearth while Roy Orbison's greatest hits and adult conversations mixed into a blur of noise around me. As with most typical "over the hill" parties, the adults

enjoyed their wine and spirits, reminisced about the good ol' days, and told their crude jokes.

As a kid, I liked to dance and be the center of attention. And this night was no different. I would habitually put on my parents' old records and dance to my favorite songs in the formal living room by myself all the time. And tonight, one of those songs, "Oh, Pretty Woman", began to play and it was time for me to shine. With a little encouragement from those in the den, I began dancing and strutting my stuff in front of the coffee table. And to my delight, everyone was enjoying it. And enjoying it so much so that I was being thrown money. What kid doesn't like to get money? With every turn, my hip would shoot out for a dramatic flair. Occasionally, I would make sure to put my hand on my hip like the diva I was.

**Figure 3 - A Dance Enjoyed**



*Note:* This image was created by myself using Midjourney AI Art Generator. This is a visual representation of what I remember wearing that evening.

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It's a typical, summer Saturday at my grandparents' house. My mother is in the kitchen helping my grandmother cook the vegetables that had come from my great uncle's farm just days before. My grandmother was cutting corn off the cob to make my favorite, creamed corn. My mother was tending to the green beans and new potatoes, yellow squash, and the fresh gallon of sweet tea. I was in my own little world in one of the back spare bedrooms.

This was my favorite spare bedroom. It had an antique oil lamp I enjoyed lighting to then pretend I was a pioneer. There was a bed filled with my grandmother's sewing materials with different kinds of fabrics and fun scissors that made patterns when you used them. But the most fun was found in the closet and on the antique dresser. The dresser contained jewelry of every color and size. Gaudy necklaces with matching rings abound. The moment I would slide the closet door open, my playtime options would be endless! Dresses, sweaters, and coats that allowed me to be anyone I wanted to be. But the best of all was the pair of bright red high heels that belonged to my grandmother. Not only were they pretty and went with every combination of jewelry, but they allowed me to see up and into a whole new world. The confidence I felt from a mere two-inch boost to my height was indescribable. In those shoes, the world was my oyster.

I would wear that jewelry and those heels with pride. I would walk throughout my grandparents' house as if I owned the place. Dressing up made me feel invincible. I didn't care that they were women's clothes. I felt pretty. And I liked playing like that.

\*\*\*

One of my favorite teachers in second grade was my art teacher. I wanted to be kind, happy, and outgoing just like her. I remember how she would hold her hands. And at the age of eight, I had picked up on a one of those tendencies. Just like her, I would hold my arms about the same height as my stomach and my wrists would be limp allowing my hands to dangle. I don't necessarily know why exactly that was the trait I picked up on and copied, but it was nonetheless. That quickly changed after my mother corrected me and told me that "girls hold their hands like that... not boys." I remember feeling as if it shouldn't matter how I hold my hands. What difference did it make? But at that age, it easily could have made all the difference in whether or not I would have been bullied by other kids as I would eventually find out.

\*\*\*

I repeated the third grade as I transitioned into a private college-preparatory school from a public school. I was a bit introverted at this point in life. I had gained weight and was now chubby compared to my previous years of being rather skinny. My new school had students that I had never met before. I didn't have any connections to lean on in this environment. Everything was different from what I was used to in the elementary school I had been at for the past three years. My classmates had mostly grown up together. Their families were all friends. I was the oddball out of the class. It was difficult for me. I tended to hang out with the girls at recess. I was too nervous to play the different sports all the boys played at recess. I wasn't good at sports, and this was the last thing I wanted the other kids to know. So, I avoided them altogether. I did not fit in with the other boys in class. I felt it. I still feel that disconnect to this day. I knew I was different, but I was not sure how or why I was different.

\*\*\*

As a growing boy, I felt different than the others, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. While my buddies were busy daydreaming about kissing Brooke or Marcy, I found myself occupied with the idea of a stolen kiss from Zack Morris on *Saved By The Bell*. And I mean, come on, who at that age didn't have a crush on Zack Morris, am I right?

You see, I often found myself feeling different from my guy friends. I wasn't interested in the same things they were - sports, video games, and talking about the "hotness" of girls. Instead, I found myself drawn to the things that were traditionally considered feminine - music, fashion, and makeup. It wasn't that I wanted to be a girl, I just enjoyed exploring these areas that were typically off-limits for boys. And when other guys were wanting to watch basketball or women's beach volleyball during the Olympic games, I wanted to watch the men's diving, men's swimming, and men's gymnastics competitions. Watching those made me feel different. There was an attraction to these guys for me.

And while some might consider my experiences, mannerisms, and personal tastes as another trope of the LGBTQ+ community, I knew these things were all part of what made me different, made me unique. Unfortunately, I didn't have a clear understanding of what it meant to be "gay". The term was certainly thrown around a lot as an insult, but nobody ever explained to me what it actually meant. As a result, I felt confused and ashamed of my interests and my perceived lack of masculinity. I didn't know how to explain to my friends and family why I was more interested in the Spice Girls' outfits

than I was in scoring a touchdown. I just knew that I felt different, and that this difference was something to be hidden and suppressed.

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In the spring of my seventh-grade year, I was involved in choir, drama, and all things creative. For choir during this time, we headed to Nashville, TN to be a part of a collaborative singing movement for schools called “America Sings”. We were there for two days and one night. For the overnight stay, we were located at a Shoney’s Inn. I ended up rooming with 6 other guys in one of the hotel’s suites. Four of the guys were in my grade level and three were in the eighth-grade level. Late in that evening as we were all in the hotel room, the three older guys began masturbating to some form of straight porn. The other guys in my grade and I didn’t join in and just kept to ourselves by playing cards and chatting. But the older kids wouldn’t allow that to happen for long. Myself and one other friend became the targets of the older boys. Both myself and the other friend tended to be more feminine in nature with softer voices, more introverted, didn’t play sports, and generally teased as gay. But at that point in life, both of us had not labeled ourselves as gay. Myself being very much in the closet, and my friend being straight.

Unprovoked, the three older boys rushed over to the pullout sofa bed that my friends and I were playing cards on and began to hold me down. My gut reaction was to fight back and try to get out from their grip, but these three boys were larger than I was. And I was outnumbered as my friends backed away not knowing how to react. While they were holding me down, they tried sticking their hands in my mouth while telling me to taste their cum. This went on for what felt like an eternity. When I finally broke away,

I ran straight to the bathroom and locked myself in there while the commotion continued outside the door for the next few minutes. I sat on the bathroom floor as the adrenaline rush gave way to tears. I don't remember how long I stayed in there, but the time didn't matter. When I finally made my way out of the bathroom, everything had settled, but the tension in the room was awkward. That night, I laid in the bed unable to sleep and had never been more thankful for an early morning breakfast and departure time. We left the hotel, and I was finally able to get away from these boys, but I would never be able to get away from that evening. It had left a mark that will never be erased.

**Figure 4 - A Night Never Forgotten**



*Note:* This image was created by myself using Midjourney AI Art Generator. This is a visual representation of what I remember the hotel room looking like that evening.

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The immediate days after returning to school were unbearable. I didn't want anyone to know what had happened to me. My hope for this quickly died as other students started coming up to me and saying things like "what does cum taste like?" and

calling me a “faggot”. The first day back, I confided in one of my friends what had happened on the trip. Thankfully, she had the courage to tell one of our teachers. At that point, things began to escalate with the principal, parents getting called, and receiving consequences. The three older boys received a two-week suspension and my friend and I, the victims of the assault, received two weeks of after school community service for an hour each day for not immediately notifying an adult of what happened.

In the years after this event, the insults hurled at me from this event diminished but never stopped. In middle school, I knew I was attracted guys. And by high school, I knew what that attraction meant. But I was never able to express that because I didn’t trust anyone to handle that knowledge with respect and dignity. I hid this part of myself for fear of having something else happen to me like that night.

In those years, I embedded myself into the religious community around me where I had found acceptance for who I appeared to be. I learned the tenets of Christianity, ascribed to the belief system, and took the teaching to heart. The leaders and people that invested in me gained my trust. They genuinely cared about me, at least the carefully cultivated image that I broadcast. But in my mind, that relationship had a price. The price was for me to conform and hide my identity as a gay guy. I was taught that homosexuality was a “sin” that I had the choice to not be. If I prayed enough, tried hard enough, I could be “fixed” of this “sin”. But I had to make that decision. And so I made the decision to be “fixed”. No one around me knew as I kept everything inside. I never even talked with my closest friends about my same-sex attraction. No one could know. I had to “fix” this before anyone found out that I was gay.



For the next 17 years of my life, I prayed daily that God would fix me and take away any thoughts and desires for same-sex attraction. I became more involved in church, spending every hour there that the doors were open for youth and young adults. I spent my summers serving communities all over the world in the name of Jesus. I became a youth pastor and received ordination as a minister. I had positioned myself as a leader in the church communities that I found myself in during those 17 years. Every opportunity I had to work harder in the name of Jesus, I took it. I believed that I needed fixing and that I could be changed.

My years at the University of Kentucky for my bachelor's and master's degrees I searched for answers to be changed. While some young adults were deleting their internet search histories to get rid of evidence of watching porn, I was deleting my search history for conversion therapy. I would regularly read websites for now defunct ex-gay ministries like Exodus International or Hope for Wholeness. I read their supposed "success" stories in hopes that I would be one of them. But no one could know that I was even searching for help, because then they would know I was gay. I remember listening to sermons like one that compared girls to spaghetti, which stated they allowed their emotions and thoughts to weave through all aspects of their life without the ability to control or separate those, and guys to waffles, which stated they were able to effectively separate all parts of their life into nice compartments like syrup separates into the holes of waffles. Listening to that sermon, I remember thinking that I was too emotional, and thus too feminine in my mind, and needed to stop allowing aspects of my life weave their way into other parts. I needed to separate aspects of my life better and appear more stoic. I also remember hearing sermons about the number of sexual partners gay men would have

in their lifetime being close to 200 different people, and how horrible that man must be. I heard sermons relate sexually transmitted diseases, death, and failure to thrive in life to homosexuality. I listened to teachings that equated homosexuals to pedophiles. This was the mindset I was being taught, but this mindset was not in harmony with my own truth that I had yet to acknowledge.

I lived in this head space for those 17 years, eventually finding a wonderful girl who I was attracted to and could see myself building a life with over the years. This girl would support me, become my wife, the mother to my children, and best friend all while not directly knowing I was dealing with same-sex attraction.

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Up until this point, I had been protected in a sense. I had always been surrounded by close friends. Through college, I had always worked with my friends, been surrounded by my friends in classes, during the summer, and in extracurriculars. I was allowed to live deceptively happy in my small bubble of sorts. The image I was putting out into the world and that I had spent years building was adequate at the very least if not quite convincing. I had built a strong image that conformed to societal norms of a White, cisgendered, heterosexual man. It was an image of myself that could not be broken. Or so I thought...

### **Responses of Others (Layer Two)**

At my mother's 40th birthday party, I had the flair and enthusiasm of a professional dancer as I strutted across the dance floor to the classic tune of "Oh, Pretty Woman". As the five-year-old version myself, I surely was more clumsy than graceful. But that did not stop me from being creative with my moves and partying like no one was

watching. The responses from the others at the party were hilarious, full of laughter, joy, and even pride; they couldn't help but get caught up in the fun! My mother's face alone glowed with amazement as her little boy filled the house with happiness on her special night.

At a young age, I was not so much a fan of my own gender's expected Sunday best and would instead use my grandmother's jewelry and high heels as my favorite dress-up items. Unfortunately, neither of my parents were overly enthusiastic about this proclivity. I couldn't help but notice wondering glances from my mother and father when they witnessed the spectacle. Most often, they were, what I assumed was being, too polite to say anything out loud, but their expressions said it all. And I would occasionally get the response that I needed to go put those things back up because that's not how boys dress, similar to the response I got when I would hold my hands up with a limp wrist like my art teacher. Thinking back now, I look fondly on those moments when I dressed up in my grandmother's heels and jewelry. My rebellion against conformity in a more creative sense has been instrumental in shaping me into the person I am today.

Moving to a new school was a daunting experience, and one of the biggest challenges was trying to fit in. My parents responded by encouraging me to try and fit in by joining sports and other activities the kids at my new school enjoyed. At the time, the thought of joining those seemed like the only answer. But despite my best efforts, I never quite felt comfortable or accepted by most of the other kids. So, I started to search for other kids who shared my passions and hobbies, which eventually gave rise to lasting friendships and a feeling of belonging.

When I reported my assault that occurred during our field trip to "America Sings" with my fellow choir members, I was met with both positive and negative reactions. On the one hand, my parents were faced with shock and sadness but also admiration that I had the courage to report the incident. My classmates and teachers responded in much the same way. A few classmates remained silent with no response while the majority of them were supportive. However, when the school assigned me two weeks of community service for reporting what happened, something completely out of my control, many of us felt confused and frustrated by the idea that as a victim I was being punished after coming forward even if it was three days after the incident instead immediately following that sexual assault. Despite this feeling, the support of those that loved me showed their dedication to doing the right thing and creating an atmosphere of safety within their realms of control.

When I first got heavily involved in the church, my family and friends were all slightly surprised at my commitment since they were not heavily involved in church. Until late in my middle school years, I had been less than interested in religion. They never expected me to take such initiative in embracing a spiritual path. But little did they know the struggles I was facing in terms of trying to "fix" my sexuality. Because of their support for my newfound dedication, I chose to keep these what I thought were inner "demons" hidden for 17 years, fake smiles and manicured nothings sustaining the walls that separated me from my loved ones. Solidarity and Christian fellowship masked my silent distress as I slowly began to accept the closet in which I was caged.

### **Comparing My Experiences to the Literature (Layer Three)**

Growing up in a small, rural town felt like existing in a vast sea of conformity but is not necessarily unique to me. To this day, an overwhelming amount of LGBTQ+ youth experience high levels of stress, suicidal ideation, and rejection (HRC, 2017). It was isolating to not fit into the typically binary gender presentation that dominated my school and neighborhood, and yet it has also offered a unique perspective on gender dynamics. Just as I experienced an internalized non-heteronormative identity and bullying, LGBTQ+ youth are also experiencing hostile environments and homophobic bullying (Marston, 2015; Steck & Perry, 2018). During my high school years, I finally acknowledged and sought help for depression and my suicidal ideations. This is right in line with the research on the LGBTQ+ community acknowledging that rejection, ridicule, and discrimination are linked to poor psychological adjustment (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Huebner et al., 2004; Mills et al., 2004; Ueno, 2005).

While I had only personal experience to draw from, it wasn't until I began studying the research literature that my own lived experiences began to make sense within the larger context of our society. By exploring theories like queer theory and social cognitive theory that tackle intersectionality and systems of sexual and gender orientations, I was able to call into question my understanding of why I felt so different and how living my authentic identity could bring diversity and acceptance on a broader level; this allowed me to question the hegemonic forces that dictate things like sex, desire, and gender norms (Murray, 2015). As a child navigating my path to my identity, I experienced the internalization of heterosexual ideas, messages, and symbols through the

interactions with my parents, the rejection of my peers, and the trauma experienced around the combination of these (Szymanski et al., 2008).

As my identity was forming in what would be Erikson's early childhood and play age stages, I learned shame and doubt around my identity through my parents' disapproval of dress-up as well as guilt to live out something other than what I felt inside (1963). During my middle school and high school years, I refused to accept my sexual identity because of the vast ignorance and bigotry around me in my rural, religious community (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Huber et al., 2004).

As someone who thought they were alone, my motivation for many decisions during this time in my life was centered around the need to belong. This desire to belong was felt so deep within me to the point that I would deny my own identity for over two decades (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brown, 2020; Slavich & Cole, 2013). My lack of belonging to my biological family and school community caused an increase in mental health issues, antisocial behaviors, and depression for me (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003; Cacioppo et al., 2011; Cacioppo et al., 2015; Choenarom et al., 2005; Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Hari, 2019; Hawkley & Capitanio, 2015; Holt-Lunstad, 2018; Leary, 1990; Slavich, O'Donovan et al., 2010). This led me to work on my communication skills to sound more "manly" and align myself with the social norms of my religious community (Blackhart et al., 2011). I was seeking to belong through conformity and denial of my LGBTQ+ identity no matter the cost to my own personal mental health and well-being.

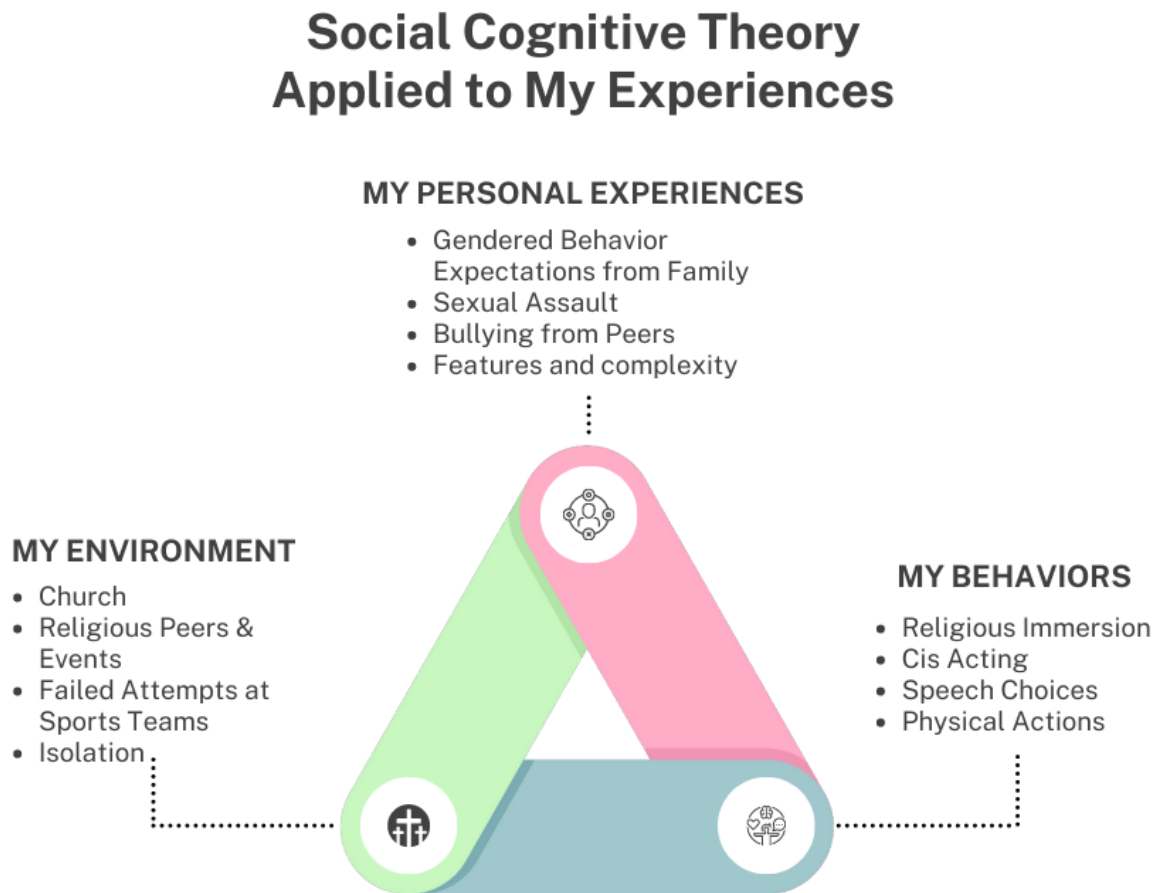
During this time in my life, I was striving for a sense of agency over the things going on in my life (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). My thoughts on who I was supposed to be were impacting my actions, these actions were influencing

the environment in which I existed, and my environment affected my thoughts and actions, creating reciprocal interactions among the three through their interconnectedness (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). I thought I was to act more like a cis-gendered, heterosexual male. So, I acted as such. I tried playing sports and got heavily involved in church, which put me in environments around cis-gendered, heterosexual males. These environments made me believe that I needed to hide my non-conforming sexual and gender identity and tendencies. All three things were constantly interacting with each other creating my reality. The diagram below illustrates this interconnectedness.

My journey of identity formation from a young age was marked by an internal rebellious spirit against the gender conformity enforced by society that was never allowed to be free. My love for creative expression drove me to dress up in high heels and my grandmother's jewelry, which were a source of joy and invincibility for me. However, my innocent pursuit of self-expression led to ridicule and abuse. My struggle with same-sex attraction brought on severe internalized shame and forced me into a mold that required conformity and denial of my true self. This constant effort to conform to societal pressures led to a loss of personal well-being and, eventually, mental health issues. Throughout this time, I sought a sense of belonging and found support from a church community, family, and friends. Despite my challenges, I developed communication skills that aligned with social norms while internally questioning the hegemonic forces of society that perpetuated non-conformity to binary gender presentation. My journey to this point is a reflection of the experiences of many LGBTQ+ youth who face hostility and rejection due to non-conformity to gender and sexual norms. The exploration of queer

theory and social cognitive theory highlights the need for society to question and be introspective regarding dominant cultural norms and expectations.

**Figure 5 - My Early Life Experiences and Social Cognitive Theory**



*Note:* This is a visual representation of the interconnectedness of my early life experiences, my behaviors, and my environment.



## CHAPTER FIVE: I DON'T FEAR FAILURE. I FEAR BEING SEEN FOR WHO I AM

There were two sides to me. There was the side I allowed everyone to see and the side that I hid and many times denied even existed to myself. Every day was a struggle to maintain the image of who I wanted everyone to see me as. How I managed this struggle for so long, I am still processing and will likely discover for years to come.

### **Who Am I: Layer One**

My first classroom was room 222 at Bryan Station High School. It was open with a large window that looked out into the front parking lot. I stuck to a simple color scheme of a dark blue and red since I was a government and civics teachers. My posters, the fonts, and little accessories throughout the classroom all matched. Everything had its place, and everything coordinated. To me, it looked like what I thought a man's classroom should look like with deep colors while still tidy and well put together. While very subtle, my classroom resembled the coordinated classrooms of the females around me and less so of the men's classrooms throughout the school building. The majority of the male teachers at this school were also coaches. I was not a coach. I was not athletic and didn't fit into the typical mold of the other male teachers in my school.

In my gut, I sensed that I was different from the other male teachers in my building. I typically didn't participate in the lunchtime banter about sports. I didn't go golfing with them on the weekends. I instead went to see musicals, gardened, and enjoyed watching shows like Glee, a high school musical drama. And while these things

are not exclusively gay or straight, they were different from the other men by whom I was surrounded.

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During these early days of my teaching career, I was also a part time youth minister in a Southern Baptist church. I was at the church at least four days a week, if not more. I would be there all day on Sundays, Monday evenings for the men's prayer group, Wednesday nights to lead the youth group, and Thursday nights for our small group Bible study. I was immersed in a culture that was of the mindset to "love the sinner, not the sin" and homosexuality was a sin that put you as far away from God as one could be.

One Sunday morning our pastor was preaching on the power of change through Christ. My pastor was also a special education teacher in the same school district. A teacher he knew had received pastoral counseling from him for homosexuality. The story went something like this: One school day, a teacher took a sick day while his wife went on to work. The wife felt something was off that morning and decided to return home. When she returned home, she found her husband in bed with another man about to participate in homosexual acts. The husband and wife came to my pastor for help. For months, my pastor would counsel this man and get to the root of his homosexual desires. After lots of work and prayer, this male teacher had been freed of his homosexual desires and his marriage was restored.

I heard this and imagined this was me. In some ways, I wanted this to be me! I wanted to be free of these desires that I was hiding. On the outside, I did everything I could to present myself as a heterosexual male, but on the inside, I was dying knowing that I was not this man I portrayed. I wanted more than anything to live an authentic life,

but I thought the only way to do that was to change what was on the inside to match what I showed on the outside.

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On July 16, 2011, I married an amazing woman. She was beautiful, kind, and everything I could possibly dream of. We had a good relationship and were great friends. The problem was we made better friends than romantic partners. Our entire relationship, I was afraid that being so close to someone would expose the fact that I was not straight. There were many days where I would have such anxiety that the things I did or said would expose me. There were times I would keep quiet during conversations with friends to not say the wrong thing and be found out. I was in a constant state of hiding.

When we got our wedding video back, I remember us watching it with a friend that put it together for us. I was more focused on watching my mannerisms and listening to how I spoke than I was on the actual events captured of the day. One moment on the video caused my heart to sink and my stomach to feel nauseous. My wife and I had promised not to smash the cake into each other's faces at the wedding reception. When that moment came, we both kind of faked each other out. And watching that moment back, I realized that my mannerisms were anything but stoic and masculine in a traditional sense. To this day, my memories of watching that moment on video with my then wife and our friend makes me anxious. Did they notice what I did? Could they see the gay part of me that I was trying to hide?

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To my students and colleagues, I wanted to appear as a cisgendered, heterosexual guy. In my car on the way to school, I would sing songs in a lower octave, practice

speaking in a lower voice, and practice saying words that could potentially make me sound like I had a lisp. I was afraid my voice sounded “gay”. So, I did what I thought would help me to not sound this way. When I would teach, I would purposely choose words for my presentations that didn’t have an “s” sound on the end of them when possible. I did everything I could to make myself sound more masculine. The whole time, lying to myself that what I was doing was the right thing and made a difference in who I was to other people.

I found security in this image I portrayed though. With this image, I secured leadership roles within my school like school committees, professional learning community lead, and was successful in my school principal program at the University of Kentucky. The person I was to everyone else was expressing success in their leadership growth.

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When my twins were born, my focus shifted drastically. While I was still concerned with how I sounded or acted, I could be myself around them. I had never felt loved quite like this. I could act stupid or silly and they would laugh and still wrap their arms around my neck as a baby. With them, I felt a love like no other. I didn’t feel the pressure of judgment or like I had to be anything other than myself in front of them. They were and are still the best thing to ever happen to me in this life.

**Figure 6 - *The Best Things to Ever Happen to Me***



*Note:* My daughters were born early and spent the first two months of their lives in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at the University of Kentucky Children’s Hospital.

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A year and one day after they were born, my life would start down a path of many changes. It started with a move to Louisville, KY from Lexington, KY, which had been my home for the previous ten years. My wife’s father, who was and will always be a figure of love, acceptance, and joy for me, had been diagnosed with Parkinson’s Disease. Between the needs of my daughters and my family’s desire to be close to my father-in-law, it was clear that we had to leave behind our life in Lexington. We needed family, and they needed us. But in that move, I left behind my friends, my church, my job, and the comfort of the façade I had built around me. I was about to find myself trying to

rebuild everything I had done in Lexington, but this time, it would end much differently than I expected.

**Figure 7 - Ch... Ch... Changes**



*Note:* Adventures at our new home in Louisville, KY soon after our move.

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Meyzeek Middle School was much different than the high school I taught at since graduating from college. My colleagues were different. The school culture was different. There were openly gay teachers at my school. I had not experienced that in my other teaching job. In my new environment, I felt alone. But I did what I knew how to do, and that was to present myself in a certain way and hide who I really was.

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Six months into my first year in Louisville, I left my part-time youth minister position in Lexington and found a new part-time ministry position at a Christian church in Louisville. During my interview, I was asked how I would respond to a youth group member that had come out as gay. In my heart, I was ashamed of what came out of my mouth. However, I knew what the interview committee wanted to hear. In those split seconds, I knew I needed the job to support my family. My ex-wife was a stay-at-home mom at that point, we had just purchased our house in Louisville, and we needed a

church family in Louisville like we had in Lexington. And just like that, I said, “I would let the student know that they are loved but that Christ calls us to live a life worthy of his sacrifice. And I would let them know that through the power of Christ, they could experience freedom from homosexuality.” The thought of what I said made me sick to my stomach to think that I would encourage someone else to experience the exact thing that was causing me so much anxiety. After I saw their approving head nods and smiles, I felt relief that I had passed their test and we could move on to the next question.

\*\*\*

It was the last day of school at Meyzeek Middle School after a grueling first year there. Two of my male students walked up to me and wanted me to sign their yearbooks. As I was signing their yearbooks, one of them said, “You know Mr. Covington... at first, we couldn’t tell if you were going to be cool or not. But now we know you’re not gay. You’re one of our coolest teachers.”

As the words began to sit with me, I sensed a crack forming in the carefully crafted portrait I thought I had built. My mind was racing with thoughts and questions. What did they mean they thought I was gay? I had a wife. I had twin daughters. I was a minister. I wasn’t flamboyant. I was straight acting. How did they know? Maybe my image wasn’t as convincing as I thought it was.

\*\*\*

Problems began to appear in my marriage. We were only friends and no romance existed between us. While I had still never acted upon my homosexual desires, they were there. They never went away no matter how much I prayed. They never went away no matter how much I meditated, studied the Bible, or read conversion success stories on

Exodus International's website, a former ex-gay ministry. I searched the internet fervently for how to pray the gay away. And while I kept finding "success" stories, I could never find how. I was too afraid to ask someone for help or to go to a conversion therapist because that would mean I would have to admit that I was in fact gay.

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As my personal life was spiraling and cracks were forming in my façade, I doubled down in my desire for leadership and perfection in my job. I took on leadership roles at Meyzeek on committees, participating in action research, working toward my doctorate, and starting to pursue instructional coach roles and administrative roles. In pursuing more leadership responsibilities, I increased my face time with my principal at the time.

As a teacher, I did not struggle with classroom management. I dealt with discipline issues in my classroom and wrote only a couple of referrals the entire school year. I had pride in my classroom management. It was firm but based on the strong relationships I had built with my students and their families. So, I was shocked when my principal told me that I was too feminine and not tough enough in my classroom as part of the reason I was not picked for an instructional coach role at my school.



**Figure 8 - *Just Keep It Together***



*Note:* A fake smile for my staff photo to try and hide the chaos happening inside.

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As my marriage was in its last year, I pursued an instructional coach role at The Academy @ Shawnee. The principal at the time saw potential in me as a leader in her building and hired me. At Shawnee, I found a home. I was starting to worry less about how I sounded or my mannerisms. I was allowing myself to be slightly freer. But even in this freedom, I was still highly guarded.

\*\*\*

After a year of failed attempts to make my marriage work, I gave up and walked away from it. This was one of the hardest decisions of my life. In my decision to walk away, I gave up half of my time with my daughters, and I gave up my vision of the future with a traditional family, grandkids, summer family vacations, a lake house, and other nonsense. But what I did was start to crack the door open for me to live authentically.

The same week I walked away from my marriage, I started a new job as an Academy Coach at Shawnee. I was to lead the implementation of the academies of Louisville model at my school. I had increased responsibilities, more workdays, and higher accountability. My work and leadership were being noticed and rewarded. At this same time, I was allowing myself to speak freely without worry of how I sounded. My mannerisms started to become more pronounced as I felt the freedom to talk with my hands without having to hold back.

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Almost six months after I walked away from my marriage, I stepped out of the closet for the first time. December 12th, 2017... I remember the day very vividly. I was having dinner with one of my closest female friends right before we were going to see the UofL Women's Basketball Team play Tennessee State. I knew what I needed to do. The day I had prayed against for nearly 20 years of my life had finally arrived. I was finally feeling a sense of worth in who I was. And in that very small amount of worth, I was able to muster enough strength to tell her that I was gay. The day I had feared for so long has become the day that I found so much freedom. I had learned to hide myself out of fear. And on that day, I felt a massive weight lifted from my shoulders. Going into it, I thought that coming out was a one-time event... however, I've come to learn that it's a never-ending series of events from telling each family member, new colleagues, and eventually my children. I've found acceptance in my family and friends. And for that, I could not be more thankful.

**Figure 9 - The Closet Door Has Been Opened**



*Note:* The picture of me in the UofL shirt is from that night. That smile is a smile of relief... a smile of acceptance... a smile of freedom... and a smile of love.

\*\*\*

A couple of weeks after I came out of the closet, I met a college friend in Lexington to hang out with them at my first gay bar. He had a similar upbringing and was willing to help me navigate the whole experience of coming out and finding my place as a gay man. I was never a bar person when I was in college. So, the whole experience was rather new to me. My first gay bar experience allowed me to dance to music like Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Beyonce without judgmental looks coming my way. I had the freedom to make flirtatious eye contact with other guys and not fear for myself. An experience that I had feared would destroy my life as I knew it was now a place where I found acceptance, freedom, and fun. And even though I was a bit nervous, I allowed myself the freedom to experience what it meant to be a gay man.

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One openly gay friend from high school suggested I download a hookup app called Grindr. He told me that he had made many friends on there that are some of his closest friends. Not knowing what it was or how these things worked, I naively downloaded the app and was introduced to a whole new world that I never knew existed. Through that app, I have met people from all over the world and some that have become my best friends and have been a support for me in pursuing leadership roles and help me to live authentically.

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I began volunteering and helping some friends that were involved with Louisville Youth Group, an LGBTQIA+ youth organization, where students from all over Kentucky have weekly programming to help them live out their authentic selves. It is what I would describe as similar to a church youth group but not based in religion and based in identity and community. I began helping the leader of this group build curriculum, design instructional activities, and supported wherever necessary. The group would hold community fundraising events where I would step in and help. I found community and purpose in helping youth not go through the same internal turmoil that I experienced for over 20 years.

**Figure 10 - *Finding Purpose and Community***



*Note:* The Louisville Youth Group’s annual spaghetti dinner and talent show for its members.

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In the summer of 2018, I decided to go on a trip across a few European countries and travel to Israel during the month of June. I picked this month because pride celebrations would be taking place throughout the world at this time. I purposefully placed myself in Tel Aviv, Israel the day after their pride parade and in Paris, France to experience my first pride parade. My memories of my first pride parade are quite vivid.

The sun was shining brightly as I stepped out onto the streets of Paris. It had been a couple of days since I arrived in this beautifully historic city, and it was finally time to experience my first pride parade. As I made my way to join the festivities, anticipation and a bit of nervousness began to build within me - what would this experience be like?

The streets were lined with rainbow flags, people watching from their apartment balconies near the rooftops, and so many people it was hard to walk at anything faster than a snail’s pace. We were all headed towards our destination for a celebration at Place

de la République, you could feel an electric energy reverberating through everyone's steps. It was clear that each person here had come to show their pride for who they are and for what they believe in. The sheer number of people marching alongside me filled me with such hope - no longer did anyone have to hide themselves away or be ashamed of who they are; here we could all be seen and accepted just as we are!

**Figure 11 - Paris Pride Parade 2018 (Marche des Fiertés)**






*Note:* These are pictures taken as I walked out on to the street from my hotel where the Paris Pride Parade was taking place.

Even with the celebration and visibility for our community on this day, there were still hints of the trauma our community has experienced and continues to experience through hatred and discrimination. There were reminders through posters some were holding in disapproval of the LGBTQIA+ lifestyle and visual representations of the harm our community is still facing throughout the world.

**Figure 12 - Hints of Trauma, Hatred and Discrimination**



*Note:* A photo I took at the Paris Pride Parade on June 30, 2018. Translation of the signs are: Red sign – In twelve countries to love each other is a crime punishable by death. White sign – Stop the death sentences of LGBTQ .

We stayed at Place de la République until late into the night celebrating our freedom with music, dancing, and endless conversations. And although that day ended up being incredibly special for me personally, what left an everlasting impression on me is knowing that even during turbulent times, coming together and living authentically can still bring about positive change.



**Figure 13 - Celebration at Place de la République**



*Note:* A photo I took as the sun was about to start setting and the party and concerts were just beginning in the Place de la République. This celebration went late into the evening.

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In less than a year, my life would take another big turn that I did not know was coming. The freedom I was experiencing was about to be squashed. The ability to express myself authentically was going to be diminished in my leadership. In some ways, I would be entering an entirely new closet.

### **Responses of Others (Layer Two)**

When I announced my decision to start a teaching career while also acting as a part-time youth minister, I was overwhelmed by the immense encouragement and support from those closest to me. My family, both biological and spiritual, were incredibly supportive and proud of me for following what I felt called to do, as it matched the passions I had exhibited throughout college. Friends, both near and far, celebrated what

felt like a new chapter for me because they had all watched me struggle to find purpose in what I was meant to do while pursuing my undergraduate degree. Stepping into teaching seemed like the perfect fit for me. In addition, it very much was aligned with being a youth minister, something I was already doing. It was amazing to see how everyone got on board so quickly and wanted the best for me. I couldn't have asked for better people surrounding me on that venture.

As one would expect and hope for, everyone seemed excited for me when I got married and started a family of my own. My family members gave plenty of gifts, went above and beyond to always help, and never stopped telling me how proud they were. Friends supported me with never-ending warm wishes and were there at every turn with gifts and helpful hands every time they were needed. Members of my church jumped in to offer words of encouragement with each stage of life, from reminding me to be strong in my marriage to my fatherhood journey and to maintain a faith-filled life. With such love surrounding me every step of the way, I can't help but feel blessed by this incredible, unwavering support system that I thought I had.

Moving to Louisville and making such drastic changes to my life was a daunting experience, and I was grateful for the unwavering support I received from my family and friends. Making this transition to a new city was no easy task, but my friends and family embraced every step of my transition with unparalleled encouragement, urging me forward instead of holding me back. No effort was too large to make sure that I felt safe and supported during this time, even if it meant watching an endless number of boxes filled with clothes and books as our family made the move. It was their generous spirit, accompanied by substantive guidance, that enabled me to move to Louisville with

excitement rather than a constant stream of fear. Though I had to leave familiar faces in Lexington, it was comforting to see how well I was embraced in Louisville from the friendly faces in church each week and the couple of close friends I made at my new school. Their enthusiasm for getting to know me was truly what made me feel welcomed in my new community.

As I navigated the deterioration of my marriage while helping raise two children and juggle multiple responsibilities with work and school, it was immensely helpful to gain perspective from both my family and friends. Though some of their opinions on what the best course of action was varied, overall, I felt surrounded by those who wanted to support me. My pastor provided particularly meaningful insight, carefully outlining that in accordance with my religious guidelines, I was well within my right to end my marriage. Although this particular step took a great deal of courage and a year for me to accept, it was comforting to know that making a change didn't have to be done against any of my moral fibers. Comforting insights like this one were key in finding inner peace and making a decision I knew would be best for both me and my kids.

The rejection I experienced when applying for a promotion at Meyzeek Middle School was a difficult blow to absorb, and the response from family and friends, who had believed in me so much, only added to the disappointment. Their initial disbelief was replaced by delight, however, when I was offered the instructional coach position at The Academy @ Shawnee. The encouragement and joy shown by them was unparalleled as it felt like this position had been made for me. This time in my life was bittersweet in hindsight, as it showed how quickly setbacks and challenges can be used to move you

forward with much greater success while molding you into a stronger person, which I found much easier with the love and support of my family and friends.

Coming out of the closet as a gay man was a difficult and life-changing experience, but I was overwhelmed by the level of support from many individuals close to me. My family welcomed me with open arms, my ex-wife showed she had no limits to her understanding and empathy for me, and my closest female friend demonstrated kindness beyond what I could have ever hoped for. This unexpected level of acceptance provided a solid platform for me as I navigated this journey of discovery and self-acceptance. Unfortunately, silence from some of my oldest friends is what greeted my news. But those losses were replaced with congratulatory messages from a few old acquaintances I hadn't talked to in years that are now some of my closest friends as we share a large part of our journey together.

As I came to terms with my sexual identity, the idea of losing some of my community felt like a real possibility. Fortunately, baring my truth was met with open hearts and genuine support from a new group of friends. My coming out process wasn't easy, but it was definitely worth it for the community I found in the LGBTQ+ space. Of course, I was fearful of potential judgment or rejection, but those worries faded when I encountered joyous and supportive people who wanted nothing more than for me to express my true self authentically and flourish as a gay man. My new LGBTQ+ friend group gave me space and freedom to explore who I am as a gay man. Thanks to them, I gained strength and resolve that enabled me to live proudly out of the closet. With their enthusiasm, understanding, and good humor propelling me forward, I felt immense courage to embrace my true self. Now more than ever, I feel connected to an affirming

group and the ever-increasing importance for everyone to find solace and acceptance for who they are. From day one, they embraced me with open arms and welcomed me into their accepting community, which is something I will always be grateful for.

### **Comparing My Experiences to the Literature (Layer Three)**

As I started my career in education, I had many fears, some personal, some professional. I was entering into new environments that were unfamiliar to me while also trying to maintain the image that I had spent years creating. But even in the midst of all those changes, I still had my sense of belonging to my religious community. It had been a constant source of connection and meaning for me during my college years and early in my career.

As a teacher, there would be times when I would upset a student with some of the simplest requests like asking them to remove their hat or sit up and not lay down on their desk. I remember in those moments some students calling me names like “faggot”, saying that I was gay, and other homophobic slurs. And this was as a closeted LGBTQ+ person that I heard these things. I was expected to address such disrespect with classroom management strategies, but where was the protection for me from these comments? Had I made similar comments to a student, I would have received disciplinary consequences. Like many LGBTQ+ educators, I faced vulnerability and harassment in my schools. (Piper & Sikes, 2010; Wright, 2010). Myers (2002) illustrates that sexual minorities have dealt with the stigma that comes with not fitting into the cis-gendered, heterosexual norms of society just as I experienced through comments from students to assumptions made by leaders when I was teaching.

Just like DeJean (2004), my fears and insecurities manifested in similar ways. Like DeJean, I would arrive early to avoid interactions with coworkers and students that I didn't feel comfortable around. I tried masking my fears and insecurities through professional perfectionism. And just like many of the gay men he interviewed for his study, I hid behind the image that I had created of myself; I was married, had children, and was involved in church. I brought my wife to school functions and tried to exist within the cis-gendered, heterosexual norms that were prevalent throughout the education systems in which I found myself.

As a closeted and then eventually out gay man, I fit the stereotypes of a heterosexual woman in how I expressed myself and was more familial in nature like Kite and Deaux (1987) found. Because I was not involved in the typical heteronormative gender roles with active and eager heterosexual urges, I was categorized as not being the typical masculine man, or in other words, as gender-atypical (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009; Eaton & Matamala, 2014). As this gender-atypical male, I did not fit into the traditional heterosexual, White male stereotypes as documented in the United States (Fassinger et al., 2010; Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008).

During both my years in the closet and my years as an out LGBTQ+ individual, it is clear from my own experience and the research literature that the topic of sexual diversity of educational leaders is nearly non-existent. There was never so much as a conversation any of my educational leadership programs on how you navigate the educational environment as someone that identifies as LGBTQ+. I had and still have a desire to see myself, an LGBTQ+ educational leader, reflected in the leadership

preparation experiences, educational policies, and critical daily interactions as Lugg and Tooms (2010) identified as a necessity.

My sense of belonging was absent in my occupation because I didn't fit the norms around me. My mental health issues persisted as I continued to live an inauthentic life. As my marriage fell apart and my religious community isolated me during my failing marriage, I didn't feel like I belonged anywhere. My health declined rapidly with weight fluctuations, anxiety attacks, poor sleep, and even cardiovascular problems (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003; Cacioppo et al., 2011; Cacioppo et al., 2015; Choenarom et al., 2005; Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Hari, 2019; Hawkley & Capitanio, 2015; Holt-Lunstad, 2018; Leary, 1990; Slavich, O'Donovan et al., 2010).

When I transitioned from a closeted LGBTQ+ man to one out of the closet, I experienced a complex and difficult process in trying to form my identity and trying to reconcile my past, faith, family, and expectations with my new reality. As Rosario et al. (2011) suggest, I struggled with poor psychological adjustment because of trying to accept my new identity. To this day, I still am learning to navigate this identity development process and find myself in varying stages of Erikson's model of development (1963).

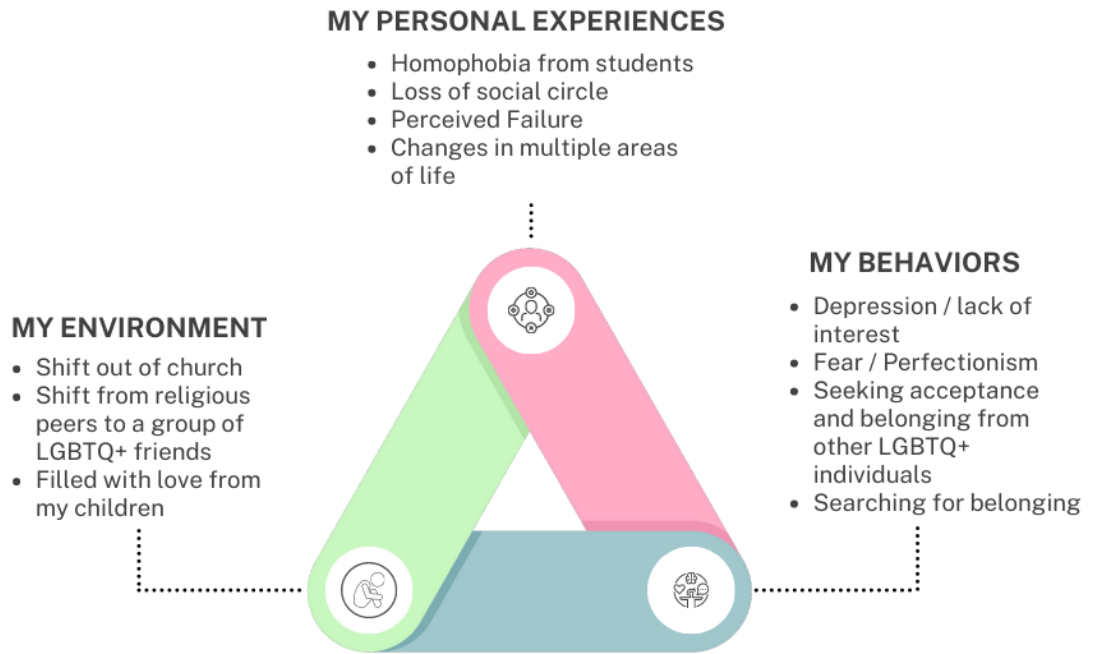
My occupations as an educator and youth minister were highly connected to my identity and the social circle around me (Bandura, 2002). But as I was accepting my new identity, my occupation as a youth minister experienced a permanent disconnect, and I felt another hit to my identity and social relations. This caused a change in environment, which impacted my thoughts, which then influenced my behaviors (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

During this time in my life, the struggles I faced in reconciling my sexuality with societal expectations of traditional masculinity were revealed. The fear of being exposed as homosexual led to a constant need to alter my behavior and speech in social situations, causing me anxiety and stress. The pressure to maintain this façade decreased after the birth of my twin daughters, but I felt alone as I transitioned to a new city with many new environments. Eventually, my transition towards accepting my sexuality was riddled with challenges that affected my mental health, but the support I received from family, friends, and my newfound LGBTQ+ community gave me the strength to live authentically. My journey towards self-realization, particularly as an educational leader, highlights the need for more discussion around sexual diversity, the ability to belong to a community that supports you, the ability to live authentically as yourself, and protection against gender norms and stereotypes in the world of education. The next chapter will delve deeper into my experiences as an educational leader and navigating the complexities of being an out gay man.



**Figure 14 - My Early Educator Experiences, Life Changes, and Social Cognitive Theory**

## **Social Cognitive Theory Applied to My Early Educator and Life Changes Experiences**



*Note:* This is a visual representation of the interconnectedness of my early educator experiences, life changes, my behaviors, and my environment.

## CHAPTER SIX: IF YOU CAN'T LOVE YOURSELF...

Less than a year after I came out of the closet, I entered the educational leadership doctoral program at the University of Louisville. Through the cohort I was in, I found freedom in two classmates. One was a colleague when I was at Meyzeek Middle School. I was able to be my authentic self around her and received her acceptance and affirmation. The other classmate helped me to see through our constant conversations that sexuality and gender are not binary but exist on a spectrum. Through one, I found healing from my past experiences at a school where I faced trauma. Through the other, I found meaning in myself and acceptance for who I was even though I don't fit into a binary like societal norms would have me do. For the first time in my own educational, learning environment, I was able to be a student who identified as gay. In my qualitative research classes, I was able to express myself in artistic ways that broke the mold of call and response like papers and class discussions. I was exposed to a color filled way of seeing the world, academia, and myself. And through these experiences, I was accepted by my classmates, my professors, and myself.

### **Leadership as an Openly Gay Man: Layer One**

On May 6th, 2019, I stepped into the role of executive principal of a small rural high school. It was the only high school in the district. As a gay man, I understand that there are certain challenges associated with my identity in this position, but when the superintendent recruited me, he excitedly described the district as progressive and willing to do whatever it takes to support *all* (emphasis added) students. When I accepted this

role, it was an exciting moment for me; not only because of the career opportunity but also because it meant that progress had been made on LGBT acceptance within my state and in smaller, more conservative communities. I was not ready for the cognitive dissonance I was going to experience through the idea that I was wanted there but only if I conformed to the hegemonic, patriarchal society that dominated the school district and community. In the beginning months, things were going well. I had a strong, coaching relationship with the interim superintendent and was making great progress on the improvement priorities we had set for our school. The interim superintendent was a politically conservative man. But even with his vocal, conservative beliefs, he was accepting of me, my differences, and my liberal political leanings. We had a great working relationship, and I felt part of the community and appreciated for the things I brought to the table.

However, this wouldn't last for long. After six short months, our school district's permanent superintendent returned from his long-term medical leave. He too openly held conservative political views, but things began to change quickly at our school and within the district. On the one hand, he seemed very supportive of me as an administrator, but behind closed doors, it became evident that he felt uncomfortable around me. He regularly commented about women and their attractiveness, which made me uncomfortable in my role and unsure of how to respond as an openly gay man. While he would outwardly say he supported all students, he questioned me about providing our transitioning student with access to the staff bathroom for that student's safety. The microaggressions directed toward me occurred regularly to the extent that I didn't feel comfortable in his presence.

I began recording our conversations because of the things he was saying to me. I was referred to as too weak and not hard enough on students and staff members, even though I had expelled 3 students within my first year as principal for fighting, something that other principals had not done in at least a decade at the school. I was brave enough to take up this issue and go before the board of education for each expulsion, but he believed I was weak. Occasionally, I would wear a small pride flag pin, even when there would sometimes be a level of anxiety internally, on special days like National Coming Out Day. Each time, he questioned whether this one-inch pin on my shirt was appropriate even though I had done nothing more than wear the pin in solidarity for the numerous students that were part of the LGBTQ+ community in our school. After a year of these constant aggressions toward me, I was mentally and emotionally exhausted. At first, I tried to keep quiet and ignore his comments, but eventually, they became too much for me to bear. One day, I recall pushing back and telling him not to mistake my kindness and patience for weakness.

I kept pushing forward though despite all these discriminatory undertones. I was determined to do what was best for our students regardless of any personal opinions or biases anyone else might have about those in the LGBTQ+ community. A decision I was going to make would test my conviction on this as well.

One major decision I made that pitted my LGBTQ+ affirming beliefs against that of the superintendent and the community centered around the color of our graduation gowns. For around two decades, the graduation gown colors had been gold for females and black for males. While principal, we had a few students that were trans or non-binary. Because of these, the binary graduation gowns presented a problem. After

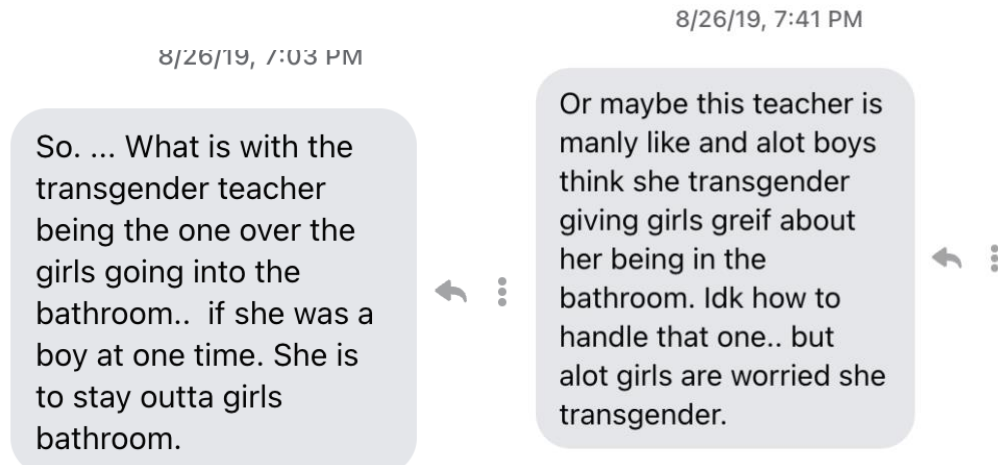
discussion with our school leadership, teachers, our student advisory council, the senior class sponsors, and our parent-leaders, I decided to let the senior class vote on what color or color combination they wanted to wear for their graduation. An overwhelming majority of more than three-fourths of students voted to all wear black. So, the decision was made by the senior class. All students would wear black. When the decision was announced through a letter to seniors and their families, three families in the community pushed back and got the superintendent involved. While the school presented multiple reasons outside of gender identity as justification for the decision, three families honed in on the trans and non-binary students, stating that it was stupid and that they could wear the color of gown based on how they were born.

Some parents and community members questioned how I could allow the school “tradition” to be ruined because of “those” kids. The superintendent said I didn’t go about the decision correctly and needed to change it back. I explained that I had followed a process that took months before a decision was made, and I ultimately left it up to the students. He explained that I shouldn’t allow tradition that is so very important to the community to be changed to accommodate things like gender expression. Even with the pushback, I persevered and kept the graduation gowns black because it was what was best for all students in this situation.

I felt like I was a gay man in a world that wasn't always accepting of me or my community. Even though the discrimination hadn't been overly adversarial, it was still present. It wasn't always directed at me either. Sometimes, it was directed at students. Other times, it was directed at staff. One such example is a message I received on social media. A parent was questioning a female staff member who was not feminine in the

traditional sense but didn't present themselves as a male. In everything I did, I worked hard to create an environment of acceptance and understanding for everyone—regardless of their sexual orientation, gender expression, or identity.

**Figure 15 - Messages from a parent**



*Note:* This is an example of a full message stream to which I refused to reply on my personal social media account of things said while working as a principal at this high school.

For most of my time in the principal role, I felt like I was not able to be my authentic self. I was still hiding who I was and the things I felt about myself. It was almost as if I had gone back into the closet for the sake of my job. I was experiencing increased amounts of depression, significant weight gain, the start of cardiovascular problems, and even shingles due to my weakened immune system at the age of 34. After two and a half years of working in this kind of environment, I had had enough and began searching for a different position. Going into this job search, I knew what I wanted in a future company's climate and culture. The amount of money and the prestige of a title

was not important to me anymore. My priority was finding a place that accepted diversity, me for who I am, and would nurture my leadership and not stifle it.

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In my job search, I was looking for an organization that appreciated my experience and valued what I had to offer. The last few months as I ended my time as a high school principal had been difficult. I'd pushed to protect students and staff from discrimination and hate, including myself, and I was tired. I felt like I was suffocating in an environment that did not want me there.

While searching for the perfect place, I kept being drawn back to a non-profit educational organization that was dedicated to reengineering high school education across the country. Everything I could find about them made it seem like they were going to be the right fit for me as an openly gay man with a passion for creativity and queer energy that was growing in me. I knew it could be my chance to find somewhere new to belong. So, I applied for the position enthusiastically and optimistically sensing this opportunity could change my life. During my interviews, one thing became increasingly clear: this organization values every single person who works there and not just what they could offer the company but also who they are on a personal level. I knew I had to work for them.

The more time I spent talking with everyone involved in the hiring process, the more confident I felt about making a real difference by using my professional knowledge and creative energy. After a month of intense interviewing, guess what? They offered me the job! And instantly, I felt a part of something bigger than myself where I was already able to be authentically me. It's now been almost two years since joining this team, and

although there have certainly been challenges along the way (as is expected when starting any new job), overall I'm feeling more fulfilled than ever before knowing that each day brings its own unique set of opportunities for growth within such a supportive community.

As a Director of School Leadership with this organization, I can show up as my authentic self. Until now, I have never felt the freedom to do something like paint my nails. But in this role, I paint my nails as a man and do not feel the need to hide it or shy away from the fact that I enjoy getting manicures and pedicures now. This simple act has allowed me to step outside of the traditional binary that has been expected of me and given me the opportunity to explore myself and my sexuality.

My colleagues in this organization are interested in my life and supportive of my sexuality. Our relationships extend beyond work and exist in a realm where we are friends. We can talk about our dating lives, me about my queer experiences, and they about their straight experiences without fear of judgment and awkwardness. The relationships are nurturing and bring me life.

At this new job, not only do I get to bring my own creative flair, but I also get to lead within the educational setting as well as help create innovative programs designed to promote social justice. These things were not possible before because of closed mindsets and ignorance. It feels fantastic being able to use my creative skills again while being authentically me! I found joy in helping others learn through this company's exceptional programs but also in feeling accepted by everyone here—regardless of our differences or backgrounds—for exactly who we are as individuals.



**Figure 16 - My Educational Company's Values**



*Note:* These are the company values that have allowed me to find freedom in expressing myself and being my authentic self around my colleagues.

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While searching for my new position with the educational non-profit, I had the opportunity to start helping my friend at their production company. At first, it was mainly live production for virtual events. But then, I began helping with producing a documentary called Conversion. As soon as I heard about this project, I knew it was special; it told stories of survivors of conversion therapy and their journey of healing, self-acceptance, and living authentically.

What drew me to this project even more was that, like many gay men my age from a deeply rooted religious experience, I too experienced a form of conversion

“therapy” growing up in an environment where being anything other than straight wasn't accepted. Memories of sermons about how homosexuals go to hell and would never be happy in life; feelings of isolation and fear because of who I am; thoughts of wondering if these religious teachings could ever change...these emotions all came flooding back every time we interviewed someone for our documentary. Working on Conversion allowed me to compare my own experiences in my religious environment with those featured in the documentary; it gave me insight into how far society has come and how much further we still have left to go before everyone can feel safe expressing themselves freely without judgment or shame. As someone who has struggled with my own religious upbringing, these survivors' stories resonated deeply with me. As the project progressed, so did my understanding of how important it is for individuals to be able to express themselves authentically without fear or judgment from society or religion.

As time passed, working on Conversion became more meaningful because of the relationships built between myself and those involved with making the documentary. The producers, directors, and survivors all connected through our shared desire for justice and understanding towards everyone regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. It truly felt like family; we supported each other through thick and thin during production because no matter what happened none of us wanted anyone else feeling alone or unheard!

As I became closer with the others working on this project and those featured in it, our conversations began delving deeper into topics such as identity and expression within different communities - including drag culture as one of the survivors is a drag queen who competed on the reality show RuPaul's Drag Race. We had many

conversations about breaking out of societal norms regarding gender roles and expectations placed upon us by others. Working through all these themes helped me gain clarity around many things in my personal life, particularly when reconciling myself as a gay man and living authentically on the outside regardless of the environment in which I find myself. This newfound appreciation and immersion in the world of drag permitted me to embrace parts and identities within myself without any shame or guilt. Drag has given me the courage to be myself unapologetically while reminding me never to let anyone put limits on my potential just because "that's not how things are done."

In the end, making *Conversion* changed my life completely. It allowed me to become stronger in spirit while connecting deeply with others despite any differences we may have. Through documenting people's stories and connecting with them on deeper levels through interviews during filming days, hearing them share their journeys helped heal parts of my soul that were shattered since coming out publicly and working in a community that was not accepting. It showed me there is beauty even in dark moments like coming out or dealing with discrimination due to society's norms; but most importantly it reminded me not only to accept myself but also to celebrate who I am, an openly proud member of the LGBTQ+ community.

**Figure 17 - Proud of Who I Am and the Work We've Done**



*Note:* These pictures were taken on November 17, 2022 at the New York City Premiere of Conversion at the SAG-AFTRA Foundation Robin Williams Center Theater.

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I had wrestled with my identity for as long as I could remember. The time had come when I needed to explain things to my twin daughters. They had recently asked when I would get married again as their mother was in a relationship with another man for the first time since our divorce. My friend circle had grown to include quite a few LGBTQ+ individuals, and my girls were asking questions about boys holding hands with other boys, or girls doing so with other girls. After much thought and consideration, I decided to share this part of me with my beautiful, twin daughters.

As I was thinking of what to share, this inner monologue played in my head, “But how do I explain it? Some things I still question. How do I identify? Am I wholly attracted to men and tell them I am gay? Well, no... That’s not exactly true as I am attracted to some women. Maybe I should tell them I am bi-sexual. But would they

understand that? And still, that's not exactly true either as I would date or marry someone that was trans as well. So, maybe I should settle on pan-sexual. No, I don't want them trying to understand labels. I want them to understand me, their father."

At the time, I was dating a guy that was a teacher in Louisville. We shall call him Utah. Utah and I had been on multiple dates, and he had met my daughters after six months of dating. One night while I was putting my girls to bed, one of them asked, "Daddy, when are you going to get married?" I replied, "when I find the right person to share my love with..." While sitting on the edge of their bed, I could see it was time for a heart-to-heart with my girls. Other random comments or questions had come up recently, and it was time to explain.

My palms began to sweat as I tried gathering all of my thoughts together into something coherent enough for a seven-year-old's mind to comprehend. Taking a deep breath... "Girls," I began quietly, "I want you both to know something about me which might be hard for you to understand at first." They looked at me, one from over the edge of the top bunk and the other from her pillow expectantly; they could sense something serious was happening and were eager for more information.

"You see," I continued gently, "I like people no matter what their gender is... So, sometimes guys make my heart flutter just like girls do." I paused briefly watching their faces then continued, "I love people for who they are and how they love me, not because they are girls or boys. Sometimes kids might have two moms or two dads, whatever combination feels right for that person... And that is like your daddy" while gesturing towards myself with a slight smile on my face. Their eyes lit up with the purest compassion and love I have ever experienced. They even started asking questions! Their

questions were innocent and, in some ways, precious in how they were processing the information. We talked through all their thoughts until there were none left unanswered. When our conversation came to an end, we hugged tightly and told each other good night with our nightly tradition of me saying “I love you to the moon and back, forever and always, my girls you’ll be” as they say the same thing but end it with “my daddy you’ll be.”

My girls accepted my identity without judgment or hesitation, showing me how much unconditional love children are capable of providing even from such a young age. My thoughts on how hate is taught have become even more solidified from this experience with my own children. We have continued talking regularly about LGBTQ+ issues so that as they grow, they will be well-versed in accepting diverse sexual orientations without prejudice or bias against anyone else's life, promising each other that we will never forget how important it is to respect everyone regardless of who they love or how they identify themselves, just like we do in our family every day!

**Figure 18 - A Proud Father of Beautiful Twin Daughters**





*Note:* These picture were taken at the LouCity Pride night on June 20, 2022.

In these moments with my children, my heart tells me there is no greater leadership opportunity than to lead them as their father. Through them, I have hope for the future. I desire to lead them to accept others without prejudice. And I desire to lead them to a place where they can live freely and be their authentic selves daily.

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When I first started my research journey into LGBTQ+ educational leaders and consequently those of LGBTQ+ students as well, I was unsure of the impact it would have on me. Little did I know that it would become an integral part of my life's mission. As a queer educational leader, I wanted to know more about how LGBTQ+ students and educators fared in their school environments. Yet, it was only when I delved into the academic literature and not just current news reports that my eyes were opened to the many struggles our LGBTQ+ community faces. As I combed through literature about LGBTQ+ youth experiences in school, their lack of visibility and support within educational systems, as well as their unique needs and perspectives often overlooked or unheard in education, something inside me stirred.

The statistics painted an alarming picture for me where over 50% of LGBT students reported feeling unsafe at school due to their gender identity or sexual orientation; one where teachers felt inhibited from properly supporting their queer students due to fear of discrimination; and one where trans youth lacked access even basic resources like gender-neutral restrooms (GLSEN, 2016). I quickly realized how important this work was, not only to help create a more equitable education system for all but also because these stories were so personal to me. They resonated deeply with the struggles and successes of my own experience growing up as a closeted queer in a small rural town. My heart swelled with pride when reading stories from LGBTQ+ educators who had been brave enough to come out at work despite fear or negative reactions they might face from colleagues or parents; however, at the same time, there was also sadness knowing that many people still don't feel comfortable being themselves due to stigma or other factors outside of their control.

This research has spurred a passion for advocacy within me, one driven by empathy and understanding gained through discovering others' narratives about living authentically in schools today. This journey has reminded me why representation matters. As I write this today, there are currently eleven bills in the Kentucky legislature that are anti-LGBTQ, many of which focus on students (Fairness Campaign, 2023). When we see ourselves reflected back in our classrooms, workplaces, and society at large we can be empowered to take action toward creating change which is desperately needed now more than ever before.



## **Responses of Others (Layer Two)**

Being a part of a doctoral program can be intimidating, and it certainly was for me as I met the members of my cohort, and we started our journey together. Thankfully, my cohort was amazingly open to me and readily accepted me without question. One female individual in particular showed such openheartedness and empathy when I told her, which ultimately made me feel safe to be myself. Additionally, a former colleague also empowered me to openly express my sexuality and individuality through her acceptance. Their unwavering support enabled me to express my full self with confidence. Ultimately, my cohort of doctoral students demonstrated the importance of allyship and belonging in every environment.

As an out gay man appointed to the position of high school principal in a rural, conservative area, it was with a hefty dose of trepidation that I initially stepped into that role. However, I was fortunate enough to find immense support from my immediate, biological family, who accepted and encouraged me through every stage of my journey, both personally as an out man and professionally with regard to my leadership at the school. My family's strength and unending love were instrumental in my career as a high school principal. It was their response to my circumstances that gave me the strength to push back on the things that I saw as inequities and issues in the school and district. My birth family's encouragement not only allowed me to become a more confident leader but also empowered me to use my voice for those without one. When I was the principal of that high school, I often led with their example in mind, teaching students firsthand that we all come from diverse backgrounds and yet, despite our differences, should be able to stand proudly together as colleagues, peers, and allies. My family's commitment to loving

me unconditionally gave and continues to give me the strength to share this message every day.

My LGBTQ+ friend group helped to serve as a support system during the difficult times I had while serving as principal. They helped to support me with advice, encouragement, and a listening ear with everything from blatant homophobic comments to microaggressions from some members of the community, including the school district's superintendent. My friends and colleagues were there for me with their comfort and encouragement to keep fighting back against those negative voices. Their presence was not just a symbol of comfort, it was a reminder that I had people in my corner believing in me and helping me..It was through this show of solidarity that I felt emboldened enough to channel my energy into something more empowering instead of being weighed down by the ignorance around me. Their help allowed me to remain true to myself.

After leaving the principalship, finding the right job and feeling welcomed by my new coworkers was something I didn't know I needed until it happened. My LGTBQ+ friend group, family, and colleagues were incredibly supportive when I announced my decision to join the new company. My new company was creative, accepting, and full of diverse individuals. And it allowed me to go back to The Academy @ Shawnee. The responses I received were like those of a prodigal son returning home. My new employers were even supportive of my part-time work on the documentary about conversion therapy. I was accepted for who I was and celebrated for being openly LGBTQ+. I was lucky to walk into my role with confidence, knowing that I had made the right decision for myself and that I was in good company, both inside and outside of the

workplace. To this day, I feel as if I am part of a family in my current role with my current company.

One of the most meaningful responses to this time in my life is from a close LGBTQ+ friend of mine that watched me grow throughout this entire time. He is the executive producer of the documentary and someone who trusted me to join in on the project, even when I was still figuring out who I was. In a recent conversation, he said he was proud of me. He was proud of how I have come out of my shell and allowed the world to see me for who I am. He explained to me how he has seen me grow into a stronger person and into a better leader through everything that has happened.

### **Comparing My Experiences to the Literature (Layer Three)**

Lugg (2006) shows that daily situations like running into your deeply, conservative superintendent while you are at the local market with your same-sex partner puts LGBTQ+ educational leaders at an increased risk of alienation and even job loss. Standing up for equitable school policies as simple as the color of a graduation gown put me in a place where I was more alienated as a high school principal. I made decisions that I thought were best for all students and not just the White, heteronormative students. And while I had been part of a few discussions around dealing with this kind of diversity around students when I did this, I did not have the foundation of my principal and educational leadership programs to help me through those situations as an openly LGBTQ+ community member (Fleig, 2016; Jennings, 2012; Lugg & Tooms, 2010).

The focus was always on the students and their diversity, not how to handle situations when your own non-conforming sexuality plays a role. DeLeon and Brunner in 2009 noted that almost no discussion existed around LGBTQ+ educational leaders and

only around LGBTQ+ youth and teachers, and as of 2023, little has changed in this regard as I am completing this study. This lack of research literature on LGBTQ+ educational leaders is one of the main reasons that led me to do this study.

As the high school principal, I struggled to feel like I belonged to the community in which I served. Brené Brown (2020) concludes that true belonging only occurs when we show our authentic selves, and in that environment, I was seldom able to show my authentic self. I felt as if I had gone back into the closet. Brown (2020) further concludes that our sense of belonging will never be more than what our level of self-acceptance is, which for me was at a very low level as I was not being true to myself with having to constantly hide and stifle who I knew I really was.

As I accepted the fact that I didn't belong in this community where I served as principal and began searching for my people, I exhibited the integrative framework for belonging presented by Allen et al. (2021). They presented four categories for belonging. For the first, I had the skills and abilities to connect with a group of people (Blackhart et al., 2011). Second, I found opportunities to belong like finding friends in the LGBTQ+ community and getting involved in Louisville Youth Group to volunteer and give back to my new community (Akar-Vural et al., 2013; Bowles & Scull, 2019). Third, I had an inner drive or motivation to belong (Claridge, 2018; Gerber & Wheeler, 2009; Hagerty et al., 2002; Putam, 2000; Roffey, 2013). I craved community, understanding, and the desire to learn from this new community. Lastly, my perceptions of belonging guided me through the negative experiences I had with the school community compared to the positive experiences I had with the LGBTQ+ community. Within my LGBTQ+ community, we shared experiences positives like Pride Month and the freedom of coming

out, and negatives like religious oppression and similar traumas (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Walton & Brady, 2017). Through my perceptions of my own belonging, I was pushed further away from the school environment I was in and pulled toward the LGBTQ+ community (Allen et al., 2021).

Bandura (1977, 1986) discusses two major components of the social cognitive theory as self-efficacy and the reciprocal interactions between your behaviors, your environment, and your personal experiences. I began to see that my environment in the school system was limiting my own self-efficacy, impacting my thoughts, and changing my behaviors in ways that I did not like. On the other hand, my environment with my LGBTQ+ community was encouraging me to grow, accept all of who I am, and live out my life authentically. With my LGBTQ+ community and that environment, my thoughts were changing for the better, my behaviors were encouraging, my confidence was growing, and I was finding joy in my life where I once had only felt defeat and sadness.

Within my LGBTQ+ community, my children, and now my family's acceptance of me for me, I have experienced a positive shift in my thoughts, experiences, behaviors, and environment. I am experiencing positivity in my goals, self-efficacy, and values based on the authenticity I see myself living out now, which is allowing me to make choices to persevere and achieve based on the things that I want in life. Not only am I in community with people that I can learn from, but I can now authentically model for others the leadership qualities that I did not get to see as a closeted LGBTQ+ youth when in school. When I reflect on my life and the things that I experience, it is no longer through the lens of who I thought I was supposed to be but instead through the lens of who I really am. Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020) conclude that these three components

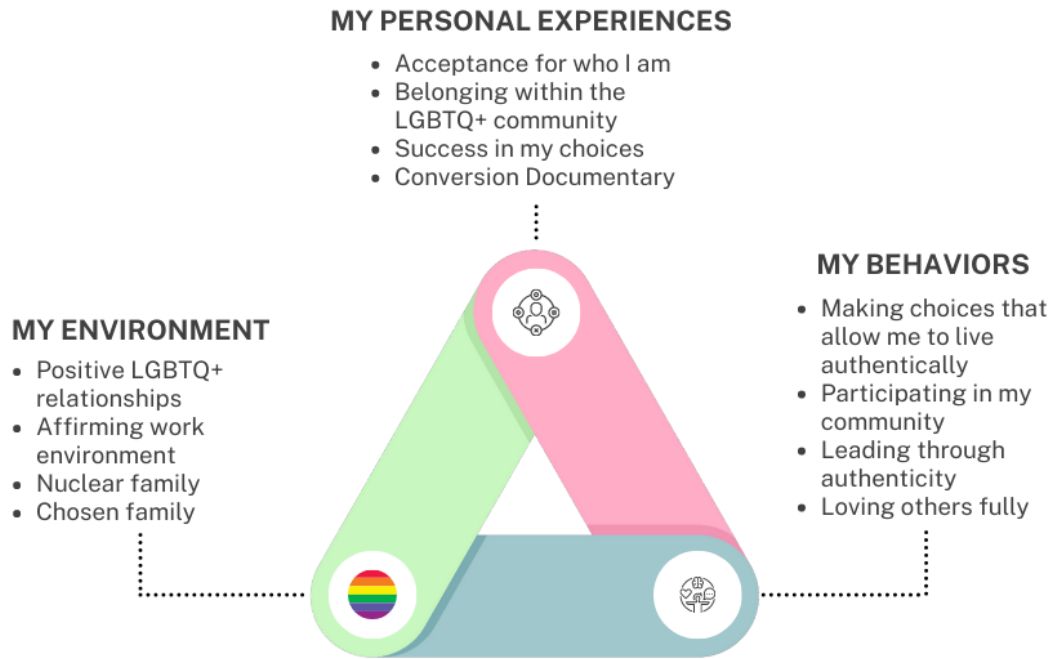
are reciprocal in their interactions. And through that reciprocity, I am able to live a more joyful, authentic life and be a better leader.

Chapter six highlights my journey towards finding acceptance and support within my professional and personal life as an LGBTQ+ individual. Through my experiences in an affirming, non-profit educational organization and my doctoral program, I discovered a passion for advocating for the LGBTQ+ community in educational settings. My research has helped me uncover the struggles faced by LGBTQ+ students and educators, which further motivates me in my advocacy efforts. With the unwavering support of my family, friends, and colleagues, I was able to gain a sense of self-efficacy and show my authentic self, which led me to a sense of belonging and empowerment. In the next chapter, I will discuss my research and autoethnography on my experiences as an LGBTQ+ educational leader and the importance of representation in promoting inclusivity and freedom for authenticity.

As I delve into my discussion, I will examine my lived experiences as an LGBTQ+ educational leader, highlighting my challenges and successes in promoting inclusivity, representation, and safety within educational settings. Drawing upon my own experiences as an LGBTQ+ individual and educational leader, I will discuss the impact of representation on personal and professional growth. I will also explore the role of allies, education, and institutional policies in creating a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ students, educators, and leaders.

**Figure 19 - My Leadership Experiences, Authentic Living, and Social Cognitive Theory**

## Social Cognitive Theory Applied to My Educational Leadership and Current Life Experiences



*Note:* This is a visual representation of the interconnectedness of my educational leadership experiences, authentic living, and my environment.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION

To begin this chapter, I am presenting the reader with recreated dialogue. This is a method utilized by Holt (2003) as the narrative portions of my autoethnography were coded revealing emerging themes. Additionally, my analysis is based on the recommendations from Hatch (2002). I reviewed the data to identify themes, wrote analytical and reflective journals for each theme while identifying its key characteristics, and studied these journals for the interpretation of my themes. The collection of journals detailing the interpretations and themes are linked to my autoethnographic narrative and my literature review. Here, I will summarize my findings as they relate to my three research questions.

In discussing my observations and answers to my research questions, it is important to state that many of the events, thoughts, and happenings in my life story are interconnected across space and time. My relationship with education and leadership was not and continues to not be a linear path with well-defined steps but one that can look different on any given day due to the context of a situation, my thoughts and beliefs, and the other players involved at the time. Additionally, it is important to remember that I am viewing my autoethnography through the lens of queer theory. For example, it must not be concluded that on one day I was straight and the next I was gay. As a human being, I am not binary and do not exist with rigid black and white parameters. At best, I would dare say that I live life on a spectrum, but even that seems too constricting. Based on Turner (2000), queer theory allows me to view my life and happenings through endless



possibilities and open to question the unpredictable relationship of things like age, context, class, or anything else to sexuality.

Additionally, this study uses the autoethnographic research design of layered accounts as presented by Ellis et al. (2011) to take you on a journey through my experiences as an LGBTQ+ educational leader. This method allowed me to juxtapose my personal experiences beside relevant literature, data, and abstract analysis. This brings a unique perspective to the literature, one which I hope will start conversations and inspire more understanding around LGBTQ+ educational leaders. Through this discussion, we will explore the conditions that supported or limited my self-efficacy as an LGBTQ+ educational leader. In this chapter, I answer my research questions and consider observations I had while conducting my research study. My research questions are as follows:

1. What conditions supported and/or do support my self-efficacy as an educational leader who identifies as LGBTQ+?
2. What conditions limited and/or limit my self-efficacy as an educational leader who identifies as LGBTQ+?
3. What can my experiences as an LGBTQ+ educational leader teach us about building an affirmative LGBTQ+ leadership paradigm?

### **Recreated Dialogue**

Through my experiences as an LGBTQ+ community member, student, educator, and educational leader, multiple themes, three distinct timeframes in relation to education, and two timeframes in relation to my acceptance of my LGBTQ+ identity emerged. The three timeframes around my relationship with education are my time as a

student, my early experiences as an educator, and my time as an educational leader. The two timeframes that emerged in relation to my LGBTQ+ identity are when I was in the closet and when I was out of the closet. One theme that emerged is that a sense of belonging as my authentic-self helped contribute to my improved self-efficacy and mental health. Another theme that emerged is that my understanding of my authentic-self fueled my motivation to belong to the LGBTQ+ community and be a better leader. As I was free to be me and surrounded by people that supported me as such, I was able to be more creative, more productive, and more supportive of others around me. Lastly, the people I was in community with and the context surrounding my experiences played a part in my self-efficacy.

From the data properties, assigned pseudonyms, and demonstrative narratives in my open-coding process, I constructed two individuals to embody the themes which emerged from my experiences in both timeframes of being in the closet and out of the closet. The first recreated dialogue is a conversation with Danny. Danny is representative of a cisgendered, heterosexual male that expects me to remain in the closet and not live authentically as myself. The conversation with Danny illustrates belonging to a community and being accepted by that community only when certain conditions are met. In my second recreated dialogue, it is a conversation with Brent. Brent represents an LGBTQ+ friend that was supportive and contributed to a positive self-efficacy as an LGBTQ+ educational leader. The conversation with Brent illustrates the themes of belonging, finding acceptance of your identity, and being proud of exactly who you are. The conversation with Brent also represents the desire and motivation to be a better leader in order to create positive change for the LGBTQ+ community.

### *Recreated Dialogue One*

As you step into the church office for our setting, a sense of unease descends upon you like a cloak. The room is dark and foreboding, with muted light filtering in through the stained-glass windows. The air is thick with an undercurrent of fear and anxiety, as if the very walls themselves are whispering secrets that were meant to be kept hidden. The weight of the pressure to pretend to be someone else clings to your skin like a sticky web, making it difficult to breathe. You can almost feel the eyes of unseen watchers studying your every move, waiting for you to slip up and reveal your true self. It's a suffocating atmosphere that seems to close in around you, dragging you deeper and deeper into the abyss, much like the closet Josh was living in during this time in his life, hiding the LGBTQ+ guy he knew he was.

Danny, a typically towering figure who always seems to loom over others, strikes an intimidating presence as he sits in the office chair across from me. From his sharp gaze that can pierce through you to his domineering posture, it's no wonder people shy away from him. However, what's even more unsettling is Danny's inability to form genuine connections with those around him. With his towering presence, he seems to lack a certain warmth that draws people in and makes them feel welcome. It's almost as if he's a statue, an imposing figure that demands respect but ultimately leaves you feeling alone in his shadow. The silence of the room disappears as the uncomfortable conversation begins to unfold...

**Josh:** Hey Danny, how are you?

**Danny:** I'm good. How are you, son?

**Josh:** I'm okay, I guess.

**Danny:** (Sighs) Josh, we need to talk again. I've been noticing some things about you that I think we need to address.

**Josh:** Okay, sure. What's on your mind?

**Danny:** Well, I've noticed that you've been hanging out with some questionable people lately. And your style of dress, it's just not very masculine.

**Josh:** What do you mean by "questionable people"?

**Danny:** You know, those flamboyant guys who dress up and act all prissy and girly.

**Josh:** Oh, you mean my friends from theater class? They're just having fun expressing themselves. What's wrong with that?

**Danny:** It's just not normal, Josh. You need to stop hanging out with them. And as for your dress, you need to start wearing more manly clothes. And you might want to try talking a bit lower. I've noticed you sound like girl on the phone. You need to fix these things. That's just the way it is.

**Josh:** Why? What's wrong with the way I dress? The way I talk?

**Danny:** Well, it's just not very manly. You need to blend in, not stand out. And speaking of blending in, have you thought about dating anyone lately?

**Josh:** Well, not really. I haven't found the right person yet.

**Danny:** Alright, well, when you do, make sure it's a woman. And make sure she's hot.

You don't want to be seen as a fag.

**Josh:** Danny, I don't like that word. And why does it matter if I like men or women? Isn't love supposed to be about more than just gender?

**Danny:** (Exasperated) Josh, you know how I feel about this. As a member of this church, it's our duty to uphold the traditional family values. That means a man and a woman, not two men or two women. It's just not natural.

**Josh:** But Danny, I can't help who I'm attracted to. It's not a choice.

**Danny:** (Sternly) Well, then you need to keep it to yourself. You know how the church feels about this. If anyone found out, it could ruin your reputation, your future career, and our family's reputation. It's not worth the risk. You will never be happy. You will never find love.

**Josh:** (Sighs) I just don't know what to do. I feel like I'm living a lie.

**Danny:** (Sighs) Look, Josh, I know it's tough. But you need to learn to suppress these feelings. And I know you can do it. You're a good, strong, Christian man. I have faith in you.

**Josh:** (Frustrated) But why can't I just be accepted for who I am? Why do I have to pretend to be someone I'm not?

**Danny:** (Sighs) Life isn't always fair, son. We all have to make sacrifices for the greater good. You're just going to have to learn to sacrifice your desires for the sake of our family and our church.

**Josh:** (Resigned) Okay, Danny. I'll try.

**Danny:** (Smiles) That's my boy. I knew you'd see reason. Now, let's pray together and ask God to guide you towards the right path.

**Josh:** (Hesitates, then nods) Okay, let's pray.

### ***Recreated Dialogue Two***

Sitting outside on the porch, Brent and Josh bask in the radiant glow of the sun. The warmth emanating from its rays envelopes them in a loving embrace, while the gentle breeze whispers sweet nothings, creating an idyllic environment for their honest and unrestricted conversation. Amidst the tranquility of their surroundings, the two friends let go of all pretensions, allowing themselves to simply exist as they are - raw, uninhibited, and unapologetic. It's in moments like these that they truly appreciate the beauty of friendship and belonging.

Brent has a smile that could light up a room and a welcoming personality that makes you feel at ease within minutes of meeting him. He has a way of engaging with people that makes them feel truly seen and heard. Whether you're striking up a conversation in a coffee shop or attending a networking event where everyone feels like they're on the outside looking in, Brent has a knack for making people feel welcomed and included. His genuine warmth and interest in others comes across loud and clear, and it's easy to see why so many people are drawn to him. If you're lucky enough to know Brent,

it's only a matter of time before you feel like you are part of his inner circle. It is with this friend that Josh can freely communicate without fear of judgment and be his authentic-self now that he is out of the closet after many years in hiding.

**Josh:** Thank you so much for being there for me when I first came out. I cannot believe how amazing life is now. I feel like a huge weight has been lifted.

**Brent:** Of course, man. You know I always have your back. How has your new job been treating you?

**Josh:** Honestly, it's been incredible. It's amazing to work somewhere where I can openly express who I am without any fear of judgment. And not only that, but the company even has LGBTQ+ support groups and resources for us.

**Brent:** That's amazing to hear. It's rare to find companies that prioritize diversity so openly. How have your coworkers been treating you?

**Josh:** Everyone has been so accepting and kind. It's such a refreshing change from my past experiences, especially with Danny and that closed-minded group of people. I feel like I've finally found my tribe.

**Brent:** That's so great to hear, Josh. And how are your daughters doing with your coming out?

**Josh:** They have honestly been so amazing and supportive. I was nervous at first, but they love and accept me for exactly who I am. We actually had a really great conversation about some other LGBT stuff yesterday, and it was so rewarding to

see them embrace it all. Their innocence and confusion on how anyone could discriminate against someone else because of who they simply love is... well, it's precious. I hope they never lose that.

**Brent:** That's incredible. You're such an important figure in their lives, so it's really important that they see and accept all aspects of who you are. And speaking of acceptance, how are you feeling about being a part of the gay community?

**Josh:** Honestly, it's been amazing. I feel like I have a whole network of people who really understand me and what I've been through. It's so liberating to be a part of a group that accepts me without any conditions.

**Brent:** Yes, exactly. And I'm so happy that you have found such an amazing community. Have you thought about exploring some of the gay spaces in town?

**Josh:** Definitely. I haven't really had the opportunity to do that very much yet, but I'm excited to check it out. It's great to know that there are so many places where I can just be myself.

**Brent:** Absolutely. And don't forget that I'm always here to support you and go with you if you ever need someone to go with.

**Josh:** Thank you, Brent. That really means a lot.

**Brent:** Of course, man. You deserve all the love and support in the world. And don't forget that you're an important part of our community, but you're also a valuable friend to me.



**Josh:** That's so sweet, Brent. And you know that the feeling is mutual. Our friendship has always been built on mutual respect and understanding.

**Brent:** Yes, exactly. And it's always so freeing to be able to talk about our pasts with each other, knowing that we'll just be there for each other no matter what.

**Josh:** Absolutely. I feel so lucky to have you in my life, man.

**Brent:** And I feel lucky to have you as my friend, Josh. Here's to many more conversations like this one and many more happy years for you as an openly gay man.

### ***Recreated Dialogue Three***

Betty is a force to be reckoned with, a true trailblazer in every sense of the word. Josh says she is a lioness in a world dominated by wolves. Her dark skin, curled hair, and curves have always made her a target for the cruel eyes of the narrow-minded. As a retired, black-female school administrator, she has faced her fair share of adversity and discrimination throughout her career, but rather than let it defeat her, she has risen above it, establishing herself as a respected leader and voice of reason in educational circles. You see, Betty always stands up for herself and for what is right.

Betty's background has given her a unique perspective on life, one that translates into a fierce determination to succeed against all odds. She is a warrior forged by the fires of discrimination and sexism. Her presence exudes a confident, no-nonsense aura that commands respect. With piercing, uncompromising eyes, she glares fiercely at the world, daring it to test her mettle. But beneath this hard exterior lies a heart of gold and an unshakable desire to see the next generation rise to their full potential. She is a tough-love

kind of mother figure who can dish out critical feedback with a smile on her face and compassion in her heart. She genuinely cares about the people she works with, and it shows in the way she pushes them to be their best selves. Even when her words sting with the truth, you know it is coming from a place of love.

She has faced countless microaggressions and blatant prejudice in her career, but she has never let it break her spirit. Instead, she has used it as fuel to build herself up even stronger, standing tall as an educational leader in all circles. As a leader, Betty is unparalleled. She knows how to motivate her team, setting high expectations and holding them accountable while also being supportive and encouraging.

Josh sat across from Betty, his mentor, in the principal's conference room. They had just wrapped up their meeting covering the latest educational reforms when Betty, with her signature no-nonsense demeanor, leaned forward in her seat and asked Josh how he was doing. Josh took a deep breath and said, "Betty, I need to talk to you about something personal... As you know, I came out of the closet a few years ago. And recently have been working on my dissertation and exploring my experiences in education... it's caused me to have all kinds of thoughts and I need to get those out of my head."

Betty's posture changed immediately, and she leaned in closer, her eyes fixed on Josh. "Of course, Josh. I'm all ears," she said.

**Josh:** (Exhales deeply) It's been a while since I talked about this stuff with someone who understands.

**Betty:** I'm here for you, Josh. Tell me, what was it like growing up as you?

**Josh:** It was...difficult. Being different, not like everyone else. It started with me wanting to dress up in my mother's jewelry and high heels when I was just five. I remember feeling invincible, like nothing could stop me. But as I grew older, I learned that the world wasn't so kind to boys who didn't fit the mold.

**Betty:** And that made things tough for you, didn't it?

**Josh:** Yeah. There were times when I thought it would be easier to just hide who I was, to blend in with the others and not stick out. But I couldn't do it. I didn't want to pretend to be someone I wasn't, even if it meant being called names and being picked on.

**Betty:** That takes a lot of courage, Josh. To be yourself in a world that wants everyone to be the same.

**Josh:** (Nods) It wasn't easy, though. I remember in second grade, my mother scolded me for holding my hands in a way that was seen as feminine. And when I went on a trip to Nashville in seventh grade, older boys assaulted me and did things to me that I didn't want.

**Betty:** (Grimaces) I'm sorry that happened to you, Josh. It wasn't fair. And when you went back to school, I'm sure things didn't get any easier.

**Josh:** No, they didn't. Kids were always making fun of me and assuming I was gay because of the way I acted. I didn't even know what that meant until high school when I finally understood my attraction to men. But I couldn't tell anyone, not

even my family. I poured myself into religion, trying to fix what I thought was wrong with me.

**Betty:** It makes sense, Josh. When people tell you that who you are is not right, it can be hard not to believe them. But you made it through, and that's what matters.

**Josh:** (Sighs) Yeah, I made it through. But at what cost? I was constantly stressed, always on edge, thinking about ways to hide who I was. I even got married to a woman because I thought that was what I was supposed to do.

As Josh shared more about his past as a student, Betty couldn't help but feel a sense of admiration for him. She listened intently as he spoke with passion about his experiences and the lessons he learned. Eventually, Josh shifted gears and began to talk about his time as an early educator - it was clear that this was a topic he was just as passionate about. As he spoke with excitement about his years in the classroom, Betty realized just how fortunate his students must have been to have such a dedicated and enthusiastic teacher.

**Josh:** Betty, do you remember when we first met? I was a scared 20-something trying to navigate my way through the education system while hiding a huge part of myself.

**Betty:** Of course, I remember. You walked into my office with a fear in your eyes that spoke volumes. But I saw right through your fear and recognized the strength of character within you.

**Josh:** I just can't believe how much I've changed since I first started out as a teacher. I was so convinced that being traditionally 'masculine' was the only way to be taken seriously in the classroom.

**Betty:** I remember those days, Josh. You were so unsure of yourself.

**Josh:** It's true. I kept quiet in meetings at school, and I would change the way I spoke and acted just to fit in. Thank goodness this eventually decreased, especially when my girls were born. The pressure to maintain that façade was awful.

**Betty:** And yet, you still struggled when you moved to Louisville, didn't you?

**Josh:** I did. My attempts to appear straight became even more pronounced, because I felt so alone in that new environment. And then my students started to notice that I wasn't 'manly' enough, which only made things worse.

**Betty:** I can only imagine how tough that must have been. But it wasn't until you landed your role as Academy Coach at Shawnee that you were able to express yourself authentically, right?

**Josh:** Yes, and coming out of the closet was the key to that freedom and acceptance. The other thing was having colleagues and superiors that were open and accepting of me for being me. Even in my leadership roles at Shawnee, I could finally be myself.

**Betty:** It's amazing how much of a difference that can make in someone's life. And it's clear that you're a much happier and fulfilled person now.

**Josh:** Definitely. But it wasn't easy, you know? I was so afraid to show any sign of my true self because I didn't think there was any room for diversity in educational leadership programs.

**Betty:** That's a real shame. But I'm glad you were able to overcome those fears and insecurities by transitioning into being an out gay man.

**Josh:** It was definitely complex and difficult. I experienced negative mental health impacts, like anxiety attacks and poor sleep, because of the disconnect between my identity and my occupation as an educator.

**Betty:** I'm sorry to hear that, Josh. But I'm so proud of you for persevering through all of that. And it's clear that your journey has had a profound impact on the lives of the students you've taught and the colleagues you've worked with.

The conversation between Josh and Betty shifted to the last couple of years where Betty had noticed the most growth from Josh. Their conversation was uplifting and hopeful for not only the things they remembered but also for the future.

**Josh:** Honestly, it wasn't until I started working at my current job that I truly felt like a could be 100% me without any fear of judgment from my employer.

**Betty:** What makes your current job different?

**Josh:** Well, for starters, I work for a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to reforming high school education and not a traditional school system. This

organization has created a space of acceptance and understanding for everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation or identity.

**Betty:** That sounds amazing. It's so important for individuals to feel valued and embraced by their colleagues in these settings.

**Josh:** Exactly! I've been able to use my creative skills while leading within an educational setting and promoting social justice. And as silly as this may sound to some people, I can even paint my nails without fear of judgment or awkwardness.

**Betty:** (Chuckles softly) That's fantastic! It's important to have that kind of freedom, both creatively and personally. But tell me, what has made you become so passionate about advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community in educational settings?

**Josh:** When I began conducting research on LGBTQ+ educational leaders and students for my dissertation, I discovered some alarming statistics around lack of visibility, support, resources, and safety. I couldn't just sit by and watch this happen without being a voice for change.

**Betty:** It takes a lot of courage to be that voice for change. But let me tell you something, you're not alone in this fight. There are many LGBTQ+ educators who are bravely living authentically in their workplaces and making a difference in their communities.

**Josh:** I love hearing that and knowing that. I'm proud to be part of a community of strong individuals committed to making a difference. But it's concerning to see that

there are currently 11 anti-LGBTQ bills within the Kentucky legislature focusing on students.

**Betty:** It's frustrating, to say the least, but this is where advocacy comes into play. We need to be the voice for those who don't yet have a platform to speak from.

**Josh:** Absolutely. And I'm grateful to have you as a mentor who has paved the way and shown me what it means to be a strong, compassionate advocate for all. Your example as an educational leader is part of what has taught me that being LGBTQ+ and an educator are not mutually exclusive.

**Betty:** Josh, look at you. You're living proof that it's possible to be both. You're helping to pave the way for future generations who might be struggling with the same things you did.

**Josh:** (Smiles) I hope so, Betty. That's all I want, to make it easier for the next person. And I couldn't have done it without you.

**Betty:** (Laughs) Oh, please. You were doing just fine on your own. But thank you, Josh. It means a lot to hear you say that.

### ***Discussion of Recreated Dialogues and Overarching Themes***

When analyzing recreated dialogues one and two, there is a clear distinction between the content, tone, and purpose of the one with Danny and the one with Brent. In the dialogue between Josh and Danny, the reader witnesses the struggle of belonging and the cost of authenticity. Danny points out Josh's association with flamboyant guys and his feminine way of dress, which he suggests could damage his reputation, and his family's



reputation, and his future happiness. Danny insists on upholding what he considers traditional family values, which means only heterosexual relationships, and he discourages Josh from expressing his attraction to men, which he believes is unnatural. Despite Josh's lackluster resistance, Danny encourages him to suppress his desires and conform, emphasizing the importance of sacrifice in order to fit in. This dialogue reveals the tension between individual identity and the pressure to conform within institutionalized settings, where the price of authenticity can be exclusion and isolation.

The dialogue between Josh and Brent centers around their close friendship and the sense of belonging and acceptance that it provides. Brent is portrayed as a warm and welcoming person who makes others feel comfortable and valued, and Josh expresses gratitude for Brent's support during his coming out process. The conversation focuses on Josh's new job, where he is able to express his authentic identity without fear of judgment, and the LGBTQ+ community, which provides a supportive network for him. The themes of belonging, authenticity, and identity are woven throughout the dialogue, as Josh reflects on his past experiences of discrimination and exclusion and celebrates his newfound sense of acceptance and community. The tone of the dialogue is reflective and appreciative, highlighting the importance of supportive relationships and inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ individuals.

The recreated dialogue between Josh and Betty continues to highlight key themes of belonging, authenticity, and identity as they related to my experiences in the educational realm. Josh's experiences growing up as a non-conforming individual have been plagued with challenges, struggles, and feelings of being out of place in school. He describes feeling different from an early age and not conforming to the traditional gender

norms. This perception of himself persisted throughout his formative years, and it became increasingly challenging to navigate the educational system while concealing his true identity as an educator. Betty offers a listening ear and a caring disposition, creating a sense of belonging and acceptance for Josh. Authenticity is embraced in the conversation, with Josh candidly discussing his experiences, feelings, and struggles. His identity as a non-conforming individual as situated in the world of education is a central aspect of the conversation, with each turn revealing further layers of identity development. The overarching takeaway from this recreated dialogue is the importance of embracing one's identity fully, despite societal pressures and expectations.

The recreated dialogues shed light on several overarching themes related to my identity and social contexts. Firstly, there is a clear distinction between the pressure to conform and the need for authenticity (Erikson, 1963, 1986; McAdams, 2001). Danny embodies a traditionalist worldview that promotes heteronormative identities and urges Josh to suppress his attraction to men in order to fit in with societal norms. On the other hand, Brent offers acceptance, support, and understanding that allows Josh to express his true identity without fear of judgment. Secondly, the power dynamics of social institutions play a pivotal role in shaping individual behavior and attitudes (Bandura, 1986). Danny's insistence on conformity reveals how traditional family structures can create a sense of obligation to abide by certain norms, which can prove oppressive for individuals who deviate from them. Conversely, Brent's compassionate approach highlights the role of inclusive environments in providing space for me to flourish and embrace my authentic self. Finally, the dialogues underscore the importance of collective identities in establishing social cohesion and a sense of belonging (Brown, 2020; Allen et

al., 2021). The LGBTQ+ community represents a shared space where individuals can find belonging and build solidarity in the face of discrimination and marginalization. In summary, these dialogues offer insights into the complex interplay between individual identity and social norms, institutions, and collective identities, highlighting the need for inclusive environments that respect and celebrate human diversity.

### **Research Question One**

Research question one, regarding what conditions supported my self-efficacy as an LGBTQ+ educational leader, is answered in chapters five and six. Belonging is an essential aspect of the human existence that influences our daily lives in significant ways (Brown, 2020). Allen et al.'s (2021) integrative framework for belonging consists of four components for belonging, which are competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions. As individuals, we strive to develop competencies of belonging that enable us to form meaningful connections with others and to feel a sense of inclusion and acceptance. Opportunities to belong are equally important in fostering a sense of community and belonging, allowing me to participate in social, cultural, and professional groups that reflect my values and interests. My motivations to belong may be driven by a variety of factors, such as a need for social support, identity fulfillment, or simply the desire to connect with others who share my experiences. Moreover, my perceptions of belonging can influence my overall well-being, whether I feel secure and validated or isolated and disconnected. Ultimately, the ability to belong in all areas of my life is crucial for my personal growth and development and essential for belonging in strong and vibrant communities.

All four of these components were present throughout my life in my educational experiences and leadership experiences. Whether I was trying to play sports, learn how to act more masculine, or speak in a certain way, I was trying to develop competencies that gave me the opportunity to belong somewhere. As I immersed myself in church, my jobs, and eventually my LGBTQ+ community, I was seeking out opportunities to belong. My motivations to belong reflected my intrinsic and extrinsic desires to feel accepted, valued, and included. And lastly, my perceptions of belonging were shaped by my subjective evaluations of the extent to which I fit in and was accepted by others. Until I found my community with other LGBTQ+ individuals, I never quite felt like I fit in as much as I tried to. It was only when I found my community with them that I experienced true freedom and the ability to live authentically as myself.

The development of one's identity is a complex and dynamic process that is influenced by a variety of factors, including one's cultural context and personal experiences (McAdams, 2001). Thus, my identity development can be seen as a collaboration between myself and the social environment that I am a part of. At certain stages of my life, such as during periods of crisis or significant turning points like my sexual assault and divorce, my identity has been strongly influenced by these external factors (Erikson, 1963). These moments have forced me to reevaluate who I am and how I relate to the world around me. Additionally, the role of gender and sexuality in shaping my identity cannot be ignored, as these are important aspects of both personal and cultural identity (Erikson, 1963; Freud, 1953). For many years, I tried to ignore my sexuality and, at times, even tried to change it. It wasn't until I embraced my sexuality

that I experienced an authentic version of myself that I am now proud of. Ultimately, it was through the embrace of my sexuality that I found my identity.

Social cognitive theory is a concept that emphasizes the importance of self-belief and self-efficacy in achieving personal goals (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Through my research, I came to understand the importance of developing a strong sense of self-efficacy. It was clearly visible to me when reflecting on my life story of the times that I lacked this strong sense of self-efficacy and was more concerned about other people's perceptions of me than my own sense of agency. But it was also clear when I had this strong sense of self-efficacy and confidence to help me overcome obstacles, stay motivated, and persist in the face of adversity. Bandura (2002) also found a strong connection between individuals and their occupations. When I was in the ministry and in a traditional school system, I denied myself the ability to be my authentic self, always having to hide who I felt I really was and my sexuality. When I left the ministry, I started allowing myself more freedom of expression. And then, I quickly went the other direction when I became a high school principal in a rural, conservative community. But when I finally found myself in roles that allowed me to be my authentic self and even encouraged it, my social relationships changed for the better, my belief in myself increased, and my mental health improved.

In reflection, my understanding of social cognitive theory has allowed me to recognize the impact of external factors, such as feedback and support from others, in shaping my beliefs and behaviors. By understanding how my thoughts, behaviors, and environments interact, I am able to harness my inherent strengths and develop the skills needed to pursue my goals with confidence. Even through my journey with writing this

dissertation, I have come to understand that as academics, we are no strangers to the challenges of goal-setting and achievement, but it is important to remember that the beliefs we hold about ourselves and our abilities can have a powerful impact on our success. By adopting a mindset of growth and perseverance, I can cultivate the self-efficacy needed to overcome obstacles and reach my full potential.

### **Research Question Two**

Research question two, regarding what conditions limited my self-efficacy as an LGBTQ+ educational leader, is answered in chapters, four, five, and six. Our sense of belonging contributes to our overall physical and mental well-being. It serves as the foundation for our interactions with the world around us, shaping our identity and influencing our actions. Unfortunately, the absence of a sense of belonging can result in significant problems affecting one's mental and physical health (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003; Cacioppo et al., 2011; Cacioppo et al., 2015; Choenarom et al., 2005; Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Hari, 2019; Hawkley & Capitano, 2015; Holt-Lunstad, 2018; Leary, 1990; Slavich, O'Donovan et al., 2010). My lack of belonging played a role in the problems I faced, including depression, weight gain, cardiovascular problems, and a weakened immune system. The times when I struggled to find my place led me to feel isolated and disconnected from others. In those times, my leadership abilities were hindered, and I could not give my all to those under my guidance as my own issues were taking up much of my attention and energy.

The process of identity formation and integration can be a complex and challenging journey for many individuals, especially those who identify as LGBTQ+ (Rosario et al., 2011). As someone who has experienced this process firsthand, I can

attest to the difficulties that arise during this. In my case, the journey spanned several decades, with only the past five years being marked by my decision to come out of the closet. This decision, while liberating in many ways, also brought with it a higher level of stress as I worked through the complexities of accepting this new aspect of my identity. Part of the struggles I experienced in accepting my identity as an LGBTQ+ community member stemmed from my environment and the people around me, which involved contexts of ignorance, bigotry, and violence (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Hueber, Rebhook, & Kegeles, 2004). As a child and into adulthood, I experienced rejection and ridicule from other people's perceptions of me as gay, which kept me in the closet and not accepting of my own identity. And because I allowed myself to remain in the closet for so long, it also kept me from living freely and authentically as myself.

As a closeted LGBTQ+ individual, I was constantly allowing other people's thoughts, actions, and the environments I was in to dictate my self-efficacy. For example, when I dressed up in my grandmother's clothes, others perceived me as unusual and non-conforming to the gender norms prevalent in my environment. As a result, my self-efficacy was negatively impacted, and my ability to see myself as capable and deserving of success in my personal and professional pursuits decreased because I saw myself as a disappointment. Because of that, my personal goals, self-evaluations, social comparisons, values, and expected outcomes were very much influenced by others and not my beliefs about what I was capable of (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). In most of my early years, I lacked an openly LGBTQ+ individual for modeled behavior, information, feedback, and accomplishments from which to learn. By not having someone like me that was out and openly displaying leadership while being LGBTQ+, my interconnectedness with my

environment and other individuals was in discord. I was in a constant battle within my own mind and life.

### **Research Question Three**

Research question three, regarding what can my experiences as an LGBTQ+ educational leader teach us about building an affirmative LGBTQ+ leadership paradigm, is answered in chapters 7 and 8 through my data analysis, conclusions, and reflections. As an LGBTQ+ educational leader, my experiences have taught me numerous lessons about building an affirmative LGBTQ+ leadership paradigm as would have benefitted me. One crucial aspect of this paradigm is fostering a sense of belonging among LGBTQ+ educational leaders. Many members of the LGBTQ+ community have previously experienced isolation and rejection, which can impede their ability to thrive in multiple settings including the educational setting. Lack of belonging can negatively impact an individual's self-worth, subsequently hindering their potential for positive leadership development.

It is essential for LGBTQ+ leaders to have a safe and inclusive environment for themselves as they work to do the same for other individuals to feel valued and supported. This can involve being intentional about allowing LGBTQ+ educational leaders be heard, seen, and their unique identities affirmed. Another beneficial strategy could be to create networking opportunities with other LGBTQ+ educational leaders that are specifically designed to meet the unique needs of these leaders. Prioritizing an authentic sense of community and belonging can create a positive climate that promotes success and well-being for LGBTQ+ educational leaders and all members of that community.



Another critical aspect of an affirmative LGBTQ+ leadership paradigm is identity development. Social cognitive theory suggests that individuals develop their sense of self through social interactions and experiences (Bandura, 2002). As LGBTQ+ individuals navigate their identities, they face numerous challenges, including discrimination, stigma, and societal expectations. LGBTQ+ educational leaders are not immune to these, and we must recognize the importance of affirming their identities and the qualities they bring to their roles. Upon my reflection, I wish there had been a conducive environment that encourages individuals to explore and understand their LGBTQ+ identities fully as it relates to their leadership roles, such as in my educational leadership university programs. I do not recall any conversations in my educational programs as to how this specific identity could impact my role, my belonging, and my self-efficacy as an educator. It has been a journey I have largely navigated on my own with the help of people outside the world of education, instead of with people with whom I can relate on both identity and occupation.

Overall, my experiences as an LGBTQ+ educational leader have taught me the importance of understanding the unique needs of my marginalized community. Designing an affirmative LGBTQ+ leadership paradigm requires a deliberate approach that supports individuals' belonging and identity development in the community and allows them to live authentically as themselves. We could even offer education and training to other school leaders on how to create an inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ educational leaders in their organizations. By prioritizing belonging and creating an inclusive environment, we can help LGBTQ+ educational leaders thrive in their roles and settings.

## **Influence of My Experiences, Others' Actions, and Environmental Factors**

Social Cognitive Theory offers a valuable perspective through which to analyze the early experiences of me as a student in relation to the world of education. My personal experiences were shaped by a number of influential factors, including gendered behavior expectations from family, sexual assault, and bullying from peers. These experiences created a challenging environment for me as a young learner, as I attempted to navigate the complexities of my schooling and daily life. I failed at attempts to join and belong in sports team and find belonging there. When those attempts failed, I found myself drawn to religious immersion as a means of coping with my isolation and feelings of insecurity. Through my religious involvement, I engaged in cis-acting and carefully selected speech choices, which further reinforced the gendered expectations placed upon me.

In addition to my early educational experiences, the social cognitive theory applies to the personal experiences as I underwent changes in life and roles in education. Moving beyond my early education experiences, I encountered a new set of challenges as a result of homophobia and loss of social circles, among other things. These struggles impacted my behaviors, leading to depression, fear, and perfectionism, and grew within me a desire to find acceptance and belonging within the LGBTQ+ community. Through these difficulties, I began to search for a sense of identity and became immersed in a positive environment with supportive friends and colleagues, nurturing my search for authenticity and belonging.

As of today, I have found acceptance for who I am and have a strong sense of belonging within the LGBTQ+ community. I am surrounded by positive and affirming

relationships, including my chosen and nuclear family, and have found success in my choices. My behaviors have shifted towards making choices that allow me to live authentically, participating in my community, and loving others fully. As an educational leader, I have been able to leverage these experiences to lead through authenticity and positively impact those around me. Through my experiences, I have developed a greater understanding of my identity, beliefs, and values, ultimately shaping my behavior to align with my authentic self.

### **Observations**

During my time writing this dissertation, I noticed my reactions and feelings changing around the things I observed like an increase in attacks on the LGBTQ+ community in the realm of education at the state and federal levels. Whether it be bans on trans individuals in sports or the simple acknowledgement that we exist in educational curriculum, the weight of these happenings weighed heavy on my heart. Over the past few years, I have seen glimpses of hope in the political sphere just to have that hope crushed by a new development in attacks on LGBTQ+ individuals' rights. It is widely known that LGBTQ+ individuals are more at risk for mental health issues and suicidal ideation (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Sosin, 2020). And these issues do not improve the more our existence is politicized as a danger to this country. Every day throughout my research, I found myself reflecting on my research and the connection to things happening around me in the world. I felt that my sense of belonging, and the embrace of my authentic identity was not enough but that action was needed.

Reflecting upon my research, I could not help but notice the rate at which circumstances, contexts, and events change. It was almost as if life was happening at a

faster pace than my research. I had not planned for that kind of feeling or reflection when I started out with this topic. Because of this quickly evolving landscape around the context of my research topic, a sense of urgency was created in my research and my life outside of academia.

Additionally, I began noticing the vast disparities that exist in terms of the treatment and representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in education, more so than I had before I began my research. Although significant strides have been made in recent decades towards inclusion and acceptance of the queer community in academic settings, there are still too many instances where LGBTQ+ individuals face discrimination, harassment, and exclusion. Additionally, my observations have shown me that the experience of LGBTQ+ individuals varies greatly depending on the level of education they are in, as well as the geographic location of the school. While some institutions have implemented policies and programs aimed at supporting queer students and educators, many others have yet to acknowledge the unique challenges and experiences that LGBTQ+ individuals face on a daily basis. As an LGBTQ+ educational leader, I believe it is our duty to continue pushing for full equality and affirmation for all educators and students, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression. I am committed to researching and advocating for the needs of these individuals in the education system, and I hope to see more progress made in the future towards creating a truly inclusive educational environment for all.

A few areas were unexpected or emerging ideas within my research that I found surprising. One such area was the influence my own children played over my thoughts and feelings. I knew my daughters would be a part of my story, but I did not realize the

extent to which they would play with their own learning of the LGBTQ+ community and how I perceived their acceptance of me. This is an area that I would like to explore in more depth in the future. Another unexpected observation was how deeply I would reconnect with past emotions and how those emotions would influence how I felt about present-day events. I knew that I would be revisiting traumatic experiences through my research, but I viewed those as separate from my life today. I quickly realized that this was not the case for me.

During my research, I kept coming back to the word authenticity, or the idea of being able to live life as your authentic self. I have personally concluded that embracing one's LGBTQ+ identity is a crucial step towards achieving genuine happiness, fulfillment, and acceptance. Knowing who you are and being unapologetically true to yourself fosters a sense of belonging and a connection with others who share similar experiences. While it may be challenging to come to terms with one's sexuality or gender identity, it's essential to understand that there's no right or wrong way to be who you are.

It's vital to recognize the social and cultural barriers that have historically hindered the LGBTQ+ community from embracing themselves and to actively reject any interference which aims to suppress that authenticity. Ultimately, breaking free from the confines of society's expectations, challenging those expectations, and embracing who you are can lead to self-discovery, self-love, a sense of purpose that will make life more rewarding and meaningful, and change society. As a recently found idol of mine, RuPaul (Charles, 2023) states, “If you can’t love yourself, how in the HELL [emphasis added] you gonna love somebody else? Can I get an AMEN [emphasis added] up in here?” And all of my readers, hopefully, said “amen.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT: IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, & REFLECTIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ educational leaders from my perspective as one such individual. The autoethnographic research design juxtaposed my experience as an LGBTQ+ educational leader alongside relevant literature, data, and analysis through a form of autoethnography known as layered accounts. This chapter includes a summary of chapters one through seven. It also provides my conclusions, implications for change, recommendations for future research, and my overall reflections on the research process.

### **Summary**

This study provided the reader a glimpse into my journey as an LGBTQ+ educational leader. I began by providing the reader the purpose of the study, an introduction into autoethnography, and relevant information as they moved from chapter to chapter within the study. Next, I completed an extensive review of the literature in three main parts. The first part is the context of LGBTQ+ individuals in the United States and then specifically in education. The next part of my literature review provided the major theories for my study as it explored the concepts of belonging, identity development, social cognitive theory, and queer theory. The last part of my literature review provided the reader with a review of the application of queer theory in social sciences research. For chapter three, I provided the reader with an explanation of autoethnography as my methodology, a conceptual framework, and a theoretical

framework. In chapters four through six, I took the reader through three distinct periods of my life, which are my relationship to education as a child and student, my relationship to education as a new educator, and my relationship to education as an educational leader. Through all three stages, my LGBTQ+ identity is explored. This glimpse into my journey was compared to relevant literature and the responses of others to the events in my life through the autoethnographic method of layered accounts. In chapter seven, I discussed my findings as they relate to my three research questions.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Change**

Several conclusions arose from my autoethnography about my experiences leading to and around my LGBTQ+ educational leadership. These conclusions include concepts around belonging, identity development, social interactions, and queer identity. My conclusions more clearly provide me a path to being an authentic LGBTQ+ educational leader.

One conclusion is that LGBTQ+ educational leaders need the freedom and support to live out our authentic selves. It is difficult enough to live a life that goes against the cis-gendered, heterosexual hegemonic norms. We need organizations that wholeheartedly accept us as we are. For example, something as simple as painting my nails can be a source of stress. It is something I enjoy, but it creates thoughts of whether I will become a target for someone else's ignorance or bigotry. LGBTQ+ educational leaders need the freedom to express themselves without judgment or fear. As an LGBTQ+ individual, I desire to belong just as any other human would. Yet a sense of belonging sought through conformity and denial of identity has costs to your personal well-being.

Another conclusion is that LGBTQ+ educational leaders need to show themselves grace in their identity development as it is an unfolding and acceptance over time (Erikson, 1968, 1980). There is great complexity in the circumstances surrounding one's experience when navigating the exit from the closet. A person's age, family, religious upbringing, occupation, personal convictions, and a myriad of other factors can all play into how they feel about themselves and how they navigate that identity development. And when it comes to coming out of the closet, I have learned that this is not a one-time event, but rather a series of events prompted by life changes, meeting new people, or the freedom to express yourself differently.

Throughout life, individuals will potentially go through times of trouble and rejection. During these difficult times, a strong support system can make all the difference. Whether it is family, friends, or a community, having a support network can help individuals find a sense of belonging and identity. In fact, research has shown that positive support systems can contribute to positive identity development by providing a safe space for self-discovery and growth. When faced with rejection and struggles, people who feel supported are more likely to bounce back and move forward. Ultimately, having a strong support system in which to belong can strengthen resilience and lead to a happier, healthier life (Akiva et al., 2013; Hausman et al., 2007; Karaman & Tarim, 2018; Kitchen et al., 2015; Long, 2016; Moallem, 2013).

And from my heart, here is a conclusion and implication for other LGBTQ+ educational leaders. Embrace your inner queer as it is not just about accepting yourself as part of the LGBTQ+ community, but also about finding joy in experiences unique to our community. It entails celebrating diversity, exploring non-conventional relationships, and



seeking out safe spaces that foster acceptance and understanding. Such spaces allow for the formation of deep and meaningful connections with others who share similar experiences and struggles. For some, embracing your inner queer might be a journey that requires overcoming internalized shame and fear. However, the quest for authenticity and belonging is essential to the human-experience from my viewpoint and finding your people in the LGBTQ+ community can bring a sense of fulfillment and purpose that is unparalleled. It is essential for LGBTQ+ individuals to embrace their true selves, find joy in their unique experiences, and connect with others in our community who understand and can validate their journey. I speak from personal experience that some days you will feel very much alone as an LGBTQ+ educational leader, like you are the only one out there. But I can assure you that you are not. Never stop being yourself and never stop looking for your people.

Lastly, leadership as an out LGBTQ+ individual can be a powerful tool in inspiring others to live their most authentic selves. As LGBTQ+ young people and individuals continue to face discrimination and isolation, it is more important than ever for them to see themselves represented in leadership roles. When visible LGBTQ+ educational leaders share their success stories, they provide a roadmap for others to follow and give hope to those who may feel alone or unsupported. These leaders not only break down barriers, but they also pave the way for a more accepting society. By shining a light on their own experiences and struggles, out LGBTQ+ educational leaders can show others that there is a path to acceptance and success, giving marginalized youth and other individuals the confidence they need to embrace their true selves.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

As an LGBTQ+ educational leader, I firmly recognize the need for research focused on the experiences and leadership practices of LGBTQ+ individuals within educational settings. The intersection of identity, power, and policy makes this a crucial area of inquiry for anyone interested in creating more equitable and inclusive educational environments. To advance this important work and increase our knowledge around this area, I would recommend exploring the ways in which LGBTQ+ educators navigate professional spaces, how they approach decision-making and problem-solving, and how their unique experiences inform their leadership practices. In order to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ educators in professional spaces, I would recommend a mixed-methods research approach. This could include in-depth interviews with a diverse range of LGBTQ+ educators to gain insight into their individual decision-making and problem-solving practices. Additionally, a survey could be conducted to gather quantitative data on decision-making practices, problem-solving practices, and any barriers they may face. The findings of this research could then be used to inform strategies for creating more inclusive and supportive environments for LGBTQ+ educators in schools and other educational settings.

Additionally, research on LGBTQ+ educational leaders has the potential for growth and development in the research literature as very little currently exists (Fassinger et al., 2010; Pryor, 2020). Understanding the experiences and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ leaders in educational settings can provide valuable insight into our educational system and help pave the way for inclusive and supportive environments. There is much to be explored within this topic, including the unique perspectives of LGBTQ+ leaders

across various disciplines, across grade levels, within different academic institutions, the impact of workplace policies and culture on LGBTQ+ leadership, and how the intersectionality of gender, race, and sexuality plays a role in leadership experiences.

Research on LGBTQ+ educational leaders is essential in understanding not only the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to navigate these challenges, but also the impact of their leadership on LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff. By examining the experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ+ educational leaders, we can identify best practices and develop more robust policies that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in education. Additionally, examining the ways in which the broader socio-political climate impacts the experiences of LGBTQ+ leaders in educational settings would be a critical area in which to focus research efforts. This research could also contribute to broader conversations about LGBTQ+ leadership in other sectors and promote greater representation and visibility of the LGBTQ+ community in leadership roles.

Since my research study was an autoethnography and limited to just me as a cis-gendered, White male, I would recommend broadening the research to include the voices of other diverse members of the LGBTQ+ community, like Black, indigenous, people of color, lesbians and transgender individuals, for example. In doing so, the voice of these marginalized groups will be documented, and their experiences honored through their stories. By engaging in this research, we can work towards creating a more inclusive educational landscape where all individuals have the opportunity to thrive as leaders.

For autoethnographic research, I would like to further explore a few areas. One such area is my identity development as a child and teenager. I would like to narrow down the timeframe and focus the research on the intersectionality of faith, shame, and

my identity. Another area is the impact of social media on my own self-efficacy and self-worth as an LGBTQ+ leader. The last area I want to further explore is my gender expression as an adult, its relationship to others' perceptions of me, and its impact on how I relate to others.

### **Amplifying The Voices of LGBTQ+ Individuals**

Research on LGBTQ+ educational leaders provides a critical voice for a historically marginalized and underrepresented group of individuals. While progress has been made towards LGBTQ+ acceptance in some circles, educational leadership remains an area where LGBTQ+ individuals are often excluded or discouraged from aspiring to these roles. By highlighting the stories of LGBTQ+ educational leaders, research can provide representation and visibility for a community that has been silenced and excluded in many aspects of society. This research can open up new pathways for discussion on the experiences and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in educational leadership, promoting greater understanding and acceptance across a variety of educational institutions.

Additionally, research on LGBTQ+ educational leaders can help to normalize the presence and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in leadership roles. The current political climate has seen a resurgence of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and policies, which can make it more challenging for LGBTQ+ individuals to advocate for themselves in professional settings. Research can help to counter this climate of exclusion and promote understanding and acceptance of diverse backgrounds and perspectives in leadership roles. By providing a platform for discussion and analysis, research can engender a more

tolerant and accepting environment in educational leadership and promote greater diversity and inclusion.

Overall, research on LGBTQ+ educational leaders is a critical component of promoting greater equity and inclusivity in educational leadership roles. By highlighting the experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ+ individuals in leadership, research can help to break down barriers and create more welcoming and supportive environments for all individuals. This research can also help to promote greater diversity and representation in educational leadership, which can help to ensure that a range of perspectives are represented and included in decision-making. Ultimately, research serves as an important tool for fostering understanding, acceptance, and progress towards a more inclusive and equitable educational system.

### **Reflection Through a Performance Piece**

In this reflection piece, I choose to express my journey of self-discovery and liberation through the art of drag. In this short video that is linked in Appendix J, I pay homage to the little boy that I once was, who was constantly afraid to express himself authentically and grappled with societal expectations of binary gender and heteronormativity. Donning the extravagant makeup, hair, and attire that define the drag culture, I embrace my true identity and finally feel comfortable in my own skin. Through my performance, I strive to showcase the beauty and power of embracing one's true self, regardless of societal pressures and stigmas.

My drag performance is also a political protest against the discrimination, animosity, and violence that the LGBTQ+ community faces in contemporary America. The recent surge in anti-trans, anti-drag, and Don't Say Gay laws that are sweeping the

nation is a stark reminder of the work that still needs to be done to achieve true equality and acceptance for the entire LGBTQ+ spectrum. By transcending societal gender norms and embodying the art of drag, I stand in solidarity with all those who are fighting for their right to self-expression, and I hope to inspire others to find their own voice and celebrate their uniqueness.

It must be noted that choosing a drag artist name was no easy task. I mean, how do you encapsulate all the fabulousness you want to bring to the stage in just a few words? That's where "Genna Say Qua" comes in. This play on words nods to my love of the French language and culture with the phrase "je ne sais quoi", which roughly translates to something that cannot be easily named or described. And let's be real, that's exactly what makes drag so mesmerizing - you can't pin it down or put it in a neat little box. As a drag artist in this reflection piece, I embody this notion, possessing a unique and indescribable essence that sets me apart from the rest. Moreover, my name elicits a sense of intrigue and mystery, leaving people curious and eager to see what Genna Say Qua has in store. So if you're ready for a performance that defies expectations and leaves you feeling spellbound, then scroll on down to Appendix J, click the link, and see the debut of Genna Say Qua. You won't be disappointed!

**Figure 20 – Genna Say Qua Behind the Scenes**



*Note:* These pictures are behind the scenes from the Genna Say Qua video shoot on May 19, 2023.

## **Reflections on the Research Process**

Autoethnography is a unique research methodology that lends itself to intense personal reflection and self-exploration, a journey I found to be quite profound. The process required me to examine my experiences through an analytical lens and to uncover the hidden narratives that define my identity. As a researcher, I found myself looking inward, examining my life, and recalling both pleasant and painful experiences. Reexamining traumatic events from the past was difficult, but necessary for authentically depicting the impact of those experiences on my present-day self.

Despite the challenges, I found solace in expressing my thoughts and emotions in a way that was true to my experience. For me, autoethnography was also a liberating experience, one where I found a newfound sense of freedom in expressing myself authentically, which I had not previously experienced in academic writing. The research process of autoethnography forced me to confront my fears, examine my life experiences, and articulate them in a way that was both powerful and empowering. Through this process, I learned that healing comes in different forms and that being vulnerable can be a powerful tool for self-reflection and growth. Autoethnography helped me to discover the power of storytelling, the cathartic release that comes from baring one's soul on the page, and the transformative potential of connecting with others through shared experiences.

The research into LGBTQ+ educational leaders and students has shed light on the many challenges and barriers that exist within our education system. Alarmed by statistics that show over 50% of LGBTQ+ students feeling unsafe at school due to their gender identity or sexual orientation, it has become clear that urgent action is needed to



ensure a more equitable education system. The lack of visibility and support for our LGBTQ+ community within the educational system, as well as the unique needs and perspectives that are often overlooked, has further highlighted the importance of this work. My passion for advocacy that this research has spurred is driven by empathy and understanding, gained through discovering the narratives of those who strive to live authentically in schools today. In a world where there are currently eleven anti-LGBTQ bills in the Kentucky legislature alone, with many focusing on students, representation is more crucial than ever before. When we see ourselves reflected back in our classrooms, workplaces, and society at large, we can be empowered to take action toward creating the change that is so desperately needed.

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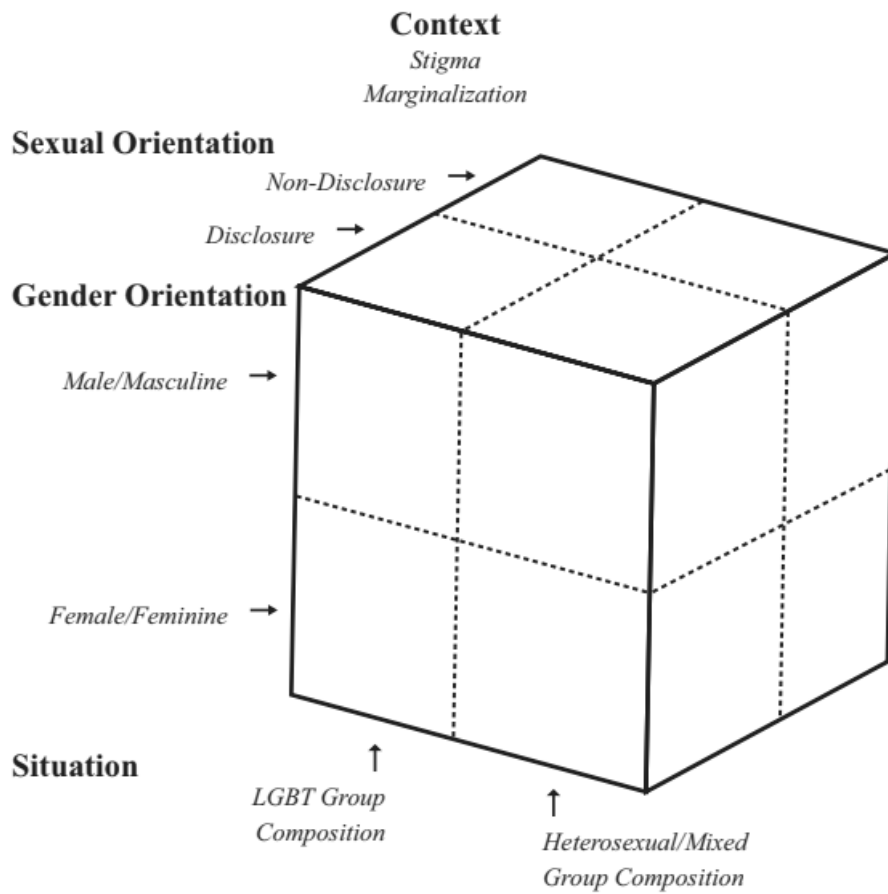
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## APPENDIX A

### *Affirmative Model of Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Leadership*

*Enactment (Fassinger et al., 2010, p. 205)*



## APPENDIX B

### *Structured Ethical Reflection Grid*

<b>Basic Values</b>	<b>Developing Research Partnerships</b>	<b>Constructing Research Questions</b>	<b>Seeking Funding</b>	<b>Identifying Sources of Data</b>	<b>Gathering Data</b>	<b>Analyzing Data</b>	<b>Taking Action</b>	<b>Disseminating Knowledge</b>	<b>Moving On</b>
<b>Equality</b>	Am I searching for people from all paths in my area of interest?	Have my questions been vetted to ensure they are unbiased and equal among all LGBTQIA+ members?	Am I searching for grants, volunteers, and all sources that would put less burden on those in my research?	Will I strive to represent the LGBTQIA+ community equally?	How will I ensure that data is gathered equally across all participants?	Am I providing equal attention to all the data collected through my analysis?	Am I leaving anyone out of the conversation?	How can I provide information to each of the subgroups I worked with to provide equal access to findings?	How can I continue to communicate this research and further studies to all stakeholders in the future?
<b>Community</b>	Am I helping to create or nurture community and not harming the community through my partnerships?	Do my questions pertain to the stories and experiences of the community?	Is the funding going to help further the LGBTQIA+ community through my research?	How can I honor the community through my selection of data sources?	How can I gather data without disturbing the community and/or intruding?	Does the data analysis represent the community as a whole and not one particular subgroup?	What is the most effective way to move forward with the research and findings?	Does my work represent this community in an honest way?	Am I confident this work represents me and the community as well as the direction desired in the future?
<b>Respect</b>	Have I been sure to respect all partners in a way that honors their dignity and story?	Do my questions regard the participants as experts and masters of their own stories?	Is the funding used ethically and showing respect to those providing the funds for this specific research purpose?	How can I show respect to the individuals that do and do not want to participate in my research?	How can I show respect and empathy to all participants in interviews, oral histories, and all interactions?	How can I respect the story and hearts that have been poured out as I analyze the data?	How am I ensuring that the individuality of each participant is being honored through the actions taken?	How can I best handle the differing viewpoints of audience members?	In what ways can I work to ensure that participants are acknowledged for their involvement?
<b>Healing</b>	Do I provide a space for healing and reflection for partners in this research?	Do my questions provide a means to provide benefits to the community for growth and healing?	Do the funds give back to the LGBTQIA+ community?	How can I find data that provides the information needed to allow for healing and growth?	Is there a way or a person that can help provide some level of healing through the interview process?	What ways can I provide help to participants as needs are found in the analysis of the data?	What actions will be best for reflection and healing for the community?	What ways can I be transparent about methods and findings for all stakeholders?	Do I provide suggestions for future action to assist in the healing of the LGBTQIA+ community?
<b>Life</b>	Do I breathe life into the LGBTQIA+ community and partnerships or hinder such?	Do my questions truly embody the intent from my research or provide the ability to change to do so?	Are the funds coming from organizations that respect the dignity of and honor the lives in the LGBTQIA+ community?	Are all aspects of LGBTQIA+ lives considered and represent the whole person?	How can I represent the data to show the lives of those participating in an authentic, meaningful way?	How can I respect all life and interpret what has been shared with trust and open-mindedness?	What actions bring life to the community and help honor their past and ignite passion for their future?	How can I make sure to uphold the spirit of the study and the lives shared in presenting the findings?	What are the best findings to represent the authentic stories from members of the community that will make a lasting impact?



## APPENDIX C

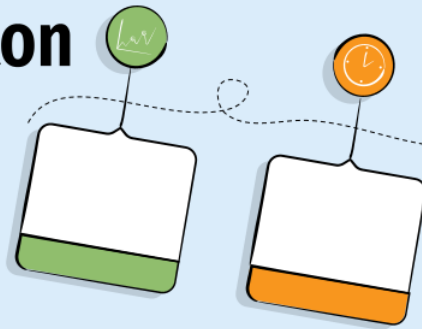
*Table 1.1 What Autoethnography Is, and What It Is Not (Poulos, 2021)*

<b>Autoethnography is</b>	<b>Autoethnography is not</b>
Qualitative inquiry	Quantitative research
Phenomenological	Positivist or postpositivist
Focused on local knowledge	Focused on generalized knowledge
Evocative writing	Reporting
Interpretive or critical	Statistical
Suggestive	Predictive
Self-reflexive and subjective	Outer-directed or objective
Grounded in participation and observation	Grounded in quantifiable data
Driven by memory, story, experience	Driven by statistical generalizations or categories
Narrative, poetic, evocative writing	Research reporting
Seeking possibilities	Seeking probabilities
Written in first-person voice (generally)	Written in third-person voice

## APPENDIX D

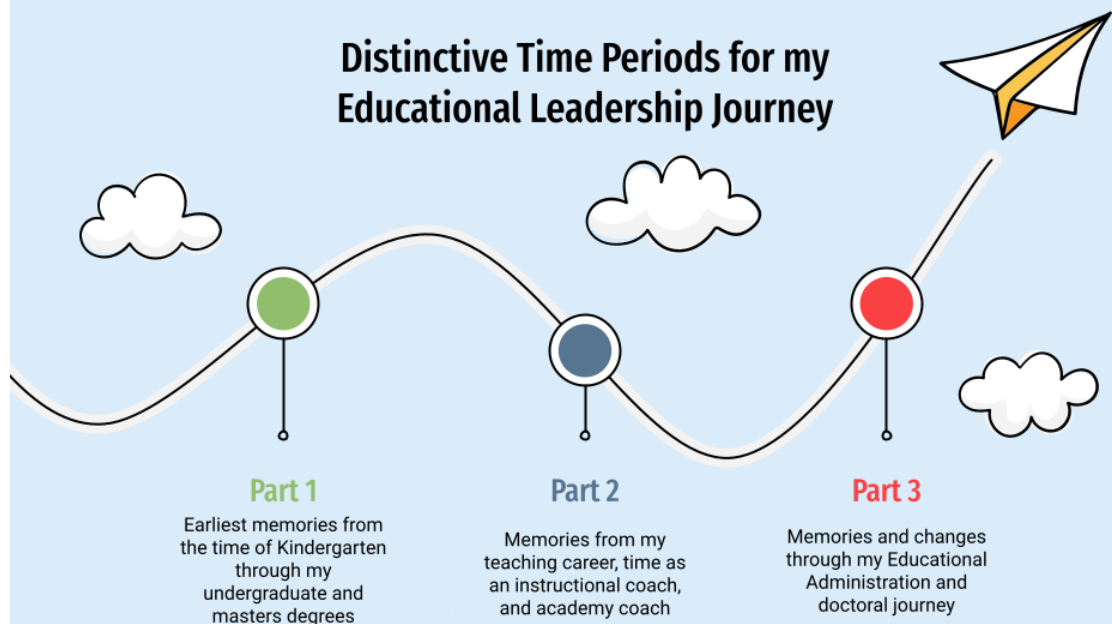
*Timeline Sketch through Google Slides for my Autoethnography*

# Joshua D. Covington Timeline

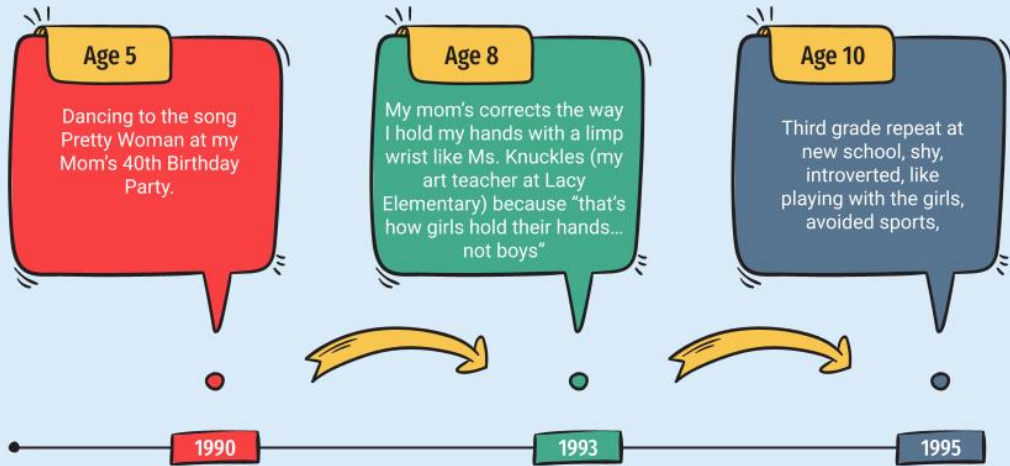


Here is where the story begins to take shape

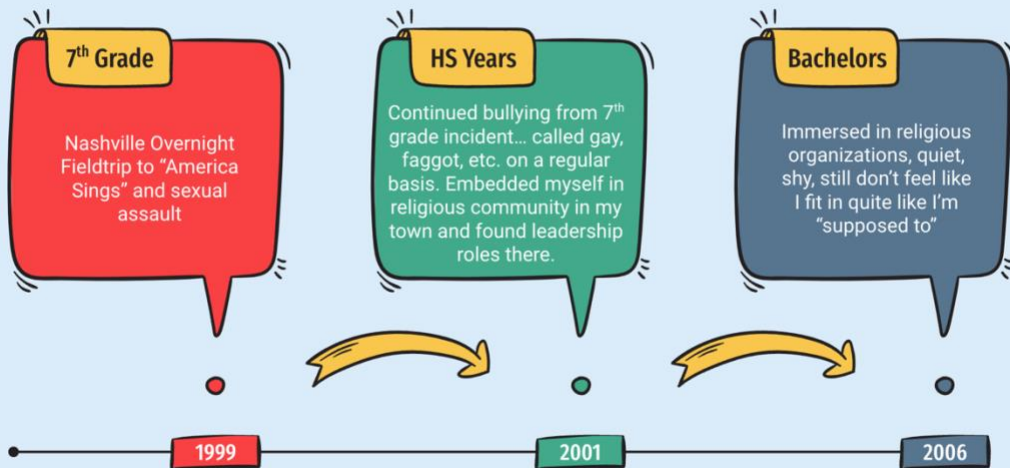
## Distinctive Time Periods for my Educational Leadership Journey



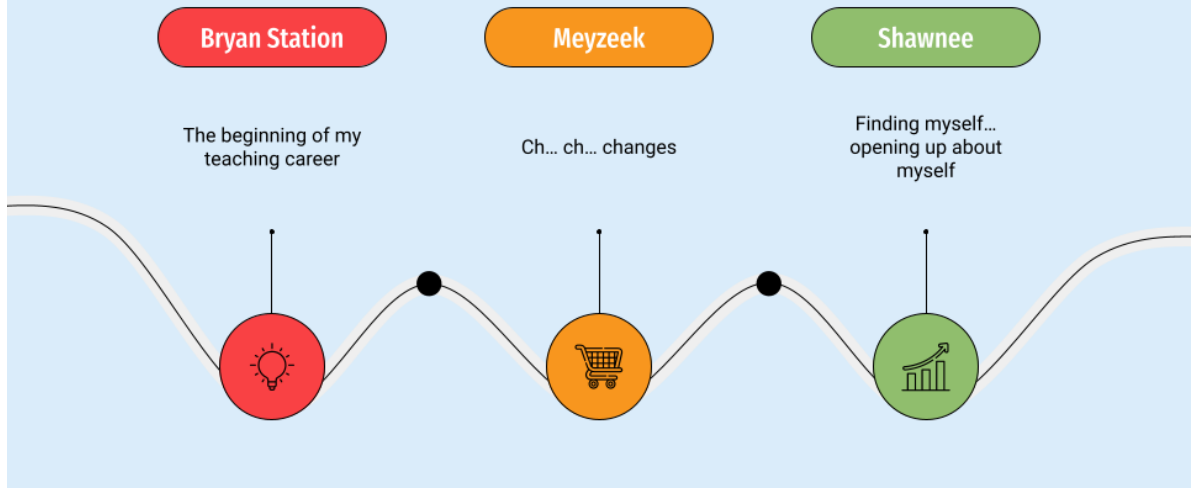
## Part 1: Early childhood through College



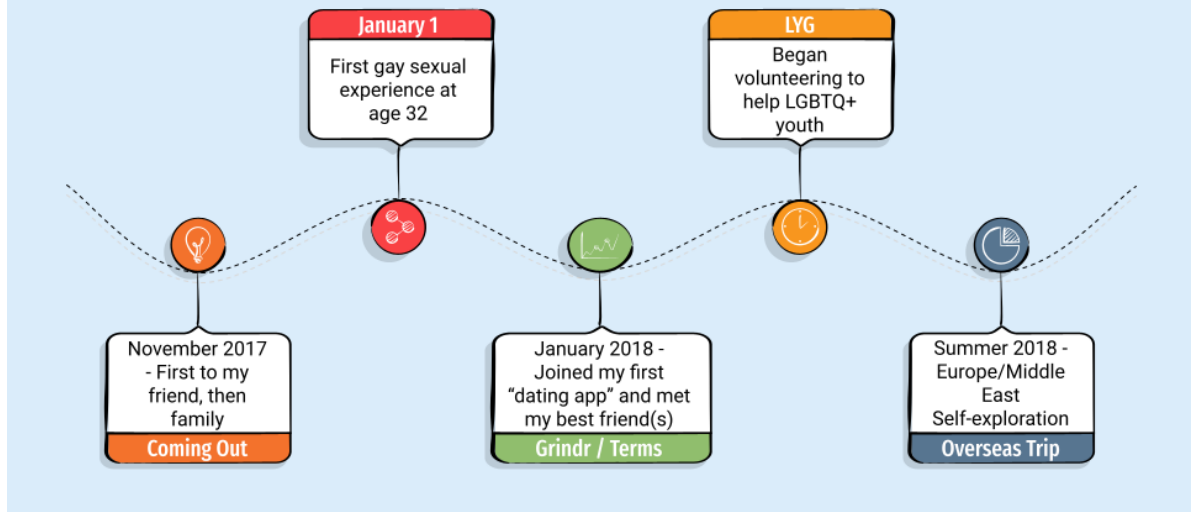
## Part 1: Early childhood through College



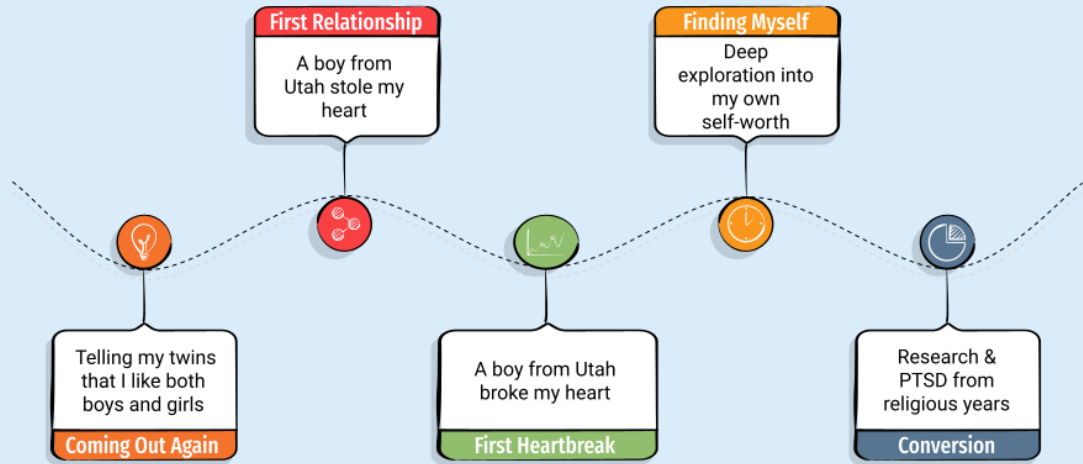
## Part 2: Career as an Educator into Early Leadership Roles



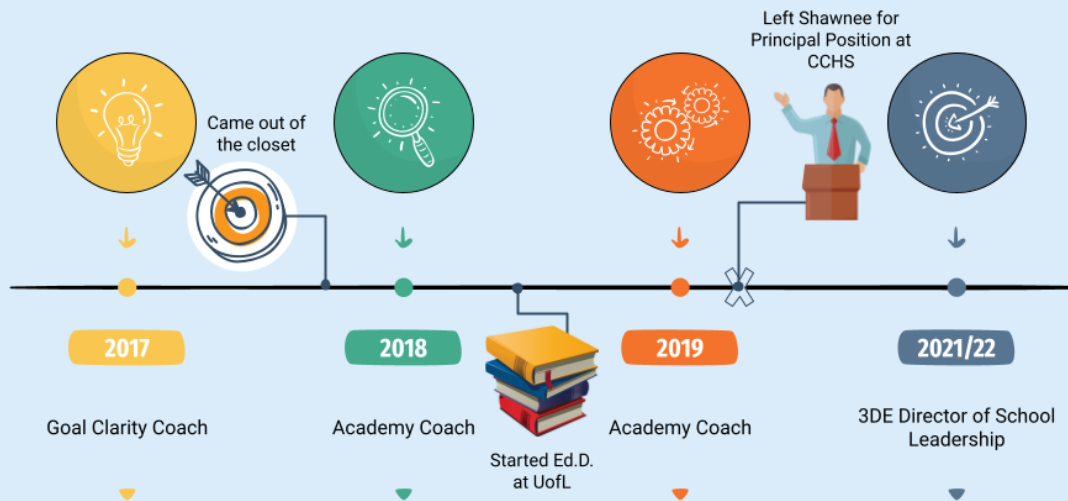
## Part 2: Personal Memories



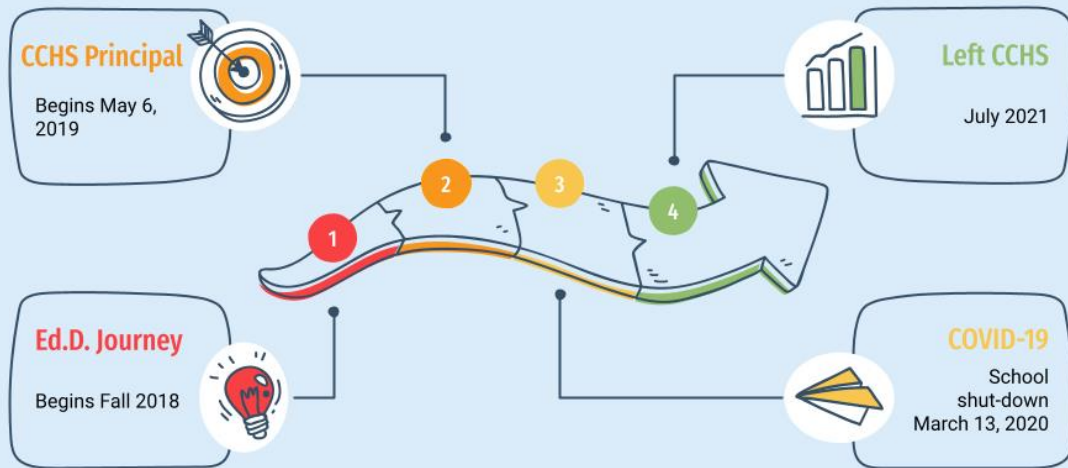
## Part 2: Personal Memories Continued



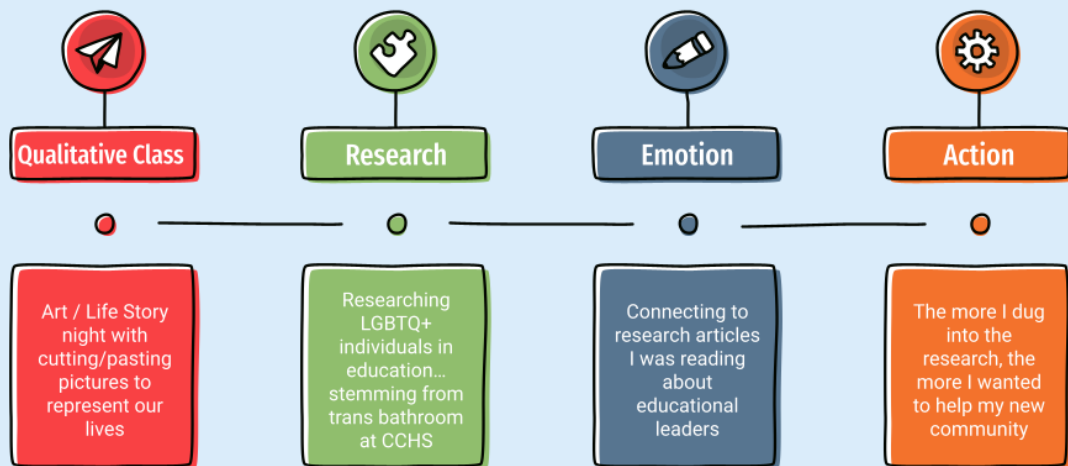
## The Academy @ Shawnee



## Part 3: Educational Administration to Doctoral Journey Overview

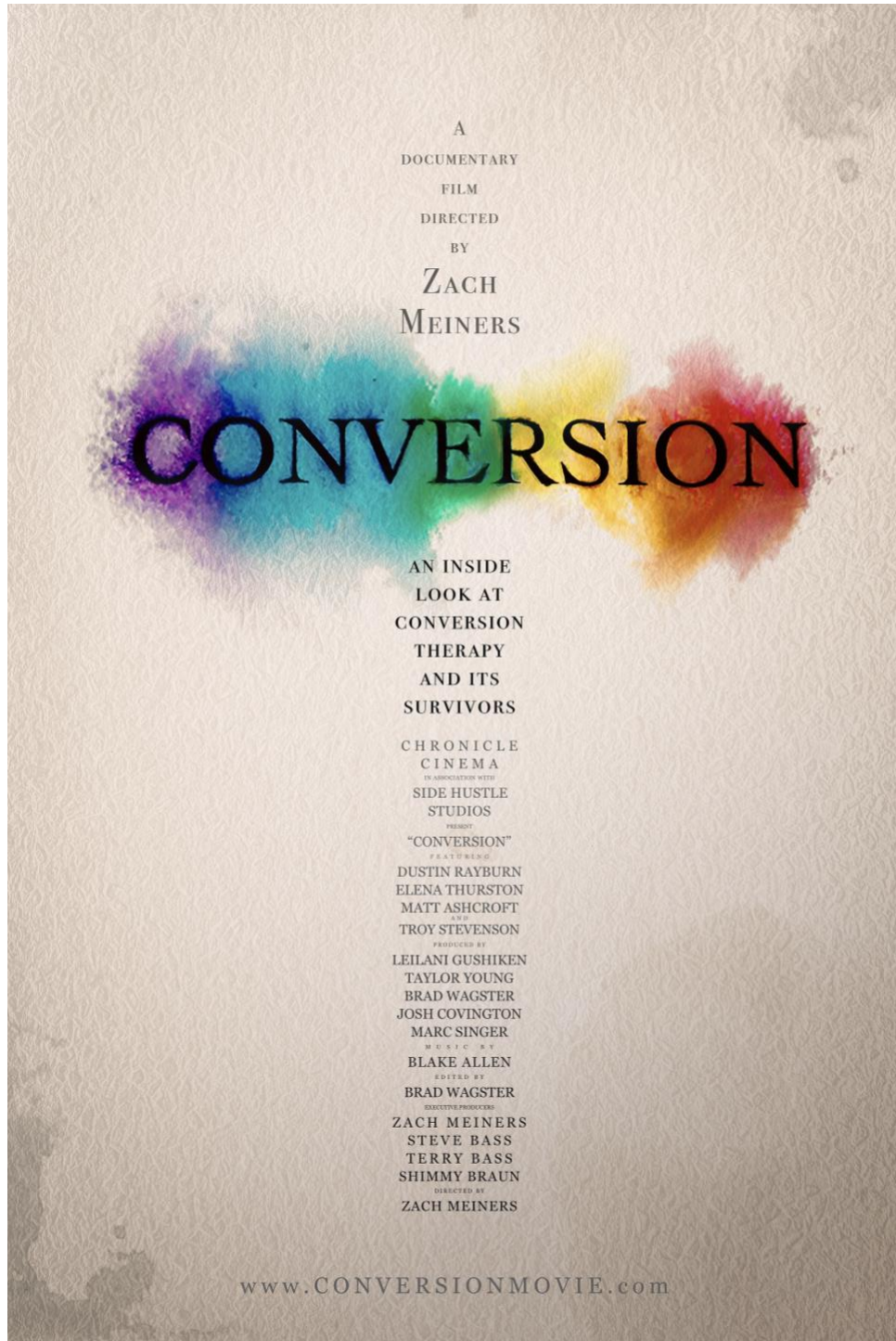


## Ed.D. Memories



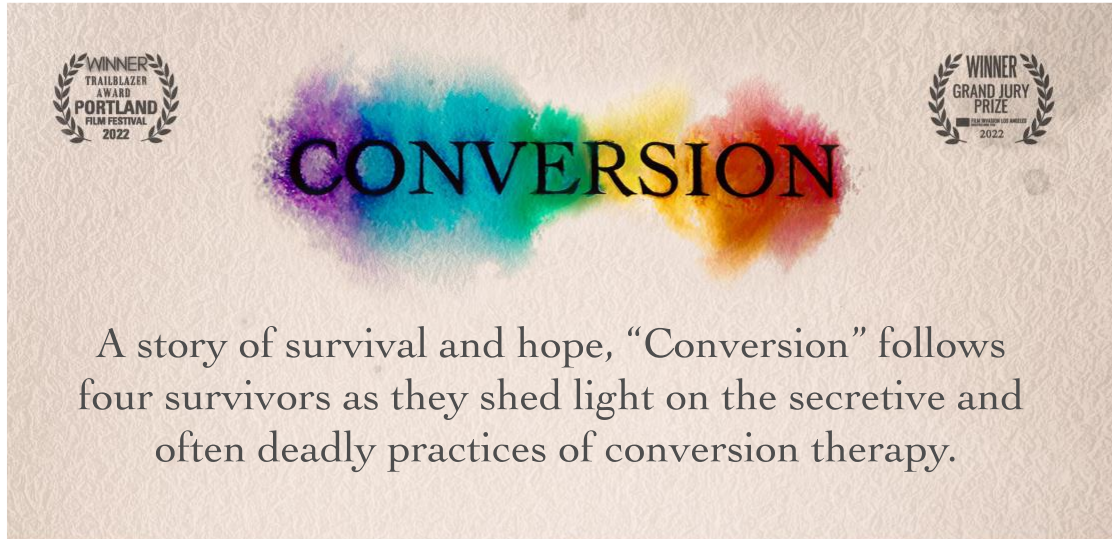
APPENDIX E

*Conversion Movie Poster*



## APPENDIX F

### *Conversion Movie Information One-Sheet*




WINNER  
TRAILBLAZER  
AWARD  
PORTLAND  
FILM FESTIVAL  
2022

WINNER  
GRAND JURY  
PRIZE  
2022

# CONVERSION

A story of survival and hope, “Conversion” follows four survivors as they shed light on the secretive and often deadly practices of conversion therapy.



## SYNOPSIS

In the US alone, over 698,000 people have been subjected to the often deadly practice known as Conversion Therapy. In 2018, filmmaker Zach Meiners discovered that his former conversion therapist was still practicing. Struggling with the trauma of his own experience, Zach began an endeavor to amplify and empower the voices of survivors, and expose the secretive and often deadly practices of conversion therapy.

“Conversion” takes us on the cinematic and personal journeys of 4 survivors from the US and Canada, as they move through the mental and physical harms of conversion therapy, and find the hope and strength to fight against it.

Conversion therapy has become an underground industry, constantly rebranding, adapting, and growing. In discussions of conversion therapy, survivors are often left out of the conversation. And the most vulnerable members of our community, children, are left without a voice, choice, or pathway out of the trauma being inflicted on them. Ultimately, “Conversion” is a story of survival and hope.

[www.CONVERSIONMOVIE.COM](http://www.CONVERSIONMOVIE.COM)



## APPENDIX G

### Genna Say Qua Video Script

Josh's Summary	Script	Drag Makeup Step to be filmed	Notes
Dream Sequence	For years, I had this recurring dream. In the dream, I was walking down my childhood hallway and into my bedroom. Everything looked as it always had, except for a small hole in the wall. I looked through the wall and saw an abandoned, boarded up, 70s style bathroom. After finding my way inside, I decided to clean it up and began to try and pull away the boards covering up the window to let the light in. But as the board would come loose, I would fall backwards and that's when I always woke up.		In full beard
		Shaving	
Dancing to the song Pretty Woman at my Mom's 40th Birthday Party. My mom's corrects the way I hold my hands with a limp wrist like Ms. Knuckles (my art teacher at Lacy Elementary) because "that's how girls hold their hands... not boys"	One of my earliest memories is dancing to "Pretty Woman" at my mom's 40th birthday party, when I was 5 years old. I remember I used to wear my grandmother's jewelry around the house. But I also remember my mom at one point correcting the way I held my hands, because I would hold them with a limp wrist. She said "That's how girls hold their hands... not boys."		
		Glue and Set Eyebrows	
Third grade repeat at new school, shy, introverted, like playing with the girls, avoided sports,	When I was in third grade, I ended up at a new school. I was very shy and introverted. I liked to play with the girls. I didn't like sports. It was during my time here that I started to realize who did and did not have a crush on Zach Morris from Saved by the Bell. I started feeling different.		
		Base Foundation	
Nashville Overnight Fieldtrip to "America Sings" and sexual assault Continued bullying from 7th grade incident... called gay, faggot, etc. on a regular basis. Embedded myself in religious community in my town and found leadership roles there.	When I was in 7th grade, my middle school took an overnight trip to Nashville. On that trip, I was sexually assaulted by some of the older middle school boys. In the aftermath of that, I was relentlessly teased and bullied. I was even punished by school authorities for not reporting what happened sooner. These experiences only seemed to reinforce that I was an outsider, so I began to look for community elsewhere.		
		Highlight / Contour and set	
Immersed in religious organizations, quiet, shy, still don't feel like I fit in quite like I'm "supposed to"	For years I immersed myself in religious organizations, but remained quiet and shy. Though I worked really hard to connect and invest, I still felt like I didn't quite belong - or that I didn't quite fit in like I was "supposed" to.		
		Draw Eyebrows	
November 2017 - First to my friend, then family	But I kept pushing through and living life. It wasn't until after my divorce that I began to acknowledge this whole other aspect of myself. In November 2017, I began to come out. First to my friend and then to my family, I started off 2018 with my first actual gay sexual experience.		
First gay sexual experience at age 32			
		Do Eyeshadow / Eye glitter	
January 2018 - Joined my first "dating app" and met my best friend(s) Began volunteering to help LGBTQ+ youth	Very soon after, I joined my first "gay social app" and ended up meeting my best friends. And soon after began volunteering for an LGBTQ+ youth organization and working in the community.		
		Eyeliner	
Summer 2018 - Europe/Middle East Self-exploration	The summer of 2018 is when I really got to explore both myself and the world a little bit. I went on a trip to Europe and Israel and really came face to face with myself and what I wanted in life. I learned a lot.		
		Mascara	
Telling my twins that I like both boys and girls	After that, I had a discussion with my twins and told them that I liked both boys and girls.		
		Contour Face powders	
A boy from Utah stole my heart A boy from Utah broke my heart	Soon after, I met a boy from Utah. He stole my heart, which he then subsequently broke. That was a really difficult time for me.		
		Blush	
Deep exploration into my own self-worth	But that pain pushed me into a deep exploration of my own self-worth. And around that time I began doing some work and research for a documentary that started pushing me to face head on some of the PTSD and religious trauma that I had pushed to the side.		
Research & PTSD from religious years			
		Highlight / Nose	
The Academy @ Shawnee Section	Along with all of this personal work, I found a family in my colleagues at my new school, Shawnee. They nurtured my innate talents, honed my skills, and embraced my quirks. I went from a shy and reserved newbie to a confident leader. Their unwavering support gave me the courage to find my voice.		
		Eyebrows Again / Lips	
Education Administration to Doctoral Journey Overview	Shawnee was not just a school, it was a catalyst that ignited a roar within me. Shawnee, my LGBTQ+ community, and my doctoral cohort provided me with the supportive network I needed to unleash my true potential and become a visionary leader who stays true to their identity and values.		
		Lashes	
Final Thoughts/Lessons/Findings/Word	For me... through all of this, I see a clear dichotomy between the pressure to conform and the importance of authentic self-expression. My conformity came at the cost of individual expression. Thankfully, I finally found my tribe and through that learned the transformative power that supportive relationships and inclusive environments have with enabling me to flourish and embrace my true identity without fear of judgment or exclusion. I've learned that...		
	I am who I am, and that's just fine, No need to pretend or constantly align. It's my unique traits that make me divine,	Set Face Wig Nails/Dress	these lines will be voiceover while we see the final pieces as macro/close up shots.
	Because being true to myself, that's when I'll really shine.	Jewelry	
	Song??	REVEAL	

## APPENDIX H

### Genna Say Qua Call Sheet



### GENNA SAY QUA

DIRECTOR	TAYLOR YOUNG	<b>CREW CALL</b>  <b>8:30 AM</b>	JOB #	
PRODUCER	ZACH MEINERS/ MARC SINGER		DATE	Friday, May 19, 2023
DP	BRAD WAGSTER		WEATHER	
PROD. CO.			SUNRISE/ SET	6:29 AM / 8:51 PM
CLIENT			HOSPITAL	UOFL MEDICAL CENTER
AGENCY			614 W MAIN ST LOUISVILLE, KY 40202	

SCHEDULE	DESCRIPTION	LOCATION	NOTES
8:30 AM	SET-UP		
9:00 AM	FIRST STORY (DREAM SEQUENCE)	BLACK VOID	
9:05 AM	TRIM BEARD/ BEGIN TRANSFORMATION		MARC CLOSE UP SHOTS
	GO THROUGH HMU PROCESS, FILMING		
	STORIES AT INTRIVALS MARKED		
	IN SCRIPT		
12:00 PM	FINISH DRAG/ FINAL TOUCHES		
12:15 PM	REVEAL GENNA SAE QUA	LIGHT WALL / CURTAINS SET	
12:30 PM	FINAL PREFORMANCE		
1:00 PM	LUNCH/ DUSTY WRAP		
1:30 PM	PICK UP SHOTS		
2:00 PM	ALL WRAP		

PRODUCTION	NAME	CELL	CALL	LOC	TALENT	NAME	CELL	CALL	LOC
DIRECTOR	TAYLOR YOUNG		8:30 AM		GENNA SAY QUA	JOSH COVINGTON		8:30 AM	
PRODUCER	ZACH MEINERS		8:30 AM						
1ST AD	MARC SINGER		8:30 AM						

CAMERA	NAME	CELL	CALL	LOC	ART	NAME	CELL	CALL	LOC
DP	BRAD WAGSTER		8:30 AM		ART DIRECTOR	JO HALL		8:30 AM	

LIGHTING	NAME	CELL	CALL	LOC
GAFFER	BRAD WAGSTER			
GRIP	ZACH MEINERS			

AUDIO	NAME	CELL	CALL	LOC	HAIR/ MAKE-UP	NAME	CELL	CALL	LOC
AUDIO	JO HALL				DRAG EXTROIDINAIRRE	DUSTIN RAYBURN		8:30 AM	

**PRODUCTION NOTES**

614 W Main St, Suite 4500  
Louisville, KY 40202

hello@chroniclecinema.com  
502.771.5162

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## APPENDIX I

### *Genna Say Qua Stills*









## APPENDIX J

*Genna Say Qua Performance Link (<https://youtu.be/PEaMSeSQkKg>)*

Genna Say

Qua

Link

## CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME: Joshua David Covington

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Louisville, Kentucky 40292

DOB: Hopkinsville, KY – April 30, 1985

### EDUCATION

& TRAINING: B.A., Political Science, Minor History  
University of Kentucky  
August 2009

M.A. Education  
University of Kentucky  
August 2010

Rank I – Educational Leadership w/ Principal Certification  
University of Kentucky  
July 2015

Ed.D., Educational Leadership & Organizational Development  
University of Louisville  
August 2023

PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES: National Educators Association  
National Association of Secondary School  
Principals

### NOTABLE

ACHIEVEMENTS: Producer, Conversion Documentary