

A WINDOW INTO MY MIRROR: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF CULTURALLY
SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY WITH LGBTQ+ STUDENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

NICKI KINCAID. A Window into My Mirror: An Autoethnography of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy with LGBTQ+ Students
(Under the direction of DR. KAREN WOOD)

This research portrays a personal journey of a middle school language arts teacher working with LGBTQ+ students. Using autoethnography as the method, this study interprets personal narratives about the researcher's adolescent identity development in connection with current culturally relevant teaching practices, specifically for LGBTQ+ students. As the subject of my own study, I focused on the relationships and cultural immersion experiences of my personal identity development. This qualitative research method invites the reader to gain insight into the subculture of this study through the experiences of the author. Perspective, being a root of the study, is unique to the author as well as the reader. Through this autoethnography, the reader is able to gain insight into the formation of a classroom teacher's identity that shape attitudes and practices within the classroom. This study represents the seeds planted to grow the tree that fosters a culturally sustained classroom.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ youth, culturally relevant teaching, personal identity, heteronormative practices and systems, narrative autoethnography, queering the curriculum

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am fully back and, yes, I have time for that now. I sure do love you two, and hope you gained some insight into what it takes to reach goals. You are pretty darn amazing kids. I love you both.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents. You both gave me strength to begin and finish this journey. Mom, you have been my biggest supporter, and you never doubted my abilities even when I doubted myself. I am lucky to have you as my mom and my best friend. Dad, you gave me the strength to begin, and the desire to finish. I am putting this in published writing, you were right; I should and could do this. Thank you for always being logical and levelheaded and for giving me the skills to set and accomplish my goals. I love you both.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AP	assistant principal
CDC	center for disease control
CSP	culturally sustaining pedagogy
CRP	culturally relevant pedagogy
CRT	culturally relevant teaching
EC	exceptional children
ELA	English language arts
GSA/O	gay straight assassination/organization
GLSEN	gay lesbian and straight education network
IEP	individualized education plan
LGBTQ+	lesbian gay bisexual transgender queer +
YA	young adult
YRBS	youth risk behavior surveillance

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Girls to the Right, Boys to the Right

It was 2011, and I was in my second year teaching eighth grade, English Language Arts (ELA) (my tenth year of teaching overall), and one day in class I created two teams one day in class: “Girls to the left, boys to the right.” I had done this hundreds of times as it was the quickest way to make two teams to compete or debate. On this day, September 12, 2012, one student sat dead center, did not move, did not speak, and did not look upset. The room fell quiet and proceeded to play whatever game we were playing that day. As the game proceeded, I sat in the middle of the room with my student and asked, “Why are you not playing?” in which the student responded, “I don’t know which side to join.”

In my head, I’m thinking, um, you’re a girl, join the girls side...Out of my mouth came, “Why are you not comfortable on the girl’s team?”

“Because I don’t feel like a girl.”

“I noticed you cut your hair.”

“Yeah, that’s part of it.”

“Do you not feel like a girl?”

“Not really, but I don’t know if I feel like a boy either.”

“Okay. Then, be the judge?”

“Sure.”

And, I walked away. Just like that, I left the student sitting in the middle of the room not feeling like a girl or a boy. I had no idea what to do, what to ask, not ask, tell, and not tell. The bell rang, students left, I had a planning block. I Googled, “What does it mean to not feel like a

*boy or a girl?” That went absolutely nowhere. I found articles about wanting a girl but finding out you were pregnant with a boy, how boys make friends easier than girls, what boys want for Christmas and girls don’t. Wow. This is new. To give myself credit, not that was due, I left a child sitting in the middle of my classroom after said child told me they didn’t feel like a boy or a girl, but I knew, I just knew, she must be gay. Yep. That’s where I went. She’s gay. If I could, I would travel back in time and smack myself. Today, when you Google the same line, the resources states: “Being in the middle of **that** spectrum is known as ‘bigender’, and **not feeling** any gender is called ‘non-binary’ or ‘agender’. Having **that** gender move around (**like** one day you **feel** more **like a guy**, one day you **feel** more **like a girl**) is called ‘genderfluid” (7cups.com, 2019). Boom. There it is. She was not gay; she was confused and questioning because there was nowhere and no one to look to for advice.*

Later in the same school year, he did ask me to use male pronouns, and call him by a different nonbinary name. I obliged, and the class was accepting, but the administration told me to cut it out. In the same breath they told me, and the rest of the staff, to differentiate, every child is different; keep that in mind when creating lessons. Okay, so different is defined by what? Not gender. Not sexuality. Race? Binary means of identification? I didn’t “cut it out.” I continued the gender identification he wanted, I continued his chosen name, I just did it behind my closed door. I was the only one.

As a veteran teacher, this experience was so new to me that I was not able to recover on the spot, which was also a new experience for me. My ignorance was clearly harming the well-being of my students, and my knowledge of the LGBTQ+ community was limited to knowing about lesbian, gay, and “cross-dressing” people. Just typing that makes my stomach tighten with embarrassment, however, what followed this experience was enlightening and grounded in the

safety and knowledge of every student's individual needs that pass through my classroom. This particular experience propelled my desire to understand the LGBTQ+ culture and ultimately led me to my doctoral program and the research that resides in this dissertation. This dissertation informs and contributes to the conversations about how to include LGBTQ+ students within culturally responsive and sustaining teaching (CSP).

Introduction

“My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you” (Lorde). The moral obligation of justice seeking is embedded within my very soul. It is not about what is fair, it is about the justness within the educational system and how we, teachers, relay information to our students. A White, heteronormative lens clouds the surface of the view. Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, a former Icelandic Prime Minister and the first openly gay head of state said, “It is absolutely imperative that every human being's freedom and human rights are respected, all over the world.” Culturally sustaining pedagogy aims to sustain the individual identities of all students within all cultures and communities. Without it we are not moving forward, we are not doing our best to educate our future generations, we are leaving behind valuable assets.

If your house catches on fire, what do you grab? You take hold of the memories, the items that cannot be replaced with insurance money. We take our pictures, our children's artwork, our grandmother's diary, our dad's pocket watch, but we do not grab our favorite sweater, our cups and plates, or our golf clubs (unless you are my husband). Our schools are on fire. We must make sure we grab the things we cannot replace: our cultures, our heritage, our ability to think for ourselves, our assets that will define our future. As Lev Vygotsky said, “Children grow into the intellectual life around them.”

From an archetypal viewpoint, teachers are always heroes or villains, never the sidekicks. One definition of an archetypal sidekick is, “The Sidekick is the absolutely faithful and supportive member of the Archetypal character set” (“Sidekick”, 2021), and this is how we [teachers] should be perceived. I always strive to stand alongside my students and their families by illuminating the identities submerged under the normative status quo by adjusting curriculum to uncloak the myriad of characters in my classroom, in my school, in our society, and in the world, and by advocating, no, by demanding, that all students are seen, understood, and included. From my experiences, this is not always an easy venture.

There is a severe stigma to having open, honest conversations around the safety and well-being of LGBTQ+ students in our middle schools. I chose the acronym LGBTQ+ to represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and the + is to represent the ever-changing fluidity of the culture as well as to include myself as an ally. The topic of LGBTQ+ tends to make students, teachers, and parents uncomfortable (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015; Mayo, 2014; Page, 2017), and hetero-narratives impose great weight in society, especially in our schools. There are many opportunities for schools and classroom teachers to weave the lives of LGBTQ+ people into classroom practices, however, the lack of follow-through and failed attempts prevail (Snapp et al., 2015). Equality and equity are thrown around education like uncooked pasta to the wall; it is just not sticking. “Equality means more than passing laws. The struggle is really won in the hearts and minds of the community, where it really counts” (Gittings, n.d.).

Our identities define us. Our identities are perceived by us. Our identities are valued or devalued by how society views us. When an identity is not filtered through a lens of acceptance, a person will ultimately fall victim to the perceptions of others. Identity through literacy is impeded by homophobia and heterosexism (Blackburn, 2005; Greathouse et al., 2018; Vetter,

2010). Finding identity in and out of school is a struggle for most LGBTQ+ students; however, finding opportunities to use LGBTQ+ literature in literacy classrooms can contribute to unsafe environments if not presented in a safe manner (Vetter, 2010). In efforts to ensure the safety for students, Vetter (2010) suggested educators attend professional development, read literature, and talk with colleagues about LGBTQ+ issues to create safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students. When teachers and schools ignore the identities of LGBTQ+ students, individuals can feel devalued and misunderstood. This is especially true when the student does not have a support system at home that accepts their sexuality and gender (Mayo, 2004), and therefore the child is left without a community of membership. In order to build a community within the classroom that is inclusive of all students, first, the teacher needs to recognize their own power in the position (Gay, 2000; Love, 2019) and be diligent in listening across perspectives to rightfully communicate with all students (Young, 1997). As an educator of twenty years, I am still learning the balance between teaching and learning. I admit, I do like control, and it is often misread as a need for power. I relinquish power to my students every opportunity I can so that they too can feel in control of their own path of learning and teaching.

Four years of undergraduate work, plus a year to grow on, and two years of master's degree work afforded me a plethora of knowledge on brain development, how to write a lesson plan, how to integrate content material into language arts, how to work an overhead projector, a copy machine, and a fax. I did not learn how to build rapport with my students, I did not learn how to identify depression, abuse, or gender and sexual confusion, and I did not learn how to ensure all cultures are infused into my daily rhetoric and lessons. I was not blind to differences, to individual personalities and perspectives, but I was White-washed in believing that everyone had equal and equitable opportunities. I was naive, ignorant, and boastful, and I was quickly

brought to reality when a child asked me if I got the newspaper at home. He asked me if I could bring them to him when I was finished because they heated their house with a wood burning stove and needed the paper to get the fire going. That same year, my first year teaching, we were preparing for upcoming parent conferences when another teacher “warned” me of a parent who was “an angry Black woman.” When I asked why she was angry, this teacher responded with, “You know how they are.” No, actually, I don’t know how “they” are, can you elaborate? I asked. He could not, or would not, and at that moment I was gifted a new lens to view my classroom. I could not pretend all students were the same that all teachers treated them with respect and set high expectations for everyone, so I would need to put time into understanding the individuals in my classroom. This became the first step in obtaining cultural relevance.

Cultural pedagogy, relevance, responsiveness, sustaining, equality, and equity are prevalent terms in research, teacher preparation, teacher professional development, politics, and the media. As a teacher in the classroom, and a researcher for professional growth and enlightenment, I see a huge gap in timing since many of these terms, although used in our schools, are nearly five or more years behind current research. As groundbreaking, and important as Ladson-Billings’s (1994, 1995) work with the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is, research has come a long way for sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) that reaches all students. Ladson-Billings’s pedagogical theories for culturally relevant teaching were in their infancy when I was in college, and I missed them. I continued to miss them until my doctoral work. However, I was able to pat myself on the back for heeding several suggestions. Ladson-Billings’s research focused on eight teachers she felt held outstanding qualities as teachers and asserted three goals of CRP: 1) academic success, 2) cultural competence, and 3) sociopolitical consciousness. By her definition, I was checking the box in academic success in my first year of

teaching, and each year since my students have met or exceeded individual yearly academic goals. I was doing something right, but I had no idea it was possibly linked to my cultural relevance. Cultural competence, yes, I was hyper aware of who was in my classroom and I slowly became experienced enough to incorporate culture into all of my units. However, my first several years teaching, I isolated lessons in the context of one cultural story presented as a grand narrative, and I allowed these lessons to be taught and understood as *others*. The final component, sociopolitical consciousness, took a little longer. The first time I can remember having a sociopolitical consciousness was about ten years ago when I began giving students a current event article of the week. After listening to Kelly Gallagher speak about his experiences using an article of the week (AoW) to help students understand the world around them, I knew this was a huge step for me as a teacher to integrate the real-world into my classroom. In this way, culture can be taught and learned as intended: malleable, not static. Ladson-Billings (2014) continued to help redefine CRP, noting that pedagogy “shifts, changes, adapts, recycles, and recreates instructional spaces” (p. 76) in order to keep students as the subjects, not the objects, of teaching and learning. Reworking her initial CRP into the *Culturally Relevant 2.0* (2014) version, she heeded Paris’ (2012) pleas for sustained cultural pedagogy. Just as seasons change, so does the culture of youth. These changes must be accounted for in CRP in order for students to feel valued in the classroom. By doing this we are able to sustain the essence of cultural competency. Through her research, Ladson-Billings led teachers on the charge for change. It is no longer acceptable for students or teachers to merely understand and analyze social inequalities; there is a need to take action. When students are seen and heard in school through the curriculum, they are more likely to engage and foster positive self-identities (GLSEN, 2017, 2019; Sleeter, 2018). The ideas, philosophies, and theories of education are subjective and often

evasive, yet Freire (1970) asserted that education is “the practice of freedom” (p. 81) and through authentic teaching the connection between self and the world can be made using “problem-posing education” (p. 83) which ensures that critical thinkers emerge. The assertion that education is the practice of freedom is often diluted in grand narratives and White-washed, heteronormative curriculums.

The nondominant culture, in any setting, is typically not normalized (Mayo, 2014) within heteronormative practices. Heteronormativity privileges those that fall within binary sanctions of gender, male/female, and sexuality as heterosexual (Toomey et al., 2012). This normalization of duality within sexuality and gender situate LGBTQ+ students to “come out,” however, members of normalized, heteronormative cultures are not put in positions that may create social shame (Halley & Eshleman, 2017). Since curriculum is not a passive neutral construct of ideas and knowledge, but created and enacted by those usually acting in roles of authority, questions of power are fundamentally at the center of any conversations about a curriculum overhaul. This brings up the question of power, how it is formed, who holds it, and how it is used. Foucault (1978) characterized power as constructed, malleable, and implores identity seekers to undo normative expectations. I return to my initial narrative to ponder my idea of gender through a Foucaultian lens, and I can begin to understand the power that the institutions of our schools and our societies place on what gender looks like. It is through this lens that I am able to process that this student’s identity was not held in the physical sense, yet it was perceived as a physical binary that has been constructed by power structures. Foucault’s theory, combined with Ladson-Billings’s work in culturally relevant pedagogies, demonstrates the possibility of equitable education. Teachers cannot only recognize inequalities and individual identities; they must embrace individual identities and seek to educate and enlighten students through culturally

sustaining teaching practices that are well informed and anti-biased, and ultimately antiracist.

Buzzwords filling preservice and veteran teachers' professional developments are not enough to give value and meaning to what it means to sustain culture within the classroom climate (Paris, 2012). Great teachers create climates that foster and respect all people in an effort to create social and academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Cultural pluralism functions with the ideals that marginalized groups conform with the dominant group yet maintain separate cultural identity, which creates continuous turmoil with policy and politics (Paris, 2012) devaluing culture as holistic (Mayo, 2014). This monoculture approach to education is evident in the curriculum, and more so in testing policy, especially in high stakes situations (Halley & Eshleman, 2017; Mayo, 2014) when tests are made to undermine teachers' autonomy (Love, 2019). Critically examining standards, texts, and school resources allows teachers the ability to debunk binary, normative practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995) through queering (Mayo, 2014) the curriculum. When teachers are taught to be perceptive of culture, ethnicities, racial identification, gender, and sexuality, they are able to acknowledge the ideologies that are predominant, and therefore they are more likely to create a successful atmosphere for all students to learn and feel visible (Halley & Eshleman, 2017). Inclusion of our LGBTQ+ culture within a multicultural education is imperative.

Statement of the Problem

LGBTQ+ youth are one of the most underrepresented marginalized populations within a school's curriculum. Approximately 10.5% of all students identify as LGBTQ+ and 5% declare they are unsure of their sexual identity (Kann et al., 2018; Trevor Project, 2020), yet are included in less than one percent of classroom literacies, and those literacies are typically cast through victimization and stereotypes (Harrington, 2017). Since little to no LGBTQ+ literature exists in

schools, and teachers tend to avoid choosing queer-themed literature, LGBTQ+ students continue to feel invisible, unsafe, and left without a voice to project an authentic identity (Batchelor, et al., 2018). This is in part, because institutional constraints play a major role in educators feeling comfortable and confident teaching literature that includes gay and lesbian couples and topics (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007). The obligation to uphold social justice insurgence is tended to the local and state governments, however, these same policies and politicians support the censorship of books (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007). For example, in 2004 Oklahoma's House members threatened to withdraw funding for libraries unless they removed homosexual books from YA bookshelves (Robinson, 2005). Again, this is an example of silencing identities.

Racism and sexism are prevalent curriculum conversations in undergraduate education classes, but homophobia and heterosexism are less likely to be a topic addressed as marginalized groups (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007). Sherwin and Jennings (2006) conducted a study of 77 public teacher education universities in the United States to identify programs that addressed sexual orientation. Sixty percent addressed sexual orientation and encouraged preservice teachers to address their own biases, however, their findings indicated that attention to victimization and at-risk labeling were directly correlated to the conflict with heteronormative ideologies. Their study found:

- 25.6% of inclusive programs covered contemporary gay and lesbian culture
- 15.4% addressed the history of the gay and lesbian movement
- 17.9% called attention to the contributions of gays and lesbians within the content areas
- 38.5% covered the inclusion of gay and lesbian content/topics in public school curriculum (Sherwin & Jennings, 2006)

Teacher preparation programs are not training future teachers to address sexual and gender diversity in the classroom, and therefore teachers are not addressing LGBTQ+ issues in the curriculum (Carpenter et al., 2010; Gorski et al., 2013; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007; Perez-Jorge et al., 2020). Visibility and conversations about and within the LGBTQ+ culture are consistently growing within the broader sense of mass and social media outlets, yet the institutionalized stigma remains silent in higher education and K-12 schools (Mayo, 2009; Page, 2017). Universities and public schools are responsible for teaching tolerance through an authentic, multicultural inclusive curriculum that promotes cooperation and understanding between and among groups of students (Aydin, 2013; Peters-Davis & Shultz, 2006; Sleeter, 2002). However, there is a contradiction between the silencing of LGBTQ+ people and the proposed goals of universities and public schools, which should not be silent, but rather engage students in curriculum inclusive to LGBTQ+ folx, as well as others with marginalized identities. Hermann-Wilmarth (2007) strongly believes that when new teachers have not had the opportunity to examine their biases of sexual orientation the likelihood of those teachers creating safe spaces is not likely. Hermann-Wilmarth also argued that all theory and classroom applications of multiculturalism must include LGBTQ+ topics in order to embrace students in a safe and engaging setting. The lack of current curriculum that fosters authentic identities perpetrates a culturally at-risk population. Invisibility and silence traumatize LGBTQ+ students when they are not visible within the curriculum and feelings of rejection are instilled within the heteronormative workings of the social networks (Page, 2017).

Censorship also plays a vast role in what and how teachers integrate multicultural and critical literacies that include LGBTQ+ youth. Some parents organize large-scale protests resulting in public outcry over the use of gay literature in classrooms. These arguments are

typically based in the off-centered belief that it promotes homosexuality (Garden, 1994), and according to Young (2008), aligning cultural integrity and social justice is daunting in smaller, conservative public schools. Controversy often surrounds educators in their willingness to address this specific culture, and therefore it is regularly ignored (Weiler, 2003), but silencing sends a negative message to students that the lives of LGBTQ+ students are faulty and should not be addressed (Snapp et al., 2015). The problem lies not only with individuals, but also with the lack of literature and resources for teachers to undergo safe teaching. Current research focuses on race, gender (male and female only), and ethnicity within the realm of multicultural instruction (Flores, 2016). More research is needed on “both LGB and non-LGB students’ perceptions of the level of support for and discrimination against LGB youth” (Mudock & Bolch, 2005). Research at national and state levels show the possibilities of utilizing queer-themed resources (Page, 2017), but classrooms and GLSEN (2019) statistics indicate this is not the reality within the classrooms (Page, 2017; Thein, 2013). Textbook companies give little, if any, attention to the LGBTQ+ culture and teacher prep institutions place LGBTQ+ topics outside the realm of multicultural education indicating that gay and lesbian students have been ignored when selecting curriculum materials and activities, which leaves them to feel invisible and undervalued (Mathison, 1998). The quest for equality in education continues.

Purpose of the Study

Not enough research exists on the implications of excluding LGBTQ+ students from discussions of equity and inclusion in reference to culture, self, and personal voice. The body of information for *what* to teach is increasing, but how a teacher safely gets to what to teach is overshadowed by two factors: 1) why teachers need to create safe places for LGBTQ+ students and 2) what teachers, particularly in language arts classrooms, should teach (Batchelor et al.,

2017; Page, 2016). Gender and sexual identities do belong in schools and in classrooms to fully encompass the identities of all students within a multicultural education. Before a teacher can decide how to teach in ways that are affirming and inclusive to LGBTQ+ students, a safe place must be established for students who identify as LGBTQ+. Next, teachers should consider what content is important to ensure inclusion for all students, and, finally, a teacher's confidence in teaching in ways that are culturally sustaining to LGBTQ+ students is established. The stigmas that sexually marginalized students feel contribute to the negative connotations they attribute to school, and it is not enough to promote anti-bullying policies in order to promote safe, positive school environments for LGBTQ+ students (Martin-Storey et al., 2015; Page, 2017). Creating spaces and places of unbiased, equal, and inclusive learning for all students is the responsibility of every teacher in every school. One of the first steps to encourage acceptance is by building conversations around solutions that foster empathy and compassion for students and staff to gain an understanding of gender and sexual diversity (Wood et al., 2019).

This study will contribute to the conversation about how to include the needs of LGBTQ+ students within culturally responsive and sustaining teaching. It will broaden the field of research and open doors for teachers to pursue and maintain inclusive teaching practices for all students. Readers of this study can resonate with my experiences in the field of education working with LGBTQ+ students. In order to gain a better understanding of how my teaching practices foster or hinder a student's personal identity I wrote, analyzed, and interpreted narrative accounts of my teaching practices, my teaching philosophy, specific experiences with students who identify as LGBTQ+, and personal vignettes of my own adolescence that produced an insightful autoethnography. Through analysis of the reflective narratives, this study explored the following research questions:

1. In what ways do my reflections mirror heteronormative systems and practices?
2. In what ways have I recognized the individual stories of identity that my students bring with them?
3. Which culturally relevant teaching practices seem to provide the most support for my LGBTQ+ students?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Queer Theory

Queer theory informs my theoretical position to conceptualize my personal identity as a classroom teacher, and better understand and facilitate learning for LGBTQ+ students. Whether identity is defined through an individual or classified as relations between groups of individuals, the goal is to explain and understand behaviors (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). The roles or identities we assume for ourselves are dependent on the interactions with others. Burk and Tully (1977) studied the role of gender identity, and found that children who had gender role identities that did not conform to traditional gender roles (male/female) had lower self-esteem and acknowledged the criticism as inappropriate behaviors. Queer theorists aim to disrupt binaries in order to unsettle normal in attempt to create equality (Mayo, 2009, 2013; Miller, 2018). Foucault (1976) introduced the notion that sexuality was constructed to provide power. Butler (1990) built on Foucault's theory, and expanded past sexuality and linked gender to an identity that is not binary. She challenged the science of gender appropriation and attributed the binary modes as forming through the laws of power, as Foucault asserted. Continuing the plight of disrupting gender and sexuality norms, Jogose (1996) expanded de Lauretis' (1991) theory of queerness about rethinking our definitions and ideas about gender and sexuality. Jogose

constructed an overarching theory that queer is not attached to being gay or lesbian, yet is an identity that remains fluid, and again, not fixed to binary titles. Mayo, (2014) encourages school policies to adopt genderqueer philosophies. Once schools become a safe place for all students to identify we remove victimization from sexual and gender minority students (Mayo, 2014, p. 4-5). Within my search for my own identity, I align myself with Mayo (2014) in attempts to formulate a critical discourse that rids the heteronormative ideology as a dominant social formation.

Conceptual Framework: CSP through Critical Literacy

Addressing diverse cultural backgrounds through pedagogy acknowledges the link to cultural integration and learning. Culturally relevant teaching acknowledges student diversity within the classroom, responsive teaching builds lessons and learning that incorporates cultural diversity, and sustaining pedagogy supports diverse, cultural learning through justice and change. Gee (2017) suggested that schools are guilty of creating an atmosphere that encourages students to get an education to do something in order to earn money in an effort to be successful. Instead, he suggested we look at how the world works, and aim to create students who become someone through identities that are appreciated and chosen. Our global world is complex and requires exposure to a variety of interests and activities to ensure successful navigation of the world (p. 86). Gee, similar to Foucault (1978) and Butler (1990), attested that identities are nothing more than labels that are systemically inherited through the history of institutions and social groups. Gee (2017) acknowledged, “these classifications come to define how we treat people in the category though, in reality, the people in the category are quite diverse and, thus, one size never fits all here” (p. 89).

Culturally sustaining pedagogy puts the onus of cultural diversity on the school and classroom teacher, whereas relevance and responsiveness merely places meaning within different cultures (Paris, 2012). The dynamic shifts of culture require educators to support and sustain cultural identities that mirror social and cultural identities; otherwise, some students are forced to relinquish their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Miller, 2018). Young adult authors have made great headway in fostering the fluid identity of today's youth (Durand & Jiménez-García, 2018), and opportunities to teach LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are frequent in classrooms yet appear to be regularly missed in English classes (Snapp et al., 2015). Mastering pedagogical shifts of cultural sustainability with critical literacy offers LGBTQ+ students spaces for literacy work that “can contribute to creating a more critically informed and just world” (Vasquez, 2017).

Significance

This research acknowledges the need for more extensive interventions in the field of culturally responsive practices within middle school language arts classrooms in order to hold teachers responsible for practices that are responsive to all cultures, specifically LGBTQ+ students. Through self-reflection, honest dialogue, and personal failures and triumphs, this research will allow teachers to conceptualize possible perceptions of students when working with the LGBTQ+ student population. Future research must contain aspects of teacher preparedness in colleges and universities, especially those classes that hold focus on multicultural awareness and cultural proficiency to include the LGBTQ+ culture. It is also worth hoping that future research has a place for government policies that protect gay literature from being censored and banned from public schools and libraries.

Definition of Terms

LGBTQ+, Queer, Questioning, Gender, Sex(uality), Identity, Heteronormative, Autoethnography

- LGBTQ+: (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, +) I chose this acronym to represent the culture of marginalized gender and sexual identities to ensure inclusion of all students. The + (plus) represents those who do not claim a specific gender or sexual identity, students who may identify as pansexual, asexual, cisgender, intersexual, or an ally of the culture. In attempts to be transparent and equitable, I self-identify as a cisgender female who is an ally with the LGBTQ+ culture. The acronym is as fluid as its meaning and only through conversations with my students have I chosen this particular acronym for my study.
- The Queer Q: Queer is also a fluid word. The LGBTQ+ community reclaimed the word *queer* from homophobic ideologies to blur the lines of normal. It is a call to critically examine gender and sexuality.
- The Questioning Q: The questioning Q represents the process of figuring out one's sexuality.
- Gender: Gender is often confused with one of two sexes, male or female. However, gender is defined here as personal identification, and it is not used in biological terms.
- Sex: Sex is defined as the biological genitalia one is born with.
- Sexuality: Defined as the sexual preference of an individual, and does not necessarily fall within heteronormative or binary roles.
- Identity: This is not a singular term, and should be interpreted as the multiple aspects of a person throughout this study.
- Heteronormative: Denoting or relating to a worldview that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation.

- Autoethnography: This is the method of qualitative research I chose for this study to analyze and understand my personal identity through the cultural experiences with LGBTQ+ students.
- Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: Teaching that creates change and promotes justice through culturally diverse, dynamic curriculum and management choices allowing a student's cultural identity to be part of their learning.

Summary

In order to create a safe learning environment for all students, the LGBTQ+ student population cannot be polarized, ignored, or victimized with the abuse of teacher or school power. Academic achievement for LGBTQ+ students is not occurring at the rate of their non-LGBTQ+ peers as found in GLSEN's 2019 survey that found half of all LGBTQ+ students did not plan on pursuing post-secondary education and attributed it to their negative school climate. In order to eliminate binary power structures, defining "normal" cannot be a privilege left in the hands of heteronormative practices (Halley & Eshleman, 2017).

Voicing concerns about the lack of gender and sexual diversity within the curriculum for preservice teachers will foster better access for education for LGBTQ+ students (Mayo, 2014). Simple pedagogical acknowledgement and shifts within personal bias will offer a space for all students, specifically LGBTQ+ students, to grow, succeed, and form personal identities that are authentic. As a literacy teacher, I am able to use literature to show a broader view of history through the lens of queer history and politics. Using queer texts in a safe environment gives students the opportunity to reassess their own bias and perceptions (Malo-Juvera, 2018), and offers LGBTQ+ students a mirror text to relate to, and queering heteronormative texts offers insight into the power of binary and heterosexual norms prevalent in our society.

Overall, this autoethnography is a self-examination of what it means to hold several identities and how power relates to the success of my students. It examines the simple choices of how to group and identify students, to the more complex aspects of how and what literature to choose. My hope is to open critical discourse in relation to identity to create spaces that encourage diversity and discourage binary, heteronormative practices.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter examines the literature influencing the transformation that has shaped my personal identity as a teacher and a person, as well as my approach to teaching middle school language arts with a specific lens toward LGBTQ+ youth. The purpose of this study was to create a more comprehensive understanding of my personal growth as an educator for LGBTQ+ students. As an autoethnographic examination of my personal experiences that encompasses the identities and injustices of LGBTQ+ students, this chapter will begin by reviewing the literature that explains the culture of LGBTQ+ youth. Next, I illustrate the literature that supports the queer theory lens in which this study was grounded. The sections following will focus on the themes that emerged throughout the study. Specifically, I will examine the literature within culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogy, critical literacy, and social justice. Lastly, I will review the literature for creating safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students, and teacher preparedness for utilizing a culturally sustaining classroom environment. Understanding the LGBTQ+ youth culture in language arts curriculum through a pedagogy that sustains diverse cultures and the impact of safety on student learning outcomes informed my study and supported the purpose of the qualitative study relating to my narrative autoethnography.

LGBTQ+ Youth

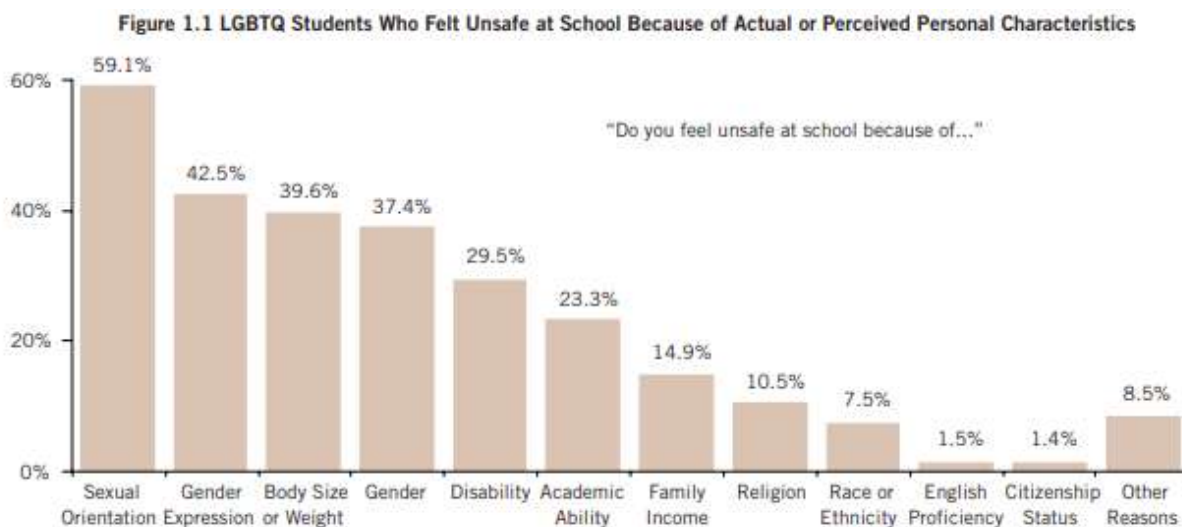
This section reviews the literature related to critical insights around LGBTQ+ youth's mental health disparities and discrimination. Approximately 3.8% of all middle school students report to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual, 1.3% report to be transgender, and 12.1% report to be "not sure" about their sexual orientation (CDC, 2017; GLSEN, 2017, 2019; Shields et al., 2013; Trevor Project, 2020). Between four and six percent of the entire U.S. population identify as homosexual or bisexual (Cianciotto et al., 2012). Similarly, The Trevor Project's research team

(2020) produced empirical data through a quantitative cross-sectional data collection using an online survey available between December 2, 2019 and March 31, 2020. Their total sample comprised 40,000 United States participants ages 13-24 with 36% representing 13-16 year olds. Sixty-eight percent of participants identified their sexuality as lesbian, gay or bisexual, 17% as pansexual, 10% as queer, 3% were unsure, and 2% straight. Eighty percent identified their gender as girl/woman or boy/man, while 20% identified as questioning, genderfluid, nonbinary, or gender non-conforming.

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported 59.1% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, 42.5% because of gender expression, and 37.4% because of gender (2019). The study also found 59.1% of LGBTQ students reported discriminating practices and policies at school. Furthermore, the study found a flat-line in curriculum that taught positive LGBTQ related content from the 2017 study. The majority of LGBTQ+ students reported some sort of harassment, and the percentage is slowly decreasing, yet the effectiveness of teacher/administration support when incidents are reported has not improved since 2012. Of the 40,000 LGBTQ+ students responding to The Trevor Project's 2020 survey 40% reported contemplating suicide in the past 12 months. LGBTQ+ students who report physical harm in school and are ignored by teachers and administration compounds anxiety in school and may lead to a suicide attempt. The Trevor Project, as seen in Figure 1, found a correlation between those students who had been impacted by physical harm versus those who had not in relation to suicide attempts.

Figure 1

Discrimination and Physical Harm



LGBTQ+ youths who have been victimized, harassed, and marginalized are often given the “at-risk” deficit label (Talbert, 2004) because of high rates of death by suicide and attempted suicide; they also lack curriculum models that offer positive outcomes apart from the stigma of being LGBTQ+ (GLSEN, 2017, 2019). The Trevor Project (2020) found 47% of 13-18 year-olds reported contemplating suicide, which is in direct alignment with the CDC’s YRBS 2017 results of 48%. Research conducted on LGBTQ+ youth indicates that these youth present a high degree of isolation and suffering, which in turn creates the dominant image of heteronormativity presented for this culture (Talbert, 2004). Manifesting from the “at-risk” label, LGBTQ+ youth vocalize feeling unsafe and mistreated in school, which interferes with their ability to attend classes regularly, stay focused and engaged, and make friends (Biegel, 2010; GLSEN, 2017, 2019; Harter, 2008; Mayo, 2004, 2014). Victimization is also evident in the climate study conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) that found, “LGBTQ students in middle school had more hostile school experiences than LGBTQ students in high school. This included experiencing higher rates of biased language, victimization, and anti-

LGBTQ discriminatory school policies and practices” (p.28) leaving 79.6% of LGBTQ+ students not feeling safe in school (GLSEN, 2019). Eighty-six percent of youth attested that politics and policy affect their well-being, specifically in terms of access to health care, and includes 61% of transgender youth being prevented or denied access to a bathroom that corresponded to their gender identity (Trevor Project, 2020). Even with safe school programs within our public schools, the safety and education of LGBTQ+ students is rarely addressed in teachers’ professional development training (Weiler, 2003). Respondents in GLSEN’s 2017 and 2019 surveys reported they were not comfortable telling school staff about harassment citing they were embarrassed or ashamed, they were fearful of being blamed, that the staff was homo/transphobic. Additionally, 8.9% (2017) of respondents said staff was part of their harassment, and 48.3% (2019) stated they did not report harassment because they did not see the harassment as “serious enough to report” (p. 64). Young people are susceptible to adult perceptions, and therefore LGBTQ+ youth may see their identities as at-risk (Talbert, 2004). A deficit definition stigmatizing LGBTQ+ youth may conclude that suicide is the consequence of being LGBTQ+ (Talbert, 2004).

Adolescents, in general, are searching for their identities by pushing against adult values (Elze, 2003; Illingworth & Murphy, 2004; Savin-Williams, 2001; Weiler, 2003), and LGBTQ+ youth are beginning to challenge the heteronormative systems of school (Meyer et al., 2009).

The positive creation of stable, whole identities that are attached to specific commitments and roles constructs LGBT youth as having specific needs (and destinations) as they pass through the dangerous middle of adolescence (Talbert, 2004. p. 119).

Heteronormativity, defined as a hierarchy that privileges systems and individuals based on the binaries of gender and sexuality (Jackson, 2006; Oswald et al., 2005), attempts to label and preserve “normal” actions and attitudes of gender and sexuality (Toomey et al., 2012). To redefine normal, Foucault (1978) maintained the idea that sexuality was constructed, and normative behaviors are enforced by dominant societal powers that should be scrutinized. The normative practices within a school reveal how sexuality and identities are viewed and accepted (Dinkins, et al., 2015; Halley et al., 2017; Snapp et al., 2015), such as proms and sports that denote labels of boys and girls being eligible for certain roles. As heteronormative tendencies continue institutionally, it is important to note that victimizing the LGBTQ+ culture is not adequate in promoting anti-homophobic discourse (Kearns et al., 2014), however, schools have the power to extend or deny privilege (Halley et al., 2017).

Meeting the Needs of LGBTQ Youth: A “Relational Assets” Approach (Sadowski et al., 2009) is a case study that tracked three LGBTQ+ youth’s experiences growing up and coming out. The study was situated around the “Relational Assets” framework that intentionally motivates alliances and community-based support groups in school to offer opportunities for “authentic, affirming relationships with peers and adults” (p. 174). The case study utilized several narrative excerpts from the participants where they revisited the bullying and harassment they faced in middle school, as well as the adults that offered solace. Using relational connection and disconnection as the basis of the researcher’s theory, they paid close attention to the negative effect of cultural power inequities that influence today’s youth into “acting straight” (p. 178). This research article is part of a larger study of 30 participants completing questionnaires, 20 of whom participated in open-ended, in-depth interviews focusing on their relationships with school, family, peers, and self, and three who were chosen as the voices for this particular study

because they best illuminated the key themes they found throughout. Their findings indicated that supportive relationships that affirmed and supported their authentic identities created self-worth, resilience, and strength; when relational assets were disconnected or violated, participants felt defeated, isolated, and rejected. One participant found strong relationships with school personnel that fostered her ability to be authentic at school by being able to write about LGBTQ+ issues in English class and belong to clubs that typically follow heteronormative rules of acceptance (p. 192). On the other hand, another participant felt invisible at school as LGBTQ+ issues were “swept under the rug” (p. 192) and fully left out of curriculum. Through the First Amendment, which protects freedom of religion, expression, assembly, and petition, and the Fourteenth Amendment, which ensures all citizens equal protection of the laws, all people have the right to express an identity and a right to be treated equally because of expressing this identity (Biegel, 2010).

In 1973, the Gay Students Organization (GSO) at the University of New Hampshire had privileges suspended after media attention, political pressure, and criticism due to a scheduled dance, which led to a lawsuit alleging violations under both the First and the Fourteenth Amendments. Ruling unanimously in favor of the students, indicating their free right to communicate and organize gave strength to GSOs across the country (Biegel, 2010). The Education Amendment of 1972, Title IX, protects students in schools that received federal funds from sexual and gender discrimination (Mayo, 2014), yet does not always lead to compliance as seen in the 1996 case of *Nabozny v. Podlesny*. Nabozny was awarded \$900,000 because he was violently assaulted for being gay at school in Ashland, Wisconsin, sustaining serious injury. The school system was also directly reprimanded for ignoring and excusing the behaviors of the offenders. Since 1996, LGBTQ+ students who have been victimized in this manner have won

consistent victories in court and have achieved landmark settlements and cases continue to decrease (Biegel, 2010). Working through stigmas, finding authentic identities, and focusing on the civil rights of a human in the United States, the LGBTQ+ community continues to build a culture to ensure that local, state, and federal laws protect their rights. However, even today, well into the 21st century, sexual minorities are still harassed at school and admonished for their overtness in being authentic (Mayo, 2004).

Sexual and gender minority youth and their allies are often more aware of their own identities due to negotiating where and when they can be their authentic selves. LGBTQ+ youth read policy, understand community and school beliefs, and are able to adapt, conform, or resist accordingly often disrupting binary categories (Mayo, 2017). Mayo has encountered IRB pushback when using LGBTQ+ students as being “higher than normal risk” even when the students were of college age and grounded in their own identities (2017). Mayo found that “LGBTQ youth do not consent to the biased structures in which they find themselves” (p. 533). Heteronormative policies excuse harassment and violates non-conforming youth’s rights (Jackson, 2006; Oswald et al., 2005). A school’s anti-bullying policy, specifically for LGBTQ+ students, that is well publicized, that increases inclusion and feelings of safety within the school environment (Hansen, 2007), and encourages positive identity formation through access to supportive peers and staff members will create a community of knowledge and acceptance (Ryan & Futterman, 1998).

Queer Theory

Queer theory works against heteronormative approaches to reach an understanding of gender and sexuality (Jagose, 1996). Grounded in Foucaultian ideology, queer theory aims to disband normal as a binary term. By acknowledging diversity, the term “queer” unhinges binary

thinking and repositions identity as an individual construct (Halley & Eshleman, 2017). Cris Mayo (2014) merged queer theory with identity because a person's identity is not singular. Identity is a multifaceted web of diversity, and personal to the person who defines it. The plight of formulating one's identity through "gay" and "lesbian" ultimately continues a binary narrative through limitations of categories (Jagose, 1996), but with a queer lens people are not labeled and categorized (Mayo, 2014), and instead, identity is claimed and personalized.

A recent study by Lo (2019) examined reflective practices that increased heteronormative awareness in student-teacher and student-student interactions using three theoretical lenses: 1) queer, 2) feminist, and 3) intersectional. Under the queer theory, Lo identified moments when gender/sex guided or disrupted routine interactions and explored how heteronormativity informed and shaped classroom organization and discourse. Queer theory allowed Lo to identify moments when gender/sexuality were used to guide interactions. Using the tripartite of theoretical lenses, Lo found visible hegemonic structures guiding reading and interactions among teachers and students and students and other students. She acknowledged that current political moves in policy under Title IX have hindered equitable access and understanding of LGBTQ+ people. Mayo urged learning spaces to be inclusive to a diverse population of identities in order for all students to build on their understandings of varying perspectives similar and separate from their own. Through queering interactions, I propose a system of change within my classroom for all students to gain knowledge that enhances their personal and future professional lives in a way that supports perspectives for differential growth and acceptance of others and themselves.

Similar to Lo's study, Jimenez (2009) explored the opportunities for students and teachers to queer the curriculum. She reviewed four vignettes that altered the traditional curriculum in order to recognize the "power of queer intervention of heterosexist discourses of

schooling” (p. 173). She offered recommendations of using respected literature, such as Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* to engage in queer discussion instead of omitting queer lives, but she warned that the facilitator must have a strong understanding of queer lives in order to promote queer discourse. The teacher who promotes queer education and knowledge must have empathy under Jimenez’s notion of care. Morally, she suggested that the omission of LGBTQ+ curriculum and standards are “institutional failures” (p. 175). The conversations, beliefs, and programs that continue to confuse queer pedagogy with talking about sex continue to corrupt teacher prep programs, professional development, national and state standards, and curriculum materials. Queer theory, within education, is pedagogy that promotes inclusion of all students and promotion of discourse for the empowerment of diverse identities.

I used queer theory as both a pedagogical tool and a way to view my teaching reflections. I evaluated my teaching to identify times of heteronormative actions and curriculum, opportunities for debunking binary perspectives, and reflections of experiences using queer themes and literature.

Literacy Curriculum

The breadth and depth of literature available for adolescent readers is expansive, and often mandated by state, local, or school based decisions. Therefore, to be inclusive of all students, to offer the “windows and mirrors” (Bishop, 1990) there must be a platform for English teachers to address the lives of all students (Boyd et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2016). Pulling from Crenshaw’s work on intersectionality GLSEN stated:

Students who attend schools with curriculum that is inclusive of LGBTQ people, history, and events experience a better school climate and improved academic outcomes. Curriculum serves as a mirror when it reflects individuals and their experiences back to

themselves. At the same time, curriculum serves as a window when it introduces and provides the opportunity to understand the experiences and perspectives of those who possess different identities. An inclusive curriculum should be balanced and include diverse windows and mirrors for every student. (GLSEN, 2017)

Classroom texts read in class in the United States are becoming more diverse in multicultural literacies; race, ethnicity, and ancestral origin are consistently increasing. However, approximately 4-6% of all students identify as LGBTQ+ but are included in less than one percent of classroom literacies (Hermann-Wilmarth et al., 2015). The economic reproduction of textbook companies and curriculum curators continue to push one-sided, dominant, binary ideas, stories, and knowledge that erode the non-dominant culture. There is a hidden curriculum shedding implicit messages in order to infuse the socially constructed standards of “proper” behavior and imposing a definitive interpretation of the knowledge that exists (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1998, p. 242). The standards of education that dictate “formal (appropriate) and informal (inappropriate)” ways of teaching and learning most often disregard the discourses of the marginalized populations, leaving marginalized histories as inferior in the constraints of pedagogy, language, and culture (Saeedi & Richardson, 2020, p. 148).

Dominant perspectives of heteronormative ideologies prevail within the textbooks and literature presented to our students, therefore discussions of same-sex couples and transgendered people are left to the media. Heteronormativity is prevalent in school systems, and the production of curriculum materials, teacher pedagogy, and school culture that align with gender binaries places heteronormative ideas as normal (Dinkins & Englert, 2015). Working to challenge heteronormative environments in middle school, Dinkins and Englert (2015) produced a case study that examined the safety, support, and learning for LGBTQ+ students when engaging with

a novel with a gay protagonist. They addressed questions regarding the relationships of the teachers and students when studying a text with a gay character. Data was collected organically through 28 hours of classroom observations to create an accurate portrayal of how students and teachers interacted with the text. Three themes emerged from their study: 1) school environment and classroom context positioned students as heterosexual, 2) non-heteronormative identities were classified as *other*, and 3) the text was intended to window and mirror for the students and teachers, however, different and contradictory views emerged. The teacher often down-played the gay character and ignored opportunities for identity work, often reminding students to find the mirror images in the novel, and limiting window perspectives as a literary lesson on point of view. To exasperate the classroom culture, the teacher did not address hate speech used in the classroom. The willingness of this teacher to use a gay-themed novel shows a level of acceptance, but the inability to infuse a space for students to bring their understanding through discussion shows a lack of understanding and a disregard for the identities of all students. An increasing number of gay-themed books being published and the heightened volume of LGBTQ+ voices being heard emphasizes the need to include LGBTQ+ curriculum as beneficial to all teachers and all students (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015). In order to show inclusion, diversity, and equity, however, it must be supported with the teachers' abilities to disrupt binary heteronormative ideals.

The first book published to have a gay theme was *I'll Get There: It Better Be Worth the Trip* by John Donovan in 1969 and it was groundbreaking, but it was nearly a decade later before three more gay-themed YA novels broke the silence. However, these novels depicted being gay as a risk and correlated to an unsafe family life. Cuseo (1992) and Jenkins (1993) completed two major studies that analyzed YA gay/lesbian novels between 1969 and 1984. Jenkins (1993)

performed a content analysis on 31 YA novels and traced content changes over time with a focus on gender, relationships, and individual identities. Cuseo (1992) focused on the literary quality and the portrayal of characters in 69 LGBTQ+ YA titles. Both studies found that the gay characters were made of stereotypes, and none of them had happy conclusions or positive influences on themselves or others. Jenkins continued her study through 1998 including nearly 100 YA novels. She found an increase in race and ethnicity in gay characters, but very little change in the victimization of LGBTQ+ characters. The literature presented characters facing estrangement caused by the coming out process, and rarely offered insight into the character's life after coming out. She also found the stereotype continued, identifying that only gay characters were presented; there were no books with bisexual, transgendered, or other sexually or gendered identities. Overall, these YA books fell under a flawed stereotype or a coming out story that estranged the character from their families and fell against mainstream social constructs, or presented as a sympathetic secondary character (St. Clair, 1995).

In 1973, the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality as a mental illness, however, YA novels continued to negatively portray gay characters. Nancy Garden's novel, *Annie on My Mind* (1982), was possibly the first YA novel to depict a lesbian couple in a slightly positive light, however it was not without hardships and contrast with mainstream society. Not until the early 2000s did the publishing market give way to a massive uptick in queer literature, and in doing so brought hopeful stories that disavowed victimization and coming out stories as the only plot lines. *Luna* (2004) written by Julie Anne Peters was the first Trans YA novel, however, it, too, tiptoed into the topic placing the narrator as the cisgender sibling telling the story of her Trans sister. Today, publishers are more apt to accept books that include all the letters of the LGBTQ+ community because of the presence and persistence of identity

proud teens. The complexity of anyone's identity is increasingly seductive to readers and publishers alike, and authors are now able to include the multifaceted teen life as sellable attributes. It is important to note that even with 60+ queer-themed YA novels published each year, they still lack diversity; most are still White lesbian or gay characters. It is also worth noting that most YA books that leave the traditional lesbian or gay realm are typically set in fantasy or utopian worlds and often set outside of the United States.

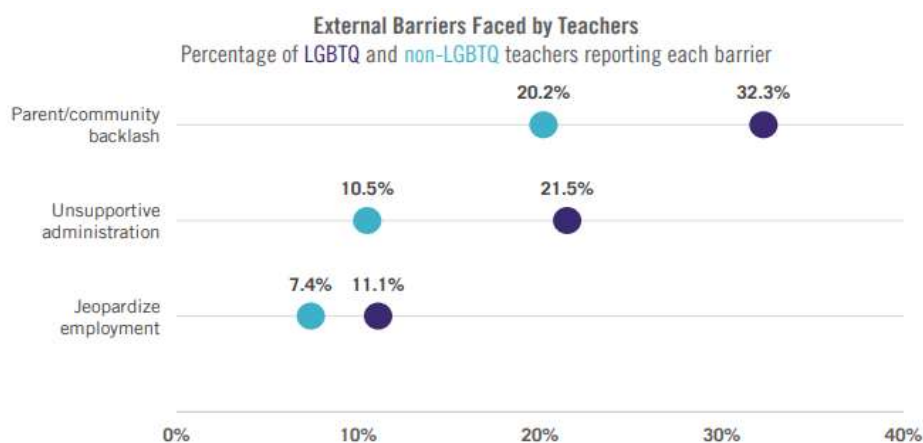
LGBTQ+ youth must have opportunities for self-affirmation in a safe environment in order to develop positive self-images and become healthy adults (Kosciw et al., 2014). Vaccaro, et al. (2012) advocated for queer literature that promotes healthy lifestyles with positive outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth so that students see a reflection of inclusiveness instead of invisibility. They asserted that if LGBTQ+ literature does not exist in schools or is only presented through stereotypes or victimhood, then LGBTQ+ students continue to feel invisible and unsafe. Harrington (2017) discussed the new textbook adoption in California that includes contributions of people who were/are LGBTQ+ to the development of the state and country. The state adopted the textbook because of the FAIR Education Act proposed by the then state senator Mark Leno who was one of the first two openly gay men elected to the state Assembly in 2002. He noted that the LGBTQ+ people and those with disabilities were left out of history textbooks. Unfortunately, each school district was granted autonomy in whether or not to adopt the textbooks for their schools, and they responded primarily to the religious groups who adamantly objected to such an adoption.

Textbook companies hold a key to inclusion, yet Houghton Mifflin Harcourt excluded LGBTQ+ contributions, justifying their decision by stating that, "none of these figures self-identified using the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgenders" (Harrington, 2017), but they

would add biographical information in the teacher’s guide. I find it important to note that the comments under this public article were a hard “no” to the inclusion of identifying sexual orientation of historical figures. Statements such as, “Let’s keep gay sex out of the classroom,” and “Children should not be taught this stuff because it does not matter” continue to marginalize LGBTQ+ students and demoralize their place in the classroom and society. Figure 2 represents teachers reporting in GLSEN’s 2017 survey that acknowledge barriers to inclusion of LGBTQ+ curriculum.

Figure 2

External Barriers Faced by Teachers



Systems, schools, and teachers should be aware of the rights of LGBTQ+ students and staff in order to build and support inclusive curriculum and environments to ensure safety and affirmation (GLSEN, 2017, 2019).

Casement (2002) noted the underrepresentation gay and lesbian literature in our schools marginalizes an entire community. Continued censorship from parents, principals, teachers, and districts play a large role in the lack of literature available in our schools, while heteronormative, binary cultural standards continue to reside as the dominate discourse in our country’s schools. Proponents of keeping censorship out of schools, including research and literature about

ensorship, leaves out the topic of LGBTQ+ literature (Casement, 2002). Students need models by which to navigate their lives. By opening up lines of communication and exploring multicultural, critical literature, all students and teachers are better equipped to be sympathetic, empathetic, and understanding of all people.

Even when language arts teachers acknowledge the need for LGBTQ+ issues to be addressed in school they are often unwilling to incorporate topics into their lessons, citing they are not qualified and it is not part of their job (Thein, 2013). In Thein's 2013 study of teachers' resistance to teaching LGBTQ+ literature, one teacher said, "such an acknowledgment would do more harm than good by distracting students from exploring literary merits in texts" (p. 175). However, Gabriel Flores focuses on the words *love*, *acceptance*, and *respect* when implementing LGBTQ-themed literature. When students questioned homosexuality as "wrong" according to their religious beliefs, Flores resorted back to the topics that encompassed the themes of *love*, *acceptance*, and *respect*. Teachers who intentionally immerse students in an expansive study of multicultural and critical literacy are actively working toward an environment free of discrimination that is open to all discourses.

Context is an important component to consider when fusing LGBTQ+-themed literature into the curriculum yet can be seamless in a literacy classroom by pairing texts, offering perspectives, infusing historical context, and inferring meaning (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015). Sanchez (2005) urged adolescents and adults to queer gay-straight themed books to debunk stereotypes and offer acceptance to the youth who may be struggling with their own identity. Books that address sexuality will in fact save lives (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015; Sanchez, 2005). However, finding opportunities to use LGBTQ+ literature in literacy classrooms can contribute to unsafe environments if not presented in a safe manner by a teacher who has the

ability and knowledge to do so (Vetter, 2010). Derman-Sparks (1993) prompted teachers to be *reflective practitioners* who critically examine their practices within the classroom to meet the needs of all students “to create a caring culture in which children can be empowered” (p. 69).

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy with Critical Literacy

It is the school’s responsibility to nurture students’ desire to understand the world in accordance with their whole-selves (Sleeter, 1996). One goal of a school’s positive culture is to build relationships with the families and communities in which students live, in order to provide culturally responsive teaching that recognizes all learners (Gay, 2000; Love, 2019). Culturally relevant teaching (CRT) attends to student achievement by affirming cultural identity and by helping students identify and navigate systems that marginalize them (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Through CRT, teachers are able to interact with students using communication that is matched and meaningful for their students (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Gay’s (2000) pedagogy of culturally responsive teaching moves past affirmation and requires teacher knowledge of students’ cultures in order to infuse it into daily discourse that is effective for all students. Through intentional curriculum and teaching moves, cultural responsiveness is established when teachers are able to infuse in-school and out-of-school learning. The evolution of Gay’s CRT moved from curriculum to pedagogy. By teaching students through their personal cultural lens, the outcome is increased academic performance and sense of belonging (Gay, 2000; 2014). One goal of Gay’s (2013) CRT is to understand the term culture to mean varying perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes of others. She further asserted that just as teachers differentiate instruction for their students academically, they should also provide the same opportunities for differing cultures through intentional curriculum, projects, and teaching style that highlighted the capabilities of all students (2013). Ladson-Billings (2011)

reveres culturally responsive teachers as the teachers who have their eyes open to the possibilities within each child and offers *informed empathy* instead of the heroic figure that creates excuses for students because of their positionality. Teachers who are adept in cultural competence help students realize and privilege their own culture and they assist them with gaining access to the wider culture (Ladson-Billings, 2011). Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (1995) found that teachers give power to their students only when the student feels visible and that they hold a place in the class for their authentic voice. It is not enough for teachers to transport content; teachers must have an intuitive characteristic based in the pedagogy of justice (Freire, 1970).

Paris's (2012) culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) is hopefully optimistic, however, this promises that teachers not only see, they understand ethnic and cultural differences (Ladson-Billings, 2009) and they help young people explore, understand, and address educational and social inequalities (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2018; Paris et al., 2017). Teachers who are trained in social justice learn to find meaning in topics that may not have a direct correlation to their own identity (Kearns et al., 2014), and in order to reach all students, teachers must understand their agency within the classroom. Culturally relevant teachers working with CSP understand that students do not need to perform well on standardized tests to show great growth in learning. They actively engage learners in the *why* behind their learning and implore them to continuously ask questions that allow them to make sense of their own learning. Not only are culturally relevant teachers experts in teaching to individual cultures, they cultivate learning of other cultures, especially those who are part of the dominant culture (Paris & Alim, 2017). Learning becomes meaningful when students are able to apply it to their lives, therefore teachers who strive to obtain culturally sustaining pedagogies must consistently stay abreast of

current youth culture. On top of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality holds the unique identity within the culture of youth and this culture often changes as fast as a teenager's mood. Paris and Alim (2017) do not stop with cultural pedagogy, they promote a socially just CSP (SJCSP) that indicate three key tenets: 1) encouraging youth to be active agents in the political process, 2) encouraging critical discourse around race, and 3) recognizing evolving immigrant youths' identities (p. 197). As an advocate and ally for LGBTQ+ youth, I would include discussions around gender and sexuality and the identities of the LGBTQ+ youth culture as well.

An English teacher has the power to enact radical social change by offering access to discourse practices through speech and writing (Gee, 1989; Kumaravadivelu, 2012). There is no access to power in this society without control over the discourse practices of the world-view lens. Teachers who want to refuse non-binary pedagogy and offer the privilege of both authentic and dominant discourses must learn to listen and infuse literacy work into their lessons with students as the experts through critical literacy (Miller, 2018). Relating to Freire's banking versus problem-solving method of teaching and learning, teachers should "interrupt the traditional power dynamics that privilege dominant literacy narratives over those that are asking critical questions in a time when critical questions are needed" (Ononuju et al., 2020, p. 43). Critical literacy positions "teaching as mining" (Freire, 1974, p. 76) to allow students to grow within and beyond the cultural models of their home cultures to meet mainstream culture in a way that "makes sense of the world" (Gee, 2015, p. 127). Critical literacy pulls from CSP by bringing social awareness of injustice that pervades all forms of media. By viewing, reading, and interpreting knowledge, students have the opportunity to identify privileged knowledge and therefore construct or deconstruct personal meaning (Coffey, 2008). Critical literacy should not only identify the author's bias, it should give students the opportunity to find their own personal

and cultural voice as valued, respected, and heard (Coffey, 2008; Delpit, 1992; Gee, 2015; Luke, 1988, 2004). As Luke (2011) stated:

Critical literacy has an explicit aim of the critique and transformation of dominant ideologies, cultures and economies, institutions and political systems. As a practical approach to curriculum, it melds social, political and cultural debate and discussion with the analysis of how texts and discourses work, where, with what consequences, and in whose interests. (p. 3)

Giving students the powerful tools of critical literacy through SJCSP affords students privileges in the worlds they participate by promoting liberation, transformation, and care (Behrman, 2006; Luke, 2004; Rhoads, 2012; Thomas, 2020). According to Gee (2015), the real literacy crisis is a crisis of social justice.

Darling-Hammond's longitudinal case study, published as *Empowered Educators* (2017), identified social justice as an axis in creating curriculum in countries outside of the United States. The movement and progress of cultural discourse in education promises outcomes of sustained social change through examination of social, political, and other dominant forms of oppression for marginalized youth (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Love, 2019; Sleeter, 1996). In order to be an equitable ally for all students, teachers must disrupt heteronormative practices (Kearns et al., 2014) and incorporate informed cultural social justice as culturally relevant teachers.

Safe Spaces and Teacher Training

Classroom management directly plays into the community within the classroom, and if cultural beliefs are not consistent with a student's cultural beliefs, then authority and inclusion is devalued (Smith, 1998). Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (1994) believe teachers give power to their students only when the student feels visible and has room in the class for an authentic voice.

Often, setting a classroom atmosphere as safe and welcoming begins with teachers asking students to self-identify through their names instead of calling roll (Peterson et al., 2015). “A culturally responsible pedagogy means that schools, colleges, and departments of education have a moral and ethical responsibility to prepare teachers to be culturally responsive” (Smith, 1998, p. 20). Casement (2002) also brings awareness that all teachers are not free of bias and therefore need specific sensitivity training to overcome these biases. In other words, teachers must respond to individual, diverse students and provide a space for all cultures to flourish within their own learning styles and personal identities. This is often as simple as removing gender-based questions on in-take forms and practicing discourse that disrupts gender norms (Miller, 2018). Ultimately, the experiences a student has in school are dependent upon the values, biases, perceptions, and attitudes of the teachers (Gay, 2000). Through a supportive equity policy and inclusive curriculum, it becomes the teacher’s responsibility to build pedagogy that presents LGBTQ+ youth as a multifaceted culture (Bittner et al., 2016). The quest for equality in education continues. The learning curve for teachers is broad, yet possible, through the teacher’s refusal of binary pedagogy and the ability to learn, listen, and infuse literacy work into their lessons with students as the experts (Miller, 2018).

In order to “transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture” (Banks, 2019, p. 59), teachers must be able to share power by allowing students to impart their own knowledge as part of, not separate from, their learning experience (Delpit, 1988). Opportunities for schools and teachers to foster a sense of belonging is crucial for enabling students to become successful (GLSEN, 2017, 2019). Gay/Straight Alliances (GSAs) are one way to foster the identities of LGBTQ+ students in a school setting. Schools with GSAs have participants with improved academic performance, better relationships with adults and peers, a full sense of identity pride,

and increased feelings of belonging and identification, as well as decreased harassment (Lee, 2001). GSAs offer empowerment to identify with their authentic sexuality and gender (Garcia-Alonso, 2004). Great schools shape their culture for LGBTQ+ student to live in positive behaviors and relationships that ultimately carry over into their lives outside of school (Goodenow et al., 2006). Poor schools exclude discussions of LGBTQ+ youth, do not offer professional development or student programs that foster personal identities, and allow censorship of LGBTQ+ curriculum in order to normalize heteronormative ideals (Kumashiro, 2002).

Teachers are able to create LGBTQ+-inclusive atmospheres that have positive effects on students that increase motivation to learn (GLSEN, 2017, 2019). However, teachers who self-identify as LGBTQ+ were more likely to engage in affirming practices as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Teachers Willing to Affirm and Support LGBTQ+ Teaching Practices



Snapp et al. (2015) recruited 26 diverse students from the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) in California and conducted a study of their perspectives on a LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum. They found varying experiences yet a large degree of missed opportunities for teachers to incorporate lessons or discussions about LGBTQ+ people. Predominantly, social science and humanities classes incorporated LGBTQ+ lessons, but very few of these lessons illuminated the systemic

injustices and oppression experienced by LGBTQ+ people. Students reported that they were aware that many teachers might be willing to include LGBTQ+ curriculum, but were fearful of retribution. Snapp et al. asserted that when teachers “are afraid to include LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum for fear of retribution, it may send a message to students that the lives of LGBTQ people are problematic and should not be addressed” (p. 255). Overall, students were excited when their teacher incorporated LGBTQ+ curriculum, and it is beneficial to all students, not just LGBTQ+ students.

Garcia and Slesaransky-Poe (2010) critically examined the ideologies and practices that teachers utilized in creating safe, inclusive, and welcoming environments. They implored that educators see gender and sexuality as organic and conceptualize the multitude of possibilities of being. The teacher’s bias of conceptual understanding about gender and sexuality influences the classroom culture that indicates what is right and wrong, which presents through rules, expectations, and practices. The underlying belief that teachers should be neutral and apolitical falls in line with what the dominant culture deems appropriate. However, the safety and education of the whole child should take precedence, and misconceptions about gender and sexuality should be deconstructed to foster the identities and well-being of all children and young adults. Urging educators to create spaces for students to have opportunities for self-expression, a place to take risks, and to find solace in all the ways of being, Garcia and Slesaransky-Poe (2010) argued for a deep interrogation of our own culture and our system’s culture in order to identify and dismantle cultural biases.

Summary

The examination of literature regarding LGBTQ+ youth, culturally sustaining pedagogy, critical literacy, heteronormativity, queer theory, the teacher’s role, and creating a safe,

welcoming space for all students has been the primary focus of my literature review. Creating a personal account of my teaching practices to enlighten myself and offer both mirrors to myself and windows to other educators remains the goal of this study. These concepts will support my personal narrative as the subject and myself as the researcher through a qualitative autoethnography to ascertain a comprehensive understanding of how my practices support LGBTQ+ students.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Miseducation

A girl and a boy meet, fall in love, and have children. The girl puts on make-up, spends hours on her hair, changes clothes at least seven times, and waits for the boy to show up at the party. The boy throws on some jeans and a t-shirt, buys a pack of smokes, drives around with his boys for hours, and waves to the girl at the party. The girl cannot approach the boy; it is too needy and not “ladylike” to do such a thing. The boy must wait and speak to at least five other girls before approaching the one he wants to talk to otherwise he looks too needy; he must appear uninterested and unavailable. The boy and the girl cannot enjoy the same hobbies as one another because one may be too girly and the other too masculine, so when they go out they must keep the conversation to local gossip and family. Sexuality and gender are binary and lean heavily on their sides, unless one wishes to be scrutinized, deemed insane, or outright wrong about personal identity “choices.”

My personal identity took a hit in junior high, then again in high school, and by college, I knew how to impose girliness in my appearance, but never quite figured out how to “be a lady.” Early in my junior high years, I found myself matchmaking and taking the side of my guy friends in relationship woes, as I became a master mediator for love. I forced myself to choose a boy to “crush” on, and ignored the boys who actually showed interest. I was not a lesbian, but I loved my girlfriends more than I loved any boy, therefore I was called a lesbian. During those times, I was met with outrage that I could not match, I didn’t care enough to fight for my own heterosexuality; think what you want. Because I did not fight against the binary label, it must mean I was gay; I even had a teacher tell me I should probably defend myself if I was not. Defend myself? Those years past, high school came swiftly, and oh. My. God. I had no idea how

to put on make-up, do my hair, and wear fashionable clothes. I wore my dad's old flannels, jeans from the local thrift store, and Doc Martens. Oh, I also drove a truck, cursed like a sailor, spit out of my truck window, and said whatever came to my mind, watched football, changed my own tires, collected bugs, and ate sardines from the can with my dad. I did not fit the norm of a girl, nor did boys, or girls for that matter, ask me out. I was fine; it was fine, until it was not. All of my friends had boyfriends and girlfriends, they got all dressed up for parties, and spent hours on the phone worrying about him or her; all of a sudden, I was alone. All of a sudden, I wanted a boyfriend, and all I heard was, "You're like a sister to me, you're my best friend, and this is just too weird." I did end up dating a boy in high school. It was fine, until it wasn't. He met a girl, like a real girl, and I just couldn't stack up. Honestly, it wasn't until I decided to write my dissertation, leaning on my LGBTQ+ students, that I even started to make sense of my own gender identity. To be clear, I never questioned my sexuality; I liked boys, rather men, and I never questioned my gender. I was female, and never felt awkward in my skin. However, understanding the spectrum of gender and sexuality has helped me see my less than hard line of being a female.

The idea of seeing the world through black and white, right and wrong, gay and straight, male and female, is boring, privileged, and wrong; in this case, there is only right and wrong and I will fall on the side of being right. Not just for myself, but for my students, and my own children. Through a journey of myself, this autoethnography details my life as a classroom teacher and disrupts my miseducation of gender and sexuality to make my classroom one of authentic identities, acceptance, safety, and learning.

Research Design: Autoethnography

This research is an autoethnography. An anthropologist, David Hayano (1984), is credited with coining the term autoethnography through his research about professional poker players. Hayano immersed himself in the game of poker to gain full access to the culture. In his writings, he situated himself as a full participant in the culture he studied and wrote through his personal lens. In 1975, Karl Heider used the term in his research with schoolchildren of the Dani Valley in Indonesia and immersed himself into the daily lives of the Dani children to become part of the culture he was studying. The term was reserved for anthropologists who aimed to learn more about being an insider within a culture. The evolution of ethnography into autoethnography begins to include memoirs, such as Zora Neil Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as examples of personal stories that evoke a critical approach to determining the value of certain identities. The margin between a narrative memoir and an autoethnography is sometimes thin. In order to ensure credibility in an autoethnography, disciplinary vocabulary and literature should connect perceived or situated theory. A definition of theory is not necessary to authenticate an autoethnography, and it is often through personal critique that a theory emerges. Unlike grounded theory, autoethnographies do not aim to find a new theory, they evolve with the researcher to uncover truths about one's self that have the possibility to contribute to a larger discourse. Often, autoethnography is considered fiction and not worthy of academic acknowledgement within the field of research. This notion embodies many of the power structures that continue to exist in our society that hold standards of right and wrong. Autoethnography holds the power to critically engage in social justice reforms and add depth to educational research. By creating meaningful discourses written from a place of care and concern, the reader is drawn into the life of the writer, and privileged power is exposed for the betterment of society.

Through my own reflective journey, I was able to create a holistic perception of culturally relevant practices for LGBTQ+ students in my classroom that offer personal awareness, as well as broad understanding for current and future teachers. Ethnography seeks to produce knowledge about a culture, society, or community without the creation of an experiment, and since auto means self, the design was a personal narrative approach. According to Mertens (4th ed., 2015, p. 242), “a key assumption [of ethnography] is that by entering into first hand interaction with people in their everyday lives, ethnographers can reach a better understanding of the beliefs, motivations, and behaviors of the people in the study.”

Understanding that individuals create a culture, I, as an 8th grade language arts teacher, am at the center of this study as the subject, researcher, and practitioner working with my LGBTQ+ students. Through this journey of autoethnography, a clear picture emerged as to my cultural relevance and sustainability working with LGBTQ+ students through the lens of my own experiences. I also recognize the impossible nature of being able to separate the content from personal representation and consistently wonder why I am telling my stories and what my stories can bring to the world (Adams & Jones, 2015). In an effort to satisfy the qualities of qualitative research I used the “sandwich” approach that weaves story, academic literature, and theory (Ellis, 2004) to unpack and deliver a metaphorical analysis of personal experiences that shape my interactions with students to create an “un-normal” space for identity, acceptance, and learning.

Using Carolyn Ellis as my mentor autoethnographer, I worked with my stories through narrative analysis as well as wrote about a story through the analysis of a narrative. Ellis (2004) urged the academia strongholds to take note of the power autoethnography has to enact social change through the people and communities that are doing the work. She stated that the “goal is

to write meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and may make a difference” (p. 46). Working through a reflective narrative allowed me to gain valuable insight to how and why I have changed as an educator and offers reflective moments for others to generalize their own experiences to mine. To illuminate a strong critical analysis of structure and power, Ellis (2004) suggested merging critical theories into personal stories in order for the reader to feel the complexities of each experience. She used the phrase “critical edge” to describe an autoethnography that provokes the writer and reader to want to become part of the change that betters a culture.

Continuing to be a full-time teacher throughout my doctoral program in urban education and literacy, I found myself in a constant struggle to devoid my own voice as I write. Carolyn Ellis has given me the ability to use my authentic voice to write, research, and learn about myself and my teaching practices while adding to the larger academic discourse of LGBTQ+ youth in schools. As an English teacher, I teach writing; I help students find their personal voice, I model my own voice, I offer exemplar authors’ voices, I introduce each story and book with background about the author to help students see and understand the perspectives of each author. It is impossible to write without experiences and perspectives that shape our worldviews, as such, this study provides an authentic voice to the field of research that promotes healthy, sustainable pedagogy for teachers to resonate in, relate to, and learn from.

The process of using stories to analyze and theorize is evocative and honest analytical research (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Identifying transformative experiences in my teaching career has allowed for personal growth and broad insights of how to work with LGBTQ+ students, and these experiences have significantly shaped my teaching philosophy. Through a symbiotic relationship of storytelling and critical theories, my experiences are explained and understood

with theory, not by theory. For example, queer theory can explain why gender should not be placed on a binary scale of male and female however. It is through an understanding of queer theory that I am able to juxtapose my own gender on a spectrum, not a scale as portrayed in the narrative that begins this chapter. Until I wrote the narrative, I was on the female scale of gender, and working with queer theory I was able to unpack the complexities of how I see my own gender as less feminine than the binary term female implies. It was not that my gender identity was shaped by queer theory, it is understood with it. Therefore, “autoethnography is a method for putting theory into action” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 90), and by imposing critical theories, with an emphasis on queer theory, into this autoethnography binary perceptions about methodology in research are disrupted.

Description of Setting

I am an eighth-grade English language arts (ELA) teacher on a team with five regular education ELA teachers, an ELA exceptional child (EC) teacher, whom I team-teach with, and a literacy academic facilitator. My school is a large suburban middle school in the southeast United States with a fluctuating 1,700 students within three grade levels, sixth through eighth. Demographically, my school is 71% White, affluent, and is a top performer on standardized testing metrics. Parents hold high standards for their children, and often these standards create a high degree of stress and anxiety. Social and emotional well-being at my middle school is a priority since my school had the most threat assessments completed last year than any other middle school in our district. We are the second largest district in the state. Trained personnel in my school, the counselors, conduct threat assessments. When a student reports a safety concern counselors conduct a threat assessment to determine if there is an intention to harm either themselves or others. Without breaching confidentiality, I was able to ascertain that about 75%

of our school threat assessments were in reference to self-harm. In the problem statement, I discussed the egregious number of students who identify as LGBTQ+ that have discussed or attempted death by suicide. The correlation to this number and the threat assessments at my school did not go unnoticed.

Typically, I teach the inclusion classes with an exceptional children's teacher (EC). A typical average class size is 26 and about half are classified as EC with specialized, individual education plans (IEP). I also teach honors level classes. Most of the students in these honors classes are performing above grade level and the average class size is 32. The year this dissertation was proposed, I taught three inclusion classes, one of which was virtual, and one honors level class. Teaching in the year 2020, I found myself face to face with computer boxes of muted, mostly blank, squares of students. Teaching and learning in this environment is not ideal, but I must find a way to effectively support and educate my students. As a teacher who prides myself on building relationships first, this is daunting and feels impossible at times. Reinventing how to personally acknowledge individual personalities and advocate for LGBTQ+ students has been...interesting, and definitely worth reflecting on and writing about.

In my school, we have a grade level counselor and assistant principal for each grade level who rotate up with their classes. This speaks volumes to the culture within our school. In order to build student and family relationships the AP and counselor have a wealth of knowledge to share with the eighth grade team of teachers. Through these relationships, we are better prepared to foster positive identities and gain a full understanding of students' well-beings and circumstances. Having these resources allows me to remove assumptions and ask questions about students before I make decisions about how to best serve individuals.

I have been at my current school since the inception 15 years ago. I began as a sixth grade language arts teacher, moved to eighth grade social studies for one year in my fifth year at the school, and landed at home with eighth-grade language arts. I am a leader within my school and district, and I have earned the respect of my principal and other district level administrators by sitting on multiple committees, providing professional development in literacy and cultural competency, and creating a classroom environment that is safe and productive for all learners. In the position of a teacher leader, I complete peer observations, which offer great insight into the importance of building positive relationships with students. Through this reflective process, I pushed myself to dive deep into personal experiences that shaped my position and how those experiences affect what I do in my classroom to promote student identity and allow students to feel valued. The process of building relationships seems natural and without intentional actions on my part however, if I would like to enact real change I must be able to identify specific instances of relationship building in order to coach teachers and support all students.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection for narrative autoethnography is unlike any other method's process. Initially, I found myself pulling out old lesson plans and journals to dissect their parts for usable, tangible data, but I knew what I was looking for and I would not find it specifically written ready as my "a-ha moment." Rereading and searching through Carolyn Ellis's works, I was unable to find a steadfast way to collect usable data for this process; she just sits down and begins to write. Understanding the quality of work I must produce for a dissertation, I resigned to explore other autoethnographers for a data collection process that would meet the criteria of this study. Heewon Chang (2008) offered a data collection process that includes chronicling the past through an autobiographical timeline. And, there is my "a-ha moment" in data collection. During

my pilot study for this dissertation, I chronicled the past eight years of my teaching career focusing on the instances that pertained to my LGBTQ+ student population. Since the pilot study, I began pondering my own adolescence, my own gender, and my own sexuality, and in doing so I began to keep a list of pivotal moments that defined my identity. As a cisgendered female married to a cisgendered male, I began to question my authenticity in writing my dissertation on my journey as a teacher with LGBTQ+ students. The imposter syndrome was real, so I had to figure out why this particular culture was so important for me to understand or I would not be able to move forward.

In my pilot study, I found ebbs and flows of my own growth as a teacher. The pilot study contained three experiences that influenced my teaching and learning of the LGBTQ+ culture. At the time of data collection, I felt like I was able to pinpoint my first experience with an LGBTQ+ student, and now I see that I was not really paying attention. The experience I wrote about then was not a moment of my own awareness, it was forced upon me after I used binary separation for a game, as seen in my initial story for this dissertation. The second narrative in my pilot study showed my silence in the face of discrimination of a student who dressed against gender norms. The third narrative indicated my knowledge of student rights, human identity, and parental confusion when I instinctively knew that a student at my school's open house was not comfortable telling me his birth name. For all three experiences, I wrote authentically about how I remember the experience, what I remember feeling at the time of the experience, and how I felt looking back on the experience. During my first write of each experience I tried to stick with the facts of who, what, when, where. Next, I added authenticity with reflexive insights about each experience. I allowed myself three weeks before going back to the reflections. There were things I wanted to delete during the first rereading, but did not. I felt the rawness of the moment should

not be changed, however, I did add more to the reflexivity of my emotions that I allowed to fester over the three weeks I did not reread the reflections. I used self-conscious analysis of each event, attempted to be introspective, I included dialogue and narration, and I wove cultural relevance issues about the curriculum into my writing. By including experts in the fields of LGBTQ+ culture, culturally relevant teaching, identity formation in adolescents, and multicultural education such as Mayo, Gay, Sleeter, Ladson-Billings, and Darling-Hammond, my narratives took shape.

I proposed to include these three experiences in my dissertation along with as many or as few other experiences that define who I am and how I am as a classroom teacher. Initially, I imagined my data to be narratives of my teaching experiences however, once I began reliving my own perceptions of gender and sexuality and felt an authentic analysis would not be complete without a deep introspection of my full self. Just as Ellis (2004), I want readers to become stimulated and intrigued with the critical representations of structures and power I present in my narratives and personal findings. Chang (2016) defines autoethnography emerging from personal memory that “opens a door to the richness of the past (p. 71). Taking Chang’s advice, I used a chronological timeline to develop a list of experiences that led me to understand my place in culturally sustaining pedagogy. After I created a timeline of experiences, I realized it was incomplete and I would not be able to understand fully my teaching philosophy without the inclusion of my personal journey to find my authentic identity. I reworked the timeline to include experiences that stood out in my memory as foundational elements of navigating gender and sexuality, which Chang (2016) refers to as “zooming in on border-crossing” (p. 73) that allowed me to become more familiar with how cultural differences impacted my perspectives of others. I organized them in an order that allowed me to trace my path to authentic identity, and wrote

them as “*confessional tales*” (Adams, et al., p. 84, 2015), which allowed me to be vulnerable while identifying changes that have occurred. Pondering my own gender identity allowed me to understand the spectrum of identities that are not limited to the sex assigned at birth. By including all aspects of my personal growth, I hope to remove a grand-narrative of what it means to be a teacher in a diverse classroom. Attaching my story promotes an underrepresented area of research within academia, teacher education programs, and teacher’s professional development. Merging these experiences into stories and analyzing them through a researcher’s lens that infuses experts in the fields discussed, this research created a qualitative study of autoethnography. Through this autoethnography, I produced a well-rounded, comprehensive journey of self-awareness as an individual and as a teacher. My reflective narratives intertwined with literature that supports emergent themes offers progressive teacher education opportunities and encouragement for a nurturing and safe environment for students through culturally, critical sustaining pedagogy. My aim was to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways do my reflections mirror heteronormative systems and practices?
2. In what ways have I recognized the individual stories of identity that my students bring with them?
3. Which culturally sustaining teaching practices seem to provide the most support for my LGBTQ+ students?

In order to understand my experiences, I dove deep into the exploration of what I do not understand in an attempt to clarify and generate rational, relational interpretations. My data collection concludes with written narrative vignettes of the experiences listed in the chronological tables below.

Table 1*My Life as an Adolescent*

Year	Experience	Value
1980s	Gymnastics: Falling Down and Getting Back Up	Lessons learned in fortitude, resilience, and clarity
1990	She is Wearing Fishnet Hose	Judgements and assumptions
1992	The Swim Meet	Acknowledging personal identities with respect
1990s	I Never Have a Boyfriend	Femininity and personal identity
1996	Don't Marry a Raft Guide and Down By the River	Gender roles and stereotypes

Table 2*My Timeline as a Teacher*

Year	Experience	Value
2011	Girls to the Left, Boys to the Right	Binary terms and heteronormative practices
2017	Not Everyone Gets a Sticker	Being an ally for LGBTQ+ students
2018	The Open House Dilemma	Safe, inclusive practices
2018-2019	Infusing Queer Literature	Including the LGBTQ+ culture into multicultural book study

Data Analysis

This study includes a reflective written account about how I remember each experience, what I remember feeling at the time of the experience, and how I feel looking back on the experience. Data analysis will uncover themes through descriptive explanation of my own lived experiences and my understanding of how my practice has influenced my teaching of LGBTQ+ students. As described by Spry in Merten's (2015), autoethnographers place themselves in a

position to experience a larger subculture and analyze data “by means of critical self-reflection and subverting an oppressive dominant discourse” (p. 277), also noting the importance of self-change in accordance with the knowledge gained from each experience. Through data analysis, I add authenticity with reflexive insights about each experience. This “analytic technique” (Ellis, 2004) allows for a theoretical interpretation of my study. In other words, I positioned myself as the storyteller in the research process. I then analyzed each narrative as a separate data point, and then merge all narratives for a comprehensive look at how my stories function for LGBTQ+ students in my classroom. Adding to the limited body of research that positions the teacher’s role as an advocate through curriculum choices and pedagogy shifts, this study used the data to make connections of my journey to the broad spectrum of educators.

To validate my personal analysis of each narrative I used thematic coding to string together meaningful insights into my personal identity and my cultural identity as a teacher working with LGBTQ+ youth. First, I read each narrative in segments, coding first the specifics of who, what, when, where of each experience. After initial topical sorting, I grouped topics into larger categories across narratives to determine a logical order to present the data and analysis. For example, I assumed larger categories for who emerged as friends, peers, students, teachers, parents. Next, I used Saldaña’s (2016) hashtag approach of descriptive coding focusing on the topics presented in each narrative allowing codes to repeat as the narratives shift. Beginning with a segment of narrative I identified words and phrases that seem meaningful to my research questions and code each accordingly. I continued to code in segments adding codes as they emerged. I began each narrative analysis with fresh codes and compared codes across narratives to identify overarching themes. After the second coding process was complete for all narratives, I compared codes across narratives pulling the codes that fell within the majority of all eight

narratives. To begin interpreting the data, I used six of Chang's (2016) ten suggested strategies to: 1) identify recurring topics, themes, and patterns, 2) search for cultural themes, 3) identify exceptional occurrences, 4) connect present with the past, 5) analyze relationships between others and myself and 6) frame with theories (p. 131). This method of zooming-in and zooming-out of data is an ideal approach to analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2016).

To triangulate my data analysis, I wrote my research questions on notecards and noted if and how each narrative would contribute to complete analysis. To add an extra layer of validity and reliability, a colleague read and coded each narrative descriptively to allow for triangulation. Once confirmation was complete, I was able to remove adjectives that described some codes. For example, initially my codes were overly descriptive such as "youth culture", "rafting culture", "LGBTQ+ culture", and "teacher culture". Through member checking, I was able to reduce this particular code to culture, and found a total of three: identity, culture, and teaching philosophy.

Autoethnography is reflexive, and I continue to circle questions of what I hope to gain, what I want others to gain, and how it is relevant. Ellis makes it clear that writing a narrative and calling it research is about the presentation, and validates that you do not have to "privilege theory" (p. 199). In my narratives, I used a self-conscious analysis of each event, attempting whole-heartedly to be introspective. Ellis and Adams (2014) suggest that autoethnography is an integral part of spotlighting the "heightened attention to identity politics" (p. 259). With current political discourse clouding the light on LGBTQ+ people, the need for allied voices, especially those in education, need to be spoken, written, read, and researched.

Limitations

Limitations that are present in this study are substantial. In order to qualify these limitations I am assuming subjectivity by the reader and understand that the reader will compare

my experiences with their own. This window to mirror approach to understanding my personal growth may appear self-absorbed and indulgent, yet introspective. The feelings evoked in readers may be unpleasant since I cannot predict the connections readers make to narratives.

It is also possible that this study marginalizes the LGBTQ+ population by focusing on the researcher's actions and reactions to each experience. I continue to remind readers and myself of the journey within that my teaching is the focus.

Finally, the exposure it implies of my inner feelings and thoughts is subjective and daunting. This study required honesty and willingness to self-disclose emotions, triumphs, and defeats within myself as a classroom teacher working with LGBTQ+ students. As an autoethnography, this research does not come without bias. Careful analysis was required in order for personal, professional, and wide-reaching growth into the fields of teacher education and academic literature to sustain.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

“When I dare to be powerful—to use my strength in the service of my vision, it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.” –Audre Lorde

My purpose in this research was to identify where, when, and how my teaching practices promoted or counteracted heteronormative practices, identify moments where I was able to uplift individual identities, and recognize what transformations I have made to become a culturally relevant teacher. This chapter explores narratives that allow the reader and myself to grapple with the importance of infusing gender and sexual identities into conversations about curriculum, equity, and all forms of safety. The data reflects personal experiences around the formation of my personal identity about gender and sexuality, my relationships with my own parents, my students, coworkers, friends, and students’ families, and my teaching practices and philosophies. As I attempt to frame my place within my own personal identities, merge myself with identities that I do not hold, and balance the knowledge of that I do not know I am able to unlock a clarity of purpose, of where I need to stand as an educator. I stand alongside my students and I work diligently to build strong relationships with them.

Just like Bochner and Ellis (1996), I want my readers to participate in and connect with the feelings and experiences I share with them. As I grapple with my own multifaceted identity, I implore my readers to reflect on their own perceptions of gender and sexuality, scrutinize their own heteronormative behaviors, and analyze the systems in which they live and work. In order for this research to provide an authentic contribution to the literature, my aim is to better understand my positionality within the classroom using the following research questions to guide me:

1. In what ways do my reflections mirror heteronormative systems and practices?

2. In what ways have I recognized the individual stories of identity that my students bring with them?
3. Which culturally relevant teaching practices seem to provide the most support for my LGBTQ+ students?

Chapter 4 is organized by the themes established through the data analysis process, and it is written as a thematic autoethnography. Each theme begins with a song lyric that establishes the thematic perspectives and helps to formulate a clear analysis of my research questions. After analyzing all narratives I found that the role of my relationships has grounded my perspective of my personal identity, therefore this is where I begin descriptive findings. The next theme presented is around the topic of *culture*. Culture, in this research, refers to the holistic moral beliefs, attitudes, and lifestyles of a group of people. Logically, the inner workings of my relationships only exist in tandem with a variety of cultures. The third theme culminates in my identity within different cultures and allows my perspectives to shift in order to pull focus back to analysis of my teaching philosophy. Chapter 4 is organized by the topics established through the data analysis process (identity, culture, and teaching philosophy), and it is written as a thematic, narrative autoethnography. Please join me on my journey as I reminisce, reflect, and interpret my thoughts. The beginning of this chapter should be read as a novel, so sit back, relax, and enjoy the story. After a dip into my mind, I will decompress and interpret my findings on a personal level and connect each segment to my identity in the classroom as a teacher. After the narratives, interpretations, and classroom connections I will culminate with the findings in relation to each of my research questions. The narratives are in italics with interludes of script where I bring myself to the present in order to make sense of the narrative for my readers and myself.

Identity

Hello darkness, my old friend
I've come to talk with you again
Because a vision softly creeping
Left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains
Within the sound of silence

(from The Sound of Silence, by Paul Simon, 1964)

Parents

My dad, in silent revolt, resisted the damsel in distress myth. He taught me how to change a tire, check my oil, budget my money, push me into math and science, made me overcome my fears, always had me try new things, and he put continuous focus on my education. My mom was always there; her role in my life was stable and normal. My mom never quit; she was always on the go, never taking crap from anyone. I never really had the traditional stereotype of what a woman's role was "supposed to be" ingrained as part of my identity. All I saw was a woman who worked hard, found time for fun, took good care of her family, and always worked through the finish. Later, as a mom and wife myself, I realized she had no idea what she was doing; she was just doing the best she knew how. Lucky for me, that was more than enough.

When I was around three years old my parents signed me up for gymnastics. I spent the next twelve years making friends, training, and competing in that gym.

The gym was my safe space. The stony smell of chalk dust, the thump of landing feet, and the drum roll of a tumbling pass became my second home. Gymnastics was therapy. I learned discipline, core strength, perseverance, and dedication. The word

can't was punishable with push-ups, and tears were only present if 911 was called. Love it or leave it—I loved it.

I was ten or so when I competed in my first gymnastics meet. My mom, dad, little brother and I drove three hours to Wheeling, West Virginia for my debut. I was the most nervous about my balance beam routine, and it is the only one I recall vividly. I fell off the beam twelve times. Twelve. After my final, actual dismount I saluted the judges and hung my head. As I meandered my way to my parents, Bev, my coach, slapped my behind and told me to hold my head up. I did, but it wasn't easy. How horrifying, embarrassing, and utterly humiliating. My parents were all smiles when I did finally raise my eyes above their kneecaps. The first words out of my dad's mouth were, "I am so proud of you!" Proud of me? For falling off the beam twelve times? "No," he said, "for getting back up on the beam twelve times." After the meet was over, my parents stopped by an old country store and bought me those little candy sticks. I got one of every flavor: butterscotch, lemon, strawberry, root beer, orange, grape... Those candy sticks will forever be my tenacity, and my continuous reminder to get back up, and, as my dad always says, "Run through the finish." Eventually, I could complete a balance beam routine without falling off, but there was always something else to improve. The uneven bars became my next nemesis.

I had been on the high bar plenty of times, but I was being asked to jump from the low bar to the high propelling by myself into a circle around the bar. I remember standing on the low bar, balanced on the arches of my feet, not able to take the leap to the high bar. It just looked so high and far away. And, what if I couldn't make a full rotation? It felt like I was being asked to do the impossible; it felt like paralyzing fear.

The encouragement from my teammates was not helping, and it was making it worse. And, the perceived disapproving look from my coach made me want to quit. The thing was, I had just moved up a level and our new season had started, there was no quitting.

I saw my dad talking to my coach. They were old school friends, and conversations were common, but they rarely revolved around gymnastics. I was not heading to the Olympics. We all knew this was a fleeting hobby to keep me busy, in shape, and focused. My dad was the gymnastics dad in a field of moms. He took me to every competition and usually picked me up from all of my practices. He even obliged when the team decided we would eat at Chuck E Cheese. Thanks, dad. However, this night was not filled with the normal banter of the day's recap.

When we got in the car to go home he said, "You're not afraid of heights; you can't be afraid of something you haven't tried to overcome. You have been on that high bar hundreds of times. What is the real problem?"

I thought, well dad, the bar is eight feet high and six feet away from the one I am jumping from, what do you think the problem is? Too snarky. Instead, I said, "Dad, I am afraid of falling." Was that really it? Was it the height or the fear of falling, or maybe something else? I didn't have much time to ponder this because my dad was about to plant a seed.

"You're going to fall, and you're going to get back up and do it again. If you want to be great, you will fall a lot, but you will get back up one more time than you fall," he promised. He went on to tell me to get my best friend, Simone, and her brother Chris the upcoming weekend for an adventure. I pleaded for more information to no

avail, so I followed directions and rallied my people for an adventure of my dad's making.

Fairly early Saturday morning we packed into my dad's car still uncertain of our destination. We drove for what seemed like hours, but was probably only minutes, and made a final turn onto an unmarked, unpaved road. We meandered down a long dirt road covering the car in a thin film of dirty grime. A final turn led us to a steep hill that we sped up and the chatter in the car ceased. At the top of the hill several pieces of construction machines sat unmoving like a field of dinosaurs frozen in time. Simone and I stared at each other, mouths agape feeling like we were in a movie or dream. What in the world were we doing here? My dad parked the car and told us to get out and climb. Now, these weren't your run of the mill bulldozers, these were monstrous. The wheel wells were well over six feet tall, and they were well above the eight-foot bar I needed to trick around.

"Climb," my dad commanded.

So, I climbed. Dad told me to stop every so often and look over the edge down to the hard packed dirt below. I definitely felt the adventure, but had not yet to connect it to a life lesson, a planted seed. It was a beautiful day outside, and I felt like the kid I was. I continued to climb higher and higher looking over the edge until I no longer lost my stomach. I wasn't afraid of being up high, or of falling, and I didn't feel the pang of foreboding failure. I was just having fun on my adventure.

I wonder, was it really a fear of heights or even falling for that matter? Nearly a teenager, it is possible it was a fear of embarrassment that tagged along with failure. At this point in my life, my peers had a stranglehold on my perception of myself. Weakness does not exist unless we

allow it to reside with us. I do not remember thinking about the purpose of our adventure at the time, and I am certain my dad just allowed the silent seed to sprout. It was not until I was at the gym the next week that I remembered the source of our outing. Bars were always our last practiced event during training, so I watered my silent seed and took my turn. Warming up, I focused on each move in the moment. I would not allow the fear to stop on my newly sprouted seedling. The construction machinery and the uneven bars are not closely related, but there was something about that day that allowed me to visualize success on the bars.

As I began my routine I heard echoes of my dad saying, "Keep going, all the way to the top." Without hesitation I leapt from the low bar to the high and fell flat on my face. I was fine. My peers laughed, but my ego stayed intact. Again. Again. Again. Finally, after weeks of practice I got my trick! I could do it, I did do it. The seed was not silent; it was a permanent tree residing within a growth mindset.

Interpretation

This is the first time I remember being told I could overcome something huge, but I find it is more than that. Being afraid of heights was not something that is natural for me. I am not afraid of heights now, and I am not even sure I was afraid of heights then. Being afraid of heights is a common fear, and the stereotype of that fear was pre-programmed in my brain to confirm my understanding. What my dad did was offset the stereotype with my own reality. He blunted my expectations, made me face whatever fear was actually invading my progress and believed I could do it. That is all it took. Someone to tell me and then show me I was capable of trying and I was quite likely to be successful. It seems so simple: believe in someone, show them you care, and foster skills that illuminate their strengths in order for them to gain a better understanding of themselves. Now, I am able to see this as a metaphor to life. When you fall, fail, mess up, you

get back up and do it again...and again. Failing, falling, and messing up were good life lessons for me. When I did not pass my National Board Certification the first time, I did it again and passed. I would say this seed manifested in an intrinsic motivation to get things right. I am not a perfectionist because I do not think anything is perfect; there is boredom in that. Being the best I can be has become a consistent goal, and I am attaching that to the simple seed my dad planted at twelve years old. However, my dad is not just a wordsmith, he also planted the seed that represents my belief that actions are the foundation of my character. I am not sure his words alone would have made a difference, because he rarely ends with words.

Classroom Connection

This is a helpful reminder as I navigate teaching my middle school students. I theorize that I began learning that adolescents are resilient, malleable, and eager to overcome adversity when my dad made me climb machinery. Each student resides in their own head, overwhelmed with perception and doubt. I utilize this knowledge as a powerful tool to help students identify their own fears and obstacles in order to overcome them. This one experience allows me to interpret my desire to help all students work to fulfill their maximum potential through individualized, personal identity work with a growth mindset. Not everyone is attempting a full rotation on a high bar, so I find it a necessity to figure out who my students are, what my students want, and what they internalize as impossible. I help them identify their strengths and learn to mimic those traits to overcome the skills or obstacles that are festering as fear. It becomes a seamless relationship of recognizing the individual identities within my classroom and fostering the cultural characteristics that make those identities unique. These are the seeds I plant in my students. I hope they water them well.

I was not finished learning from my dad. Do we ever stop learning from our parents? It is funny how seemingly uneventful moments can affect the rest of our lives. My dad does not talk ill about other people. Ever. He keeps his judgement to himself and allows actions to reveal a person's character. I was a judgmental teenager at my younger brother's soccer game when the seed of non-judgmental thinking was planted.

Fishnet hose. *It was a slightly overcast morning, not too cold, not too hot. A perfect day for soccer. I stood on the sidelines with my mom and dad in a pair of shorts and a favorite sweatshirt. At fourteen years old I scanned the fields for the high school games and the high school boys paying little attention to my ten-year-old brother's game. That's when I saw her; a thin lady wearing a fitted skirt, t-shirt, and fishnet pantyhose standing on the sidelines.*

"Oh my god, dad, that lady has fishnet hose on at a soccer game," I gasped.

"Yeah, so?" Dad's eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched.

I thought for a minute he might know her, he knows a lot of people in our fairly small town. Again, judgmental teenager here I just couldn't help my response, "I mean, we are at a soccer game, why is she wearing those here?"

"Why not?" he asked again now looking at me in the eye.

"Because it's a soccer game, she's not at the club," Duh, Dad.

He took a long breath and looked out to the soccer field clearly over his righteous daughter and replied, "You don't know where she has been or why she is wearing them. It's really none of your business, and definitely not your job to judge her," he schooled me.

Not getting what I wanted from my dad, I sauntered over to my mom. “Mom, look at that lady in the fishnet hose. Why would she wear those to a soccer game?” I asked again. “Dad thinks it doesn’t matter.” I waited for her to counter his defiance in seeing this as none of my business.

I’m pretty sure she took a minute to take it all in before she said, “You don’t know what the poor woman is going through. You don’t know, maybe that’s all she has to wear. But, she is here now to watch her kid play soccer. I bet he is really happy about that,” my mom had decided.

I’m pretty sure I went to sit in the car after being verbally smacked by both parents. I had the mind to wear fishnet hose to school. That would show them.

Interpretation

I did not wear fishnet hose to school. And, yeah Mom, I guess I took it for granted that moms show up to their kid’s soccer games. There is another silent seed: assumptions are harmful. I think of that woman often. Admittedly, I am still a little confused by this, but the seed of anti-judgement was planted. First, I stereotyped what someone should wear to a soccer game, and then I opened that stereotype up to judgement. When I noticed her it did not cross my mind that she was a mom watching her kid play soccer, she was a crazy woman, a possible stripper, a drug addict, but not a mom. I created these assumptions about who she was without the possibility of any positive correlation. Even if she was a stripper or a drug addict, what business did I have to judge her life? I learned. Maybe not at that exact moment, but eventually. Those fishnet hose affected my dad as well. I think he probably realized he had planted an important seed for me. He will not let me forget. If I ever attempt to vocalize a judgement based on

assumptions my dad says, “I bet she has fishnet hose.” My dad also reminds me without prompts of my judgmental assumptions when he sneaks fishnet hose into my Christmas gifts.

I am also able to form the theory that those fishnet hose were a lesson on judgement that allowed me to shift my thinking from judgement according to how I viewed the world to perspectives that forced me to look outward.

Classroom Connections

I find myself thinking of those fishnet hose when I take inventory of the students in my classroom. Initially, I do not know their individual stories, but I do know they exist and create an environment that fosters their need for belonging. Individual stories are what makes each class special and unique, and in part, those fishnets remind me to encourage, listen, and learn from each student in order to gain a better understanding of how each student contributes to the culture of our classroom. Each individual story becomes a new seed planted in my gallery of perspectives. With every new perspective I gain I am able to unpack and theorize experiences in order to be a better teacher and ultimately a better human. When a parent shows up to a parent conference in pajamas, I check my judgement and assume nothing. I refrain from assuming my students have active moms and dads, and I never use their parents as a threat. The seed of assumption bloomed empathy. Not knowing a student’s home life or culture leaves me without perspective, but employs empathy and understanding. Therefore, when a permission slip is not signed on time, I do not penalize the student. When a report card is forged, I do not reprimand the student and call home. I do not know why these things are or are not happening and assumptions are harmful, so I ask questions.

Middle school students crave affirmation, respect, and the benefit of the doubt. I have mutually respectful conversations with my students, which yields honest answers. I overhear

teachers say, “I don’t need my students to like me,” but I do. In my own life, if I do not respect or like someone I am not likely to heed their information, so why would that be different for my students? I do not allow my students, or my own children, to mistake my friendliness, my caring, and my desire to hold mutual respect as friendship, but I do expect them to listen to me as I listen to them in a win-win situation. My job is to manage the safety and well-being of each student, so I begin the conversation with easy questions and active listening. In doing so I am able to build mutual respect, understand each situation from the perspective of my student, and better situate my teaching to meet the needs of the individual. These are not things I learned through my formal education; I learned them through my parents.

Friends

I have always had an eclectic group of friends; when I was young I liked people who liked me, but as an adult I find it necessary to like them too. My dad used to tell me that if I could count the real friends I had on one hand when I was “his age” I should consider myself lucky. Of course, I did not understand his philosophy then, but now I find myself repeating his words to my home children and my school students. It is amusing that my own children want to disagree with me, however my students seem to ponder the idea. Being a parent to a teenager is impossible to navigate and the fear of failure hangs on tight. The moments when my children do or say things that indicate they have actually been listening give me the assurance that I am doing a few things right.

Knowing that adolescents feel that their parents know nothing, I work to be a second voice of reason for my students. However, I also know that middle school students are evolving into adults. They spend their elementary years learning the basics of education, and socialization, and they are still wholly their parent’s kids. In middle school, friends become an important part

of their identity formation and they begin to separate themselves from their parents by searching for independence and personal identity. In adolescence, popularity is often perceived as who has the most friends. What we do not understand when our brains are still forming is that friends come and go. Some break our hearts, some we are glad to see go, some become Facebook friends, and the rest are there for a lifetime. No matter where that friendship lands, they all teach us something about ourselves and therefore the world around us.

I made assumptions about my relationship with friends that are righteous and deplorable, but enlightened my perceptions of my role as a friend and ally. In high school, I was friends with a girl who was often misgendered, but silence around her identity remained consistent across our friendship and our friend groups until, I literally tried to “out” her.

The Swim Meet and Brain Development. It was 1992, and I was sixteen years old. I was slightly more than a recreational swimmer; meaning I swam six days a week, three months of the year, and competed in about six competitions a year. I was not great, but typically okay-enough to place in the top three for each of my heats. To be real, I did it for the social aspect, and I was deep into the culture of being young and carefree. But, only one of those meets changed the core of my identity as a human in society.

My dad may have been my driver, cheerleader, and confidant in my gymnastics endeavors, but my mom was the swim mom. She brought me to every practice and every swim meet. My mom did not learn to drive until she met my dad, and she had little confidence in herself in a lot of aspects of her life before him. But, once she had children, her inhibitions were squashed, and we were all that mattered. She put fears aside and did what we needed. She was a good driver, but did not drive in the snow and hated going places that she was not familiar with so back and forth to the pool in the summer was her

jam. Until we had to navigate to unknown parts of the state blindly searching for an opponent's pool. In the days before GPS, this was never easy.

On one particular meet day, we left early as always heading into the unknown. Boy, am I glad I don't have to taxi my children around without GPS, as my sense of direction would have us in Kansas. Sometimes we would caravan, which always made life easier, but for some reason this time we were on our own. Unfortunately, my mom made several wrong turns and I was late to my swim meet. She was frustrated, I was irritated, and I did not want to walk in late. I pretended to care about not being able to warm up before I swam, but in reality I was relieved I didn't have to swim the extra laps. Shortly after I changed into my swimsuit I was called to deck, meaning I was waiting for my heat to be called to the stand. I cannot tell you what stroke I was swimming or the result of the meet, but I could, if called to do so, describe exactly what the person looked like that planted the seed that would propel me out of my self-righteous mindset.

It started when a gal from an opposing team asked me if I knew a specific boy from my hometown. My hometown is fairly small, so of course I knew who she was asking me about.

"Do you know X?" the brunette asked.

"Yes! That is my best friend's boyfriend," I replied in excitement.

"Wait, what? I've been talking to him for three months, every night on the phone," they said. Round, brown eyes responded in disbelief.

...long silence. "Well, I guess that's a problem for us," I stumbled, searching for the right thing to say and furious that my best friend's boyfriend was cheating on her.

“We are going to call him,” the girl with a small scar above her left eye declared.

“Yep,” I concluded, and I couldn’t wait to tear him a new one!

We didn’t have cell phones, so we made our way to a payphone after our race was over. As a new team, we decided I would call and tell him I had met one of his friends and then I would put her on the phone. We were going to catch the bastard in all of his deceitful lies and put this to bed. As I punched the numbers on the pay phone she stopped me to tell me that was not his phone number. Confusion bustled on our faces and I hung up before completing the call. We stared dumbfounded at one another and I asked her what number she had. Remember, this was a time when we actually had to memorize phone numbers, so I had plenty stored in my brain. My new gal-pal did not, in fact, have my best friend’s boyfriend’s number. When she rattled off the number she knew to be X’s I pretended to not know the number. Instead, I wrote her phone number down and told her I would call her after my novice investigation. But, I already knew whose number she had and I was not prepared to let her know because I was not prepared to understand the magnitude of why she had this number.

The next day I went over to my friend’s house, the friend who was actually on the other end of swim-girl’s phone calls. As soon as my friend opened the door I was rushed into the house. It was clear that swim-girl had already made contact. My friend knew why I was there and immediately started explaining it all as a big, nasty joke.

*“She used to date one of my friends and cheated on him so I was getting her back,” she explained. Yes, you read that correctly, **she** was playing a joke on another girl.*

I was beside myself with confusion and actual outrage. How could she put this poor girl through this as a cruel joke? Swim-girl was smitten and had obviously spent many hours exchanging intimate information over long phone calls.

“She seems to really like you and thinks you like her too,” I puzzled and prodded, “Have you come clean with her yet?” I demanded to know.

“Nah, not yet. I’ll just quit answering her calls,” she responded indignantly.

“You’ve already lied to her, can’t you just make up another lie and break up with her? I feel bad for her, she was really nice and cared for your fictitious character,” I begged.

“I’ll figure something out, I only talked to her a couple of times,” she lied.

Clearly, I was a busy-body and felt a weird loyalty to the swim-girl I had known for all of fifteen minutes. I called her later that night. I am not sure I had a plan, but I am certain that what happened next was not on the agenda.

Cell phones weren’t a thing, but caller ID was so she answered my call with, “Hi, so I guess you know that he lied about his name?”

“Um...” I stammered. This is not what “figuring it out” meant to me. Lied about HIS name? Yeah, I did know SHE lied about HER name. This was not going in a direction of any of my imagined scenarios.

“It’s okay,” she assured me, “he broke up with his girlfriend and we are together now. He just didn’t want her to find out so he lied about his name to protect us all.” I mean, I guess you could say that I thought.

“I guess I don’t know who you are talking about?” I hoped my gentle prodding was enough to get her to spill it.

It was. "Oh, his name is M (new guy from our town) do you know him?" she let me in on the secret.

"Wait," I started and stopped. "I'm happy for you, but I don't know him," I decided that was the best response. I knew him. Not well, better yet, I knew of him and he didn't seem the type to play this game and as far as I knew he didn't have a previous girlfriend.

"He's really great. He came to my grandmother's funeral and met my family. We even kissed," she mused.

I honestly have no idea how this conversation ended. My brain was mush, and I could not comprehend what was happening. I do remember hanging up the phone and immediately calling my original friend to... do what? Out her as a lesbian? Get her to tell me it was another bad joke? I don't really remember the conversation, but I do know she pleaded with me to not tell M she was using his name. Thankfully, I didn't know M well enough because I may have told him. Actually, I have told him since. I ended up marrying him. Oh, serendipity.

Interpretation

I have no idea how any of this played out. I think I have blocked from my memory out of pure humiliation. I was so certain that I had the right to know and understand the situation that I never considered the feelings of my friend. A decade or so later, my friend is in a loving relationship with a woman. So, she was gay, and I tried to make her tell me. I honestly did not even put it together that she could be a lesbian. At the time, I was just confused. I did not know that I probably knew many gay people, and it was so far off of my radar that I believed she was just playing a trick. She was a jokester after all, the class clown, life of the party and all. In every

aspect of her life, she appeared so confident, everyone adored her; she was fun and funny, and proudly wore shorts and a t-shirt to the swimming pool, but silence eluded her authentic self during those years. I do not remember even questioning why she wore a t-shirt and shorts to swim, or why she wore her hair in a buzz cut, or why she never had a boyfriend or included herself in conversations about cute boys at the pool. I do not know why; it really does not matter why.

Reflecting on this experience, I am conflicted on what I should have done differently. More than likely, I probably should not have put my nose in anyone's business. However, this leaves me wondering when, or if, I would have processed the fact that people were actually gay; people I knew. I was certainly upset with my friend, but not for being gay, for not telling me she was gay. A decade or so later, when she did come out as a lesbian, I was furious all over again. We had not seen each other in several years, and she had zero reason to call me up and tell me, but I felt betrayed. I seriously felt entitled to know this, for her to tell me, for her to out herself before she was ready. Since this entitled experience, I am able to better understand my role as a friend. My role is to actually be a friend without selfish intent. Yet, this experience allows me to understand how important honesty is to adolescents, and how even the illusion of dishonesty can feel like a personal betrayal. As a nod to my now Facebook friend I am referring to, thank you for helping me become a better teacher and overall better person.

Classroom Connection

What matters is how I can empathize with students in my classroom, because it takes a long time to figure out who we are. My job is not to make anyone attach themselves to an identity, it is to foster self-worth. I tell a modified version of this experience to my students, allowing them to see me as flawed in judgement at their age. Explaining my lack of empathy and

understanding of a person's full identity put us all at risk for betrayal and heartache. We also talk about deceit and how pretending to be something or someone you are not causes other people harm as well as yourself.

By discussing the journey to self-awareness, students are able to marinate in my mistakes, the mistakes of my friend, and learn to work on compassionate empathy when dealing with our friends. Most of the time my students want to defend my actions saying I did the right thing by trying to get to the bottom of the issue. I reassure them that in fact I did not do the right thing in the right way. At this point, I do not lead them into a conversation about talking to friends they feel may be part of LGBTQ+, however, they often bring themselves to this conversation. This is when I take a seat and listen to learn. This generation of students is more apt to understand the LGBTQ+ culture and better prepared to know how to respond to friends who are finding an identity within this culture. They finally agree I overstepped in my prodding and offer each other suggestions on how to approach this situation. What I have learned is that there is not a right or wrong answer in any given scenario because we are all different and approach our identity from different perspectives and angles. The kids of today have a much stronger grasp on how the world works than I ever imagined. The most important thing I can bring to the classroom is a safe space to hold these conversations. As they prepare for the next chapter in their lives, high school, I want them to move forward with as many varying perspectives as possible. In most cases high school students have a better grasp on who they are becoming, yet they are still working through all the facets of their individual identities and sometimes those pieces go missing for a while. I work to encourage them to hold on to all the parts of themselves that make them feel safe and comfortable with themselves.

High School

In high school, I often felt like the third wheel, the girl who was “one of the guys,” and I began to feel conflicted about who and how I should present myself. I preferred to hang out with guys; they were so much easier. Less drama, less analyzing every little thing that happened to them, and more spontaneous than high school girls. I also was not boy crazy. I did not feel like I should have a boyfriend, and I enjoyed my time with the guys. One of my best guy friends taught me how to throw a punch, another one informed me on how to position my car seat so I was not “eating the steering wheel” as he said, and most of them told me all about the girl(s) they were crushing on and asked me to be their go-between. None of these boys wanted me as their girlfriend, and I never even thought to care.

Miseducation: Why I Never Had a Boyfriend. *A girl and a boy meet, fall in love, and have children. The girl puts on make-up, spends hours on her hair, changes clothes at least seven times, and waits for the boy to show up at the party. The boy throws on some jeans and a t-shirt, buys a pack of smokes, drives around with his boys for hours, and waves to the girl at the party. The girl cannot approach the boy; it is too needy and not “ladylike” to do such a thing. The boy must wait and speak to at least five other girls before approaching the one he wants to talk to, otherwise he looks too needy; he must appear uninterested and unavailable. The boy and the girl cannot enjoy the same hobbies as one another because one may be too girly and the other too masculine, so when they go out they must keep the conversation to local gossip and family. Sexuality and gender are binary and lean heavily on their sides, unless one wishes to be scrutinized, deemed insane, or outright wrong about personal identity “choices.”*

Early in my junior high years, I found myself matchmaking and taking the side of my guy friends in relationship woes, as I became a master mediator for love. However,

there were two boys, close friends of mine who told me I was pretty. Actually, they began calling me “100” because they said on a scale of 1-10 I was a 100. Okay, okay, that’s nice and all, but I wanted them to stop. Ego-wise, I guess it boosted, but I did not like being objectified for my looks and I slowly stopped hanging out with them as much.

Not having a boyfriend had obstacles. I was called a lesbian more times that I can count because I loved my girlfriends and spent a lot of time with them never crushing on a boy. I was not a lesbian. I knew this, I think. During those times, I was met with disdain that I could not match. I didn’t care enough to fight for my own heterosexuality; think what you want. Because I did not fight against the binary label, it must mean I was gay; I even had a teacher tell me I should probably defend myself if I was not. How and why would a teacher even know this was a topic of conversation? And, defend myself? How absurd that sounded, even then.

In high school, I had my first real crush. I watched all of my other girlfriends have crushes one day and boyfriends the next. This should be easy. It wasn’t. He barely gave me the time of day. About the middle of my senior year I landed my first real boyfriend. I didn’t know he existed until he asked me out. I figured this was how it all worked. It lasted nearly two years, and I learned a lot about myself. It was worth it.

Those years passed, high school came swiftly, and oh, my, god, I had no idea how to put on make-up, do my hair, and wear fashionable clothes. I wore my dad’s old flannels, jeans from the local thrift store, and Doc Martens. Oh, I also drove a truck, cursed like a sailor, spit out of my truck window, and said whatever came to my mind, watched football, changed my own tires, collected bugs, and ate sardines from the can with my dad. I did not fit the norm of a girl; no boys, or girls for that matter, asked me

out. I was fine. It was fine, until it was not. All of my friends had boyfriends and girlfriends, they got all dressed up for parties, and spent hours on the phone worrying about him or her; all of a sudden, I was alone. All of a sudden, I wanted a boyfriend, and all I heard was, "You're like a sister to me, you're my best friend, and this is just too weird."

In my junior year of high school, I went to a formal dance. My grandmother bought me a fiery red dress and gold high heel shoes. I didn't have a boyfriend, so I went with a friend who was a boy.

My friend, who was a boy, took one look at me and said, "Wow, you look like a girl."

"Um, I am a girl...?"

"Yeah, but now you really look like one."

"Screw you, asshole."

"Ah, that's more like it."

My shoes were off in the first ten minutes of the dance. I was told more times that I had ever been told I looked "pretty," and I also pushed a car out of a ditch of snow in my bare feet and red dress. However, it felt good to be "pretty," and I certainly wasn't getting compliments for my less than feminine qualities, so I made moves to be more feminine. I wore a little bit of make-up, bought jeans that were my actual size, and only wore my dad's flannels occasionally. All of a sudden, there were boys who "liked" me. The boy I dated in high school was nice and cute and my parents liked him. And our relationship was fine, until it wasn't. He met a different girl, like a real, stereotypical

girl, and I just couldn't stack up. I learned, and by college, I knew how to impose girliness in my appearance, but never quite figured out how to 'be a lady'.

Interpretation

Honestly, it was not until I decided to write my dissertation, leaning on my LGBTQ+ students, that I even started to make sense of my own gender identity. To be clear, I never questioned my sexuality; I liked boys, rather men, and I never questioned my gender. I was female, never felt awkward in my skin. However, understanding the spectrum of gender and sexuality has helped me see my less than hard line of being a female. My dad had taught me “manly” things, like how to change my tire and balance my checkbook. My mom had taught me that getting dirty meant that you were accomplishing something. The most influential people in my life have taught me authenticity and self-preservation. I was not forced into etiquette classes, but believe me I had better keep my elbows off the table and if I ever brought a date to dinner he had better remove his hat. Old school, dad. I was not told to change my clothes to be “presentable” or asked to cross my legs at the ankles—I did not know that was even a thing until I was an adult! I just was not taught to be a girl. I was taught to be a decent human that worked hard. “Be the first one there and the last one to leave” words to live by from my dad. I was taught “if you start something you have to finish it” from my mom. I was taught that the way I treated people indicated the type of people that surrounded me. I did not fit into the gender or sexual stereotypes of many of my friends because I just was not taught that way. Even though I was taught not to assume things, I am going to assume this was not the intention of either of my parents, but in my opinion of myself I am glad they did not allow me to fall victim to stereotypes.

Classroom Connection

I think this all goes back to ensuring my students have information. Lots of it, from me, literature, videos, each other, their parents, friends, enemies, society, and everything in between. Teaching language arts affords me the opportunity to have deep conversations that meander off the course of standards and into the path of real life. Again, I began with a story about my own adolescence to engage the connection that I too was once their age and have not totally forgotten what it is like to be young. I roll my eyes as I am telling them my dad-isms and how they meant very little at their age, but now they are part of my mantra. I ask them for a one-liner that their parents, grandparents, or other trusted adult feeds them and we laugh and then analyze why that may be important for that person. I often wonder if these conversations give new light to students in their parent's plight to enlighten them of how the world works, even if it is for a fleeting moment. One thing my students always say to me is, "You teach us things about life." I am not sure this makes me a good language arts teacher, but I am certain that it makes them better people. This also ensures that I am a trusted adult for them. They see me as relatable, non-judgmental, and honest. These attributes open my classroom to our classroom and give students the opportunity to explore and express their personal identities in ways they may not feel validated doing elsewhere. I wonder what that feels like for them.

Being a Female

As a young adult, still navigating my own identity, I clearly never considered myself a feminine girl, until becoming immersed in the culture of the "river rat." From being the kid who collected bugs for fun, took up for myself and others, and had no idea how to look like a girl to wearing make-up, buying clothes that "flattered my figure," and almost learning to flirt, I was about to relearn or unlearn what it meant to be a female. The female "river rats" intrigued me. I had so many questions, but I bided my time by watching and listening for several months before

I began to inquire. I was dating a white water rafting guide, which afforded me the opportunity to spend a lot of time getting to know the people of the river.

Down by the River. *My time down by the river and life on the campground implanted the newest patch to my developing brain as a human in society. I have never felt more like the perception of a girl than I did with my new friends. With my newly enlightened and nearly developed brain, I was no longer afraid to admit I didn't actually know everything about everything. Typically, I was the more outspoken, dominant person within my friend group, yet within this group I had unidentified insecurities. Their lives were so foreign to me, and I didn't know how or even if I could relate at first. After some time, I began asking questions.*

On a very cool morning in June we were in the back of a pick-up truck tucked in with huge rafts and coolers on our way to the put-in of the river for a day trip with friends. I had my first ever bottled Starbucks Frappuccino that will forever remind me of this day, and I was finding a new comfort with new friends. It was early morning when the sun was still fighting the river spirits floating as mist above the trees. Bouncing back and forth between the switchbacks in the road I mused over my three new friends and their seemingly carefree lifestyle. I had so many questions about their lives and how they lived them, and I figured there was no better time to dive right in. I probably didn't choose the best question to begin my investigation of the inner workings of these women, but nonetheless, I was enlightened.

"So, why don't you shave your armpits?" I mused.

"Why do you?" they retorted kindly.

Questioning my own answer, "Because I'm a girl...?" I sounded so shallow.

Met with a little snide one responded, "You don't have to shave to be a girl."

"I know," I didn't really know.

"So, why do you shave?" Again, the question was diverted back to me.

I really didn't know the answer. Why did I shave? Was I ever told I had to? Who started this madness? I attempted my answer, "At this point, it's a habit," I guessed.

"Habits can be broken, you know? It is up to you, if you feel better, or prettier, or Complete by shaving, keep doing it. It is just not something we find important, or necessary," they explained honestly as the truck was parked and the unloading began when the conversation died there.

Along with a lesson in shaving and femininity, I also learned showers were optional.

Girls can lift and handle a raft as good as, and often better than any person, hair products are not necessary, and make-up is Chap Stick. Societal gender roles did not exist on the river, but I felt as if it may be too late for me to resort back to my early perceptions of myself. I was also afraid I would appear to be mimicking a culture I did not belong. Yet, after a year, I was an adopted member and became comfortable with still showering daily, wearing mascara, shaving my armpits and sometimes my legs, building fires, pushing cars out of the mud, cleaning up campsites, and wearing comfortable clothes. My then boyfriend, now husband, liked me. I was past trying to pacify a stereotypical girlfriend facade and figured I could be myself and he would choose to like me or not. I would survive either way. Twenty years later, it seems to be working out, except the shaving part. I have pretty much given up on that. And, you know what? I am still a female, still feel like one, and I do not care if others wonder about it. They do not ever ask, because silence seems to answer questions for people who like to make assumptions.

Interpretation

I kept shaving. I do not really know why. Reflection makes me wonder if it was because I never considered myself feminine, and in comparison to my new friends and the status quo of femininity, I had a place to feel like I was the most feminine. That does not feel authentic to me though. Was being perceived as a feminine girl actually important to me? I still shave under my arms, but my legs are another story. Full transparency, I shave my legs if other people will see them. What is that? Why is that the reason I shave my legs? As I examine the feminine norms, I wonder why I have to wear a bathing suit when men wear shorts. I would feel much better if I could wear shorts to the pool. Why don't I just wear shorts? I still cannot answer this question, I guess I am still finding my way through this landscape of what gender means. I think I will wear shorts to the pool this summer. Becoming stereotype-resistant takes time, and I find myself backpedaling out of my own assumptions at times.

Classroom Connections

Reliving my own identity formation, I am able to correlate my teaching strategies and philosophy to these experiences. I package my varying perspectives from my own life and the lives of past students and make constant adjustments to how I create a caring culture in my classroom. I find myself scanning my classroom year after year asking myself how many of the young girls feel they have to wear make-up to fit the gender norms of their youth culture. I check out school materials, new clothes, and lunchboxes and wonder if they are accidentally falling victim to stereotypes. I work swiftly to find literature and articles to eradicate the stereotypes, to teach a new perspective, to wave the flags of persuasive media in the faces of stereotypes. However, it is important to just fit in while we are all finding our place, and middle school is just the beginning. Stereotypes are catapults for understanding a culture, therefore I find myself teaching students the importance of acknowledging stereotypes for what they are. I ask my

students to develop a list of the boxes they fall in, and then I ask them to interrogate the stereotypes where they check the boxes. My job may not be to help students find their authentic identity, but I find a personal desire to help them acknowledge themselves.

Once students are able to view themselves as a human with a unique story, they are better equipped to see others that way. Being in the classroom with students, I try to find myself in them. I search for the kid who conforms, I search for the kid who does not trust me because I am White, and I read body language for signs of abuse and sadness, I assign writing assignments that are intentional in gaining trust and identifying how the youth culture plays a part in their individual identities. My experiences allow relationships to revolve around trust and a multitude of perspectives. I begin the year with safety in mind by asking students to self-identify. I offer my own pronoun preference in my personal introduction to allow students who are LGBTQ+ to feel comfortable in my classroom. I share stories of my junior high times in order to let students know I am aware of cultural differences, and I ask many questions while offering different perspectives.

Culture

And how many years can some people exist
 Before they're allowed to be free?
 Yes, and how many times can a man turn his head
 And pretend that he just doesn't see?
 The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
 The answer is blowin' in the wind

(from Blowin' in the Wind, Bob Dylan and Tom Petty, 1963)

Culture is the second topic discussed in this chapter. Working the topic into a theme I find that our culture is not singular, it is compounded by the multifaceted nature of our identity. Misguided in my notion that I do not have a culture because I do not have roots with an ethnic or racial culture of people allowed me to immerse myself into a plethora of cultures. These cultures

may not be mine to claim, but they have offered perspective into how my identity is my own.

This section discusses how my cultural immersion takes shape within my personal identity, and has afforded me the privilege to help students sustain their own multifaceted cultures.

Youth Culture, Then and Now

When I was growing up, I was free to roam and was encouraged to ride my bike with friends until the streetlights came on. Today's youth culture checks in every hour and make sure they have their cell phone on and their location activated. One thing that has not changed is the middle school students' desires to feel accepted and to stop at nothing to defend their tribes. As I scoured my memories for significant moments in my teaching career, I circled back to a brave kid who defied gender stereotypes and wore a dress.

The Boy in a Dress. *As an eighth grade teacher, we volley for who stays back on overnight field trips. This was the year I stayed behind with students who 1) didn't want to go, or 2) had disciplinary issues that caused them to lose that privilege.*

On the first day that the majority of students were away it was a nice spring day, so we spent some time outside. I was talking to two other stay-behind teachers when we noticed a circle forming a few yards away from where we were standing. If you are not aware of circling middle school students, that is a definite signal to scope out the scene. The source of the circle was a beautiful sundress hanging on the frame of a perceived male student. I heard the group telling the student how beautiful they looked, how brave they were, and I beamed with delight. I assumed they were not being nice. Intending to place myself in the circle and behold the unfolding of events I was headed off by the administration pulling this student aside and demanding that they change clothes. It all happened so fast.

I redirected my attention to the dispersing circle and noticed that most of the students were outraged. My rapport with the students is good, so I planted myself in a conversation with a spoke of the circle. Their outrage stemmed from this student being forced to change clothes. I took stock and just listened:

“That’s not right.”

“He should be able to wear whatever he wants.”

“Why is his identity not important?”

“That’s who he wants to be.”

“Mrs. Kincaid, is he allowed to make him change?” they pleaded.

“He’s the boss, I guess he didn’t think the dress was appropriate,” I excused.

“But, he did it today to be safe away from the rest of the students,” they bemoaned.

“I think the principal thinks he is just trying to get attention,” I misguided the conversation.

“Yeah, Mrs. Kincaid, that’s the point!” they demanded.

“I’m sorry, there is nothing I can do,” I sputtered, as I believed this to be true.

Heads shaking, they all walked away from me.

This is literally where the story ends. As much as I understood the culture of youth, I was not willing to take a stand for them. My stomach still sours thinking about all the trust I lost with students that day. I just cannot seem to get over it.

Interpretation

Since then I have had conversations with my principal about both of our roles that day. He still asserts it was for attention, and I agree explaining that it was this student’s intention to

gain attention through approval. He may never concede, but he has agreed he mishandled the situation and would address it today with empathy. We cannot grow without mistakes. I allowed the power structure to beat me this day. I bellied up to “the man” and the “rules” and was living with actual regret for a couple of years.

I have seen this student in public since this experience; *she* was dressed beautifully and was authentically herself. I apologized for my silence the day she outed herself to her peers. She did not know I was silent that day, and insisted it was the best thing that could have happened for her. She proceeded to tell me the story of how she came out as a transgender female to her parents, which was a positive experience that changed her life’s trajectory. She went on to tell me that if I had pushed back on the principal she might not have gotten the opportunity to discuss it with her parents. In the middle of a busy sidewalk I was trying to make myself feel better by apologizing for something she did not even know I had not done. Thankfully, this dawned on me before the conversation ended and I asked her for ways I could support my identity-seeking LGBTQ+ students. First, she explained the need for silence on my part. It was not my place to defend her then, and it is not my place to defend her now. As a reminder of individual identity work, she explained that each person has different experiences and expectations, and it is their job to figure out who they can and should talk to. My job, as a true ally, was to stand beside my students when they asked me to.

Classroom Connections

My understanding of youth culture began with identifying the aspects of my own youth culture that formulated my view of the world. Youth culture is versatile, yet unique to each generation. There is little use of holding up my personal mirror for students to view the world. They must learn to ask for it. The middle school student is still learning to view themselves in

their own mirror and they still make the mistakes of assuming we all have the same image looking back at us. I have found that I first need to foster their abilities to take a close look at themselves before I ask them to look out the window at others. I am appreciative that I was able to speak with the former student. She enlightened me on how to be a better ally. Silence is sometimes important. I do not allow crude comments, assumptions, or misinformation to take shape in my presence, but I do allow my students to face challenges on their own, always letting them know I am here if they need me. One look around my classroom indicates that I am an ally. Along with my Safe Zone door sticker, I have queer-literature on my shelves, quotes hung from well-known LGBTQ+ advocates, posters that dismantle homophobic language, all of the LGBTQ+ symbols represented on my walls, and I wear a rainbow ribbon on my lanyard. This is how they know I am an ally: actions.

Cultural Immersion

One's culture is just as complex as one's identity. I have found through reflective and analytical analysis of my experiences that my identity is largely composed from the cultures I have been exposed. The following sections explore the cultures that have influenced my identity significantly, and include West Virginia culture, hippie culture, Black culture, teacher culture, and the LGBTQ+ culture. These cultures are all very different in many ways, yet maintain the single most important idea within my data analysis of culture: stereotype resistance.

West Virginia: Take Me Home Country Roads. I was born and raised in southern West Virginia. We rode bikes, got dirty, partied in the woods, cruised the mall, had days off for hunting season, and defended our own. We skied in the winter, rafted in the summer, hiked all year long, and cheered for Mountaineer football. I have been called a redneck, a hillbilly, White trash, and inbred, and there is a comeback to each one:

“Inbred? He’s my second cousin.”

“Hillbilly? Yeah, my left leg is only an inch shorter than my right.”

“Redneck? I can’t seem to reach back there to put on sunscreen.”

“White trash? I definitely know how to take the trash out.”

However, there is nothing more offensive than being asked where in western Virginia I am from. Everyone from West Virginia can commiserate. I once brought an adult friend and her husband to WV with me explaining several times we were not going to western Virginia, West Virginia is a separate state. Before we left, I did not know her assumptions about my state, but I soon found out that she was steeped in the stereotypes.

It was a three-hour drive to my home state of Wild Wonderful West by God Virginia, and it never once occurred to me that my adult friend had only one picture of West Virginia in her mind. We popped off the interstate a few exits early to allow for a real, twisty-turny back roads experience for my friend and her husband on the way to my parent’s home. As we sped up to feel the roller coaster effect in a series of humps on the road she looked over to me and said, “This is exactly what I expected.”

I peeked out of the window and saw mobile homes, cars on cinder blocks, and a dog tied up to a pole in the middle of a yard. I wasn’t sure whether to feel ashamed, annoyed, or indignant. She proceeded to ask when we would hear banjo music. Understanding the allusion to the movie Deliverance, I quipped, “That was filmed in Georgia and South Carolina.” It wasn’t the first time I had heard such remarks. I bided my time, waiting for her reaction to my parent’s house.

We pulled onto my parent’s road and the trees enveloped the sky above us, mimicking a tunnel of foliage. Possibly the first thing you see as you pull into my parent’s

drive is a little shed my dad made to store his tools and cover the firewood. I wondered if she saw this first as well and panicked with the thought of sleeping there. I let it ride.

We pulled our luggage from the car and I opened the front door waving my arm as if I was presenting the Taj Mahal. My parent's home opens up like a dollhouse; from the foyer a view of nearly every room in the house is seen. Impressively, in the center of the house runs a stream, real trees and plants in a garden of rocks that line the natural ground below them. I like to tell people my parents have a six-floor house, in a sense it is true. There are six levels and six sets of stairs, but each set is only 2-6 steps. It is hard not to ogle over my parent's home. It is literally one of a kind, so I knew I had just busted a stereotype for my friend, until she asked me if they had to go to Virginia to get groceries. One thing at a time...

Yes, West Virginia is poor. Big companies cannot make a home in the state because there is not enough flat real estate, coal mining is, or was, the state's money maker but when out of state companies buy coal mines they do not care about the people and land they are getting rich from. To live in West Virginia you must have the innate desire to be adventurous in order to stay happy. There are not sports teams, or many museums, you have one or two favorite restaurants, and maybe a movie theater. True West Virginian's will literally give you the shirt off their back even if they do not have another one. The culture comes from the people.

One of those West Virginia cultures resides down by the river, and there is nothing more refreshing than the commune nature of the river hippies. The people that make up this culture are earth-loving, free-spirited, natural humans. At first glance, they are targeted for being "pot-heads" and vagabonds, which is only moderately true. To say it was a surprising turn of events when my buttoned-up dad decided to put his paddle in the water would be an understatement.

My dad, to my novice eye, was nothing like these people. My dad was outdoorsy-ish; he skied, raked leaves, and took me on walks to pick blackberries, but adventurous? Nah. Carefree? No way. Risk-taker? Never. I guess I did not know him all that well after all.

Don't Marry a Raft Guide. *My dad's mid-life crisis landed him in a raft as a white-water rafting guide. It was a blast! I rode with him often, and I met a new culture of people that brimmed with pure satisfaction in their place in the world. A group of good-natured, physically fit, longhaired, stinky, pot-smoking folks made themselves at home in my evolving brain development. Their days began before sunrise, rising from campground tents, hungover from the night before to earn their spot on the campground by cleaning up campsites and gathering firewood before they headed down to catch their bus. Each trip was anywhere from six hours to three days, but no matter what, the day ended with live music, fires, and beers. These were the full timers. Then, there were the part timers, like my dad. These people had "real jobs" and guided a few trips a season. This is also a lesson for you, the reader: Before you get into a boat with a guide, find out if it is their full time job, believe me, you want it to be.*

I was seventeen when my dad started letting me stay for the "after parties," always with a short leash. If any of the guides were caught talking to me, we were both reminded that I would not be dating a raft guide. Here is something to know about my parents: I wasn't told I couldn't do something, I was encouraged to try new things, meet new people, go to all churches, and be friends with whoever I found interesting. I was never told I couldn't be friends with or date certain people. Reminder, I went to the river with my dad nearly every weekend each summer for years; my last three years with him there was as a teenager. I had a crush on at least three river guides at any given time, but

my dad is a force, and none of them made a move. But, I was so drawn to them. Their ability to love life, enjoy every minute, and ignore any form of status quo was invigorating.

Fast-forward a year. It was summer, I was home from college, and I had just broken up with a high school boyfriend when I was reintroduced to a guy I knew of in high school. He attended the local college, worked part time at a restaurant, and worked enough river trips to be considered a full-time raft guide. He lived this carefree, fun life. He took me hiking, he made me laugh, and he dismantled my need for plans and lists as he forced me out of my comfort zone and encouraged me to breathe into the unknown. It was great, and it would be an amazing summer adventure, or so I thought.

Fast-forward twenty-five years. We are married, two kids, two cats, a dog, a house, and three cars. This is my life. So, dad, I can't do what?

Interpretation

The natural unfolding of my identity within this culture grew from my earliest memories of being an independent kid foraging through the New River Gorge that was my backyard. In a sense, this culture of river people is how I first understood a West Virginian to be. From my earliest years, my family and friends spent the weekends and summers outdoors. Somewhere in my adolescence the exploration of the outdoors wavered and I lost myself in an unfortunate manner. I was no longer a gymnast, I was a dancer. I was no longer a swimmer, I was the lifeguard. I was no longer adventurous, I was predictable. I was lost in finding myself. This culture of river people brought me back home, to a place I belong: West Virginia. It is part of me. I hold so much love for all the people I met within this culture. I attribute my deep sense of

loyalty, my willingness to be adventurous, and my constant desire to make every day matter to the people and places I was privileged to encounter through deep felt West Virginia culture.

Classroom Connection

I pondered for a long time about how this culture impacts my teaching, as most of the kids in this culture are homeschooled, commune style. These kids do not usually end up in my classroom, but my classroom practices should reveal them as windows for others. These perspectives and lifestyle choices exist in our society, and are an integral part of my personal identity. My cultural identity is sustainable within the classroom as well.

Black Culture

As a White girl living a privileged life in a small town, my worldview was limited to my family and neighborhood friends. Without explicitly knowing, I was learning about Italian and Asian cultures through my friendships, but in the 1980s we were working in a culture of sameness, so at the time these cultures and traditions did not resonate with me as part of my identity. The first culture, separate from my own, that I knowingly experienced was Black culture. However, I was still living in my privileged bubble that did not hold space for true enlightenment of the experiences of others.

My junior high was once an all Black high school, so it was settled in a community of color. There were bars on the windows of my school, and there were a few drive by shootings across the street. On my first day of junior high there was a fight between two girls where a razor blade was pulled across a face. I had a Black principal and several Black teachers. We watched *Roots* and learned about the social construct of race. I learned if I was going to fight I needed to take my earrings off, put my rings on, and pull my hair back because girls like to rip out hair.

The majority of my guy friends were Black and they came to my house often. One night, my dad was bringing a few boys home; it would take me decades to understand the events of that night.

Drop us at the corner. *“Mr. White, you can just drop us at the corner,” one friend said.*

“No, I’ll take you all the way home, tell me where to turn,” my dad was insistent.

“Mr. White, we can’t have a random White man bringing us home, it is dangerous for all of us,” the other friend pleaded.

And just like that, we dropped them at the corner and drove away.

As we were driving home in silence, I asked my dad why it was dangerous for all of us if he brought them all the way home. I was so confused, my dad is not one to back down, so I was at a real loss as to why he didn’t bring them all the way home.

“Nicki,” he began, “it is a different world over here,” he finished in finality.

Silence. That was the last of it. I did not push my dad for more, and I never asked my friends follow-up questions. But it made me sad, and several years later as I drove one of those same friends to his doorstep, I found myself locking my doors as I drove away. Damn. I let silence win.

Interpretation

I surmise that my experiences on the outskirts of Black culture led me to UNC Charlotte’s doctoral program. I contemplated online PhD programs and neighboring universities, but was drawn to UNC Charlotte’s drive to lift up marginalized voices, promote equity in schools, and dismantle racist systems. If I tried to guess the reasoning behind the night above, I would be making assumptions in a place I have no weight. More than anything else, what struck me that night was my dad’s silence that never circled back to a lesson or task that

solidified his understanding of the experience. Maybe that is it; his lack of guidance allowed for personal exploration and understanding. Maybe he was wise enough to understand his agency in this culture was zero and his comments and assertions were moot. Maybe, he was just as befuddled as I was. This was the first time in my life I witnessed a difference in how people lived. Now, I understand my privilege and acknowledge my ignorance was tainted with naivety. I never questioned why all of my Black friends lived on the other side of town or why I was never invited to their house. I just picked up my bubble and carried it around with me. Must be nice, huh?

Classroom Connections

I was lucky to have my junior high experiences. I learned United States history from Black teachers, so when I taught U.S. History in the eighth grade I was a little confused about the curriculum that withheld Black history. As an adult, teacher, and parent I was appalled and made sure to teach more than “slavery.” I taught my students to stop saying “slaves” and begin using enslaved people, I merged Shirley Chisholm into our lessons on Congress, illuminating the first Black Congresswoman, and explained that Dr. King was not alone in his plight for civil and equal rights by including Bayard Rustin as the man behind the scenes of the March on Washington. Revisiting my experiences and merging them with my doctoral education I understand my desire to continuously push for places and spaces to build a culturally sustaining community stems from my multifaceted perspectives and desire to understand.

Teacher Culture

I have been a classroom teacher for nearly twenty years, and there are some differences among folks within my profession. For example, elementary school teachers have a level of patience I cannot hold, high school teachers are tasked with relaying a great deal of content,

while middle school teachers are literally stuck in the middle. We are in the purgatory between childhood and young adulthood, holding on to as much patience as we can muster and enough content to keep them occupied. As a middle school teacher for fifteen years, I find myself shifting my curriculum to encompass all of my identity-seeking students. However, being a middle school teacher, I have seen the spectrum of teacher identities: those who only care about the output and intake of content, those who refuse to set boundaries and practice routine, those who want all students to behave and perform the same, and those who are honestly there for their summers off. A full staff meeting can be very telling for an outsider. A few years ago, my school had a professional development about LGBTQ+ students. I was keenly aware of the topic at this point, and spent most of my time watching my teacher peers.

Not Everyone Gets a Sticker. *The things you notice when you know what you're looking for is illuminated in this narrative. It was during a doctoral course about power and privilege, that for the first time in my academic career, LGBTQ+ culture was brought to the forefront. A month or so into this course my work life and scholar life collided in a beautiful way. We had just finished reading Cris Mayo's book, we met and learned from a transgender woman, and I had just posted a handmade sign that read: "I heard you say, 'that's so gay.' What I am sure you meant to say is, 'that's so foolish or absurd'" when my workplace school held a professional development for the staff on support and acknowledgement for the LGBTQ+ culture.*

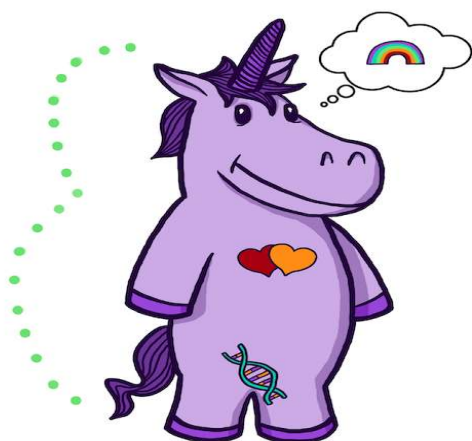
A cisgender (gender identity matches sex assigned at birth) male gave the presentation, and we learned all about the gender unicorn:

Figure 4

The Gender Unicorn

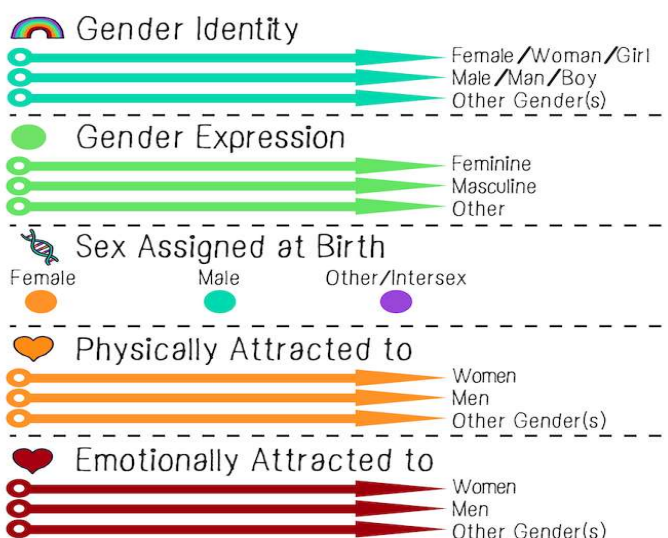
The Gender Unicorn

Graphic by:
TSER
Trans Student Educational Resources



To learn more, go to:
www.transstudent.org/gender

Design by Landyn Pan and Anna Moore



We were told how gender is a continuum, and how sexuality is also a varied approach of attraction depending on sexual and emotional attractions. The staff was asked to think about times they fell into a masculine role and vice versa, and then we were asked if this changed our perspective of our own gender. No one answered, but there were whispers. A large portion of the time was spent discussing transgender individuals, so I started whispering to my coworker how this was all wrong. The conversation should not begin with how we should be able to identify transgendered students, the conversation should be about appropriate and inclusive teaching for all students. It is not our job to identify, out, or question any one person's identity.

So, for an hour I watched and listened as my peers rolled their eyes, began scrolling on their phones, and eventually tuned out completely. What a shame. What a valuable missed opportunity. Until the end when my principal said in two minutes all

that really needed to be said after the presenter started passing out “Safe Zone” stickers to our staff.

“Just wait a minute, not everyone gets a sticker. Not everyone is equipped to be a safe space.” Turning his attention to his staff he said, “An hour of professional development does not make you an expert. However, it is your duty and responsibility to teach all students, to be accepting of all students, and to not allow bias to inform any of your decisions. We are here for the sole purpose of educating within a safe environment.”

Amen, preach it, thank you.

I displayed my Safe Zone sticker above the entrance to my classroom, not as an expert, but as an ally.

Interpretation

It is true not all teachers are equipped to post the Safe Zone sticker, but they should be. This has been the only professional development from my school or my county about LGBTQ+ population, and still, not everyone gets a sticker. Analysis of this narrative and the experience leaves me wondering why we do not include the LGBTQ+ culture in our cultural proficiency trainings. As I sit through district-mandated training I am grateful for the opportunity to learn, and more grateful that the district, as a whole, is experiencing some of the content I was privileged to learn during my doctoral program. Watching my peers’ feign interest and eventually giving up the illusion of pretending to care gives meaning to my work. It also ignited a real fire in me to do more than post a sticker and pretend that was enough to make students feel safe. The more I think about this training, the more I feel it was just a check mark for our school; yep, staff is Safe Zone trained, get those stickers up. Most teachers work for the kids, we thrive

when we can enlighten them, and are thrilled when they enlighten us. This particular training illuminated the need to hear voices from the LGBTQ+ youth population for teacher training.

Classroom Connections

I am concerned that the move toward cultural relevance is leaving LGBTQ+ youth out, which is detrimental to this community of learners and exclusionary in promoting culturally sustaining pedagogies. I work diligently to include the cultures of all my students, which always includes the often-silent culture of LGBTQ+ students.

LGBTQ Culture

As with all cultures, I am still learning, allowing new perspectives to organically formulate my identity. I have made too many assumptions about this culture that have slowed my understanding. I do not know how many gay kids have sat in my classroom, how many who were questioning their gender or sexuality, nor how many felt that being gay was an abomination. The following narrative explores my progress from earlier narratives to illuminate the need for better teacher education.

The Dilemma at Open House. *Open house is my least favorite day of the school year. I hate it. It's always a blur of parents, new students, old students coming to say hi, siblings of students, grandparents, nannies...all coming to meet me, well, other teachers too. By the end of the two hours, my face hurts from smiling, I have a stack of notes about IEPs, 504s, and "we will need a conference as soon as possible," and a desperate desire to wash my hands after shaking upwards of 200 hands. Oh, and my feet and back are killing me, because let's be real, this is the only time I wear shoes that hurt my feet, my stomach is empty, and I need a drink, I need a drink just typing that.*

Some teachers are really good at filing the information from open house:

“So-and-so’s mom seems really needy,” they say.

“Who?” I never know.

“Did you see Jake? We have his sister this year,” they prod.

“Who?” see?

I envy it a little, but I truly believe I am in survival mode, I am an introvert, I abhor small talk, and crowds make me anxious because I am always looking for the escape. However, open house, 2018 was a save forever file in my brain.

It was closing in on 7pm, I was exhausted and starving when a mom and her kid walked into my classroom. Sidebar: I was a waitress in college, and there was nothing worse than the customer who came in ten minutes until closing time. This felt like that moment. I was not going to put on my fake smile and ask them what their favorite book is. I was right, I didn’t. Immediately I could see anxiety plastered on both of their faces, so I approached with a half-smile, it was the most I could muster, and an extended hand while greeting:

“I’m Ms. Kincaid, what’s your name?”

The kid’s face mashed up into a mix of anger and sadness searching the ceiling for the answer, “My naaaa, my naaaammeee is Er....Erica.” and the tears unloaded in shockwaves.

I’m going to brag a little here, I never claimed humility. Without missing a beat, I responded with, “No. Not the name on your birth certificate, YOUR name, what is it?” I mean, come on, that was pretty good, right? I know, as long as I was right about my assumption. Believe me, that story wouldn’t have made the cut.

Mom looks at me and pulls me in for a hug. I am not a hugger. I take it, I even

give a little back, this poor mama. Kid looks at me, and says with shoulders back, tears drying, "My name is Nate." Whew.

"Nice to meet you, Nate."

I've spun mom, like she doesn't even have words for a minute, but when she does finally find the words, I want to shove them down her throat. She says, "Nate has been diagnosed with a mental disorder called gender dysphoria."

Mmmmmkkkkay. Mental disorder? Thankfully, my brain sometimes works as a filter for my mouth and I didn't say what I was thinking, and honestly, I had never heard of gender dysphoria.

New search: "gender dysphoria"

Output: "gender dysphoria refers to psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one's sex assigned at birth and one's gender identity" (APA, 2013).

I'm a little less upset with mom, but she needs to drop the "mental disorder" from her interpretation.

Back to my story. I ushered them to the door to find our counselor, this needed to happen fast because it was already 7pm and no one waited long before scooting out the door. Thankfully, we caught her. I've worked closely with this counselor, specifically with LGBTQ+ topics, and I knew she would provide valuable information for my new student Nate. Together, we helped Nate and his mom change his name and gender in our district database, and sent them off with support group information, doctor's names, and smiles.

This felt good. I was so proud of myself. Gross, I know.

Nate and mom left, and the counselor and I stood side by side watching them go,

like watching our last-born go to college, I thought as my eyes welled up with tears.

“Yeah, so, Nate was Erica last year” my counselor said.

“I know” duh, I retorted.

“No, you don’t. Nate was Erica last year, and the year before that, here, at our school, with our students” she attempted to explain.

I gave her a blank stare. Actually, it was probably irritation.

“Nicki!” she nearly yelled. “The other students have only known Nate as Erica, and now they will need to address him as Nate, a boy, not Erica, a girl.” I definitely saw the disappointment in her eyes as she literally had to spell it out for me. Ego, deflated for now.

Luckily, I had picked up a best practice a few years prior of not calling student names at the beginning of the year. Instead, they have a notecard they write their preferred name on and decorate with color and images that match what they see reflected in their identity mirror. Nate was quite content sharing his plaque and real name, and things began smoothly. There were a few missteps from students, friends from previous years, that would accidentally misgendered or call Nate Erica. They were friends. There was no malice. I never witnessed any malice, and my ears were on constant standby when Nate was around.

However, these innocent misgendering events would put Nate in a tailspin. I checked on him daily, talked to mom regularly, kept the counselor in the loop, but Nate couldn’t seem to dig himself out of depression. Diving deeper into their lives, they were also homeless. This was a mess, and I was not equipped. Nate failed most of his classes, but aced his standardized tests. The further along the year went, the less work he did, and

the more absences he stacked up; we were losing him. I would love to end this story that matched my gloat early on, but it ended with a kid who barely passed 8th grade, still couch jumping with a mom who now claimed disability for her child's mental illness. It's really easy to judge from the sidelines, but there are free services out there that we provided for you, and they were not used. This makes me sad. Was there anything else I could have done?

Interpretation

That question is a continuous loop in my thinking as I am cultivating relationships within my classroom. Initially, I felt I had all the tools I needed to help this student become a successful student who was able to be authentic. I looked forward to being the teacher that read queer literature, called out defamatory language, integrated gay rights into my curriculum, and changed this kid's life. I do not know if I made a difference with this student, but I do know that I must do more to understand the homeless culture. Rereading this narrative and reflecting on my words and actions, I recognize that I was only focusing on one element of this child's identity and culture. Actually, this particular student did not hold culture in the LGBTQ+ community, was unaware of the existence of support groups, and did not want my ally ship. Maybe if I had used the culture of artists that this student connected with, or worked harder to find the full identity of his culture, he would have felt success.

Classroom Connection

Through the years I have made conscious decisions to remove heteronormative practices, include the lives of everyone sitting in my classroom, and provide content and literature that encompasses the LGBTQ+ cultural population. With each new experience I continue to add to my perspective collection and remind myself that my work requires me to be stereotype-resistant

in order to promote a culturally sustaining classroom. Using culture to ground my intentions provides opportunities for my students and me to partake in honest discourse around social and systemic discrepancies for justice.

Teaching Philosophy

I'm gonna make a change
 For once in my life
 It's gonna feel real good
 Gonna make a difference
 Gonna make it right

(from “Man in the Mirror”, Michael Jackson, 1987)

My teacher education courses did not fully form my philosophy of teaching and learning. I did learn about Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Bloom’s taxonomy, brain development, and how to administer a reading diagnostic test. I always wanted to be a teacher, and through this journey of self-reflection and analysis I find it easier to understand my passion. From my first day in a classroom, I wanted students to learn and to know that they are liked and safe in my classroom. I did not understand this as philosophy, and I did not learn this in my formal education. I learned this through my relationships and the cultures in which I immersed myself. I allow myself to weave all of my current and past relationships within each culture I am, or have been, a part of to formulate my place in the classroom.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

I did not learn about Ladson-Billings’ culturally relevant pedagogies in college, as she was formulating her theories toward the end of my schooling. As I read, researched, and learned about the tenets of CRT. I found myself smitten with her theories that found a home in my own philosophy. For me, student learning was not an option. I knew that every child could and would learn. I used their own youth culture to guide problem solving and intellectual growth. I always pulled literature from various cultures to include in the curriculum to emphasize the need for

cultural awareness. Initially, I was not as adept in facilitating critical consciousness, possibly from my very real privileged life I was not “woke” to social inequalities the way I should have been. Eventually, I assigned current event articles to my students that culminated in a fishbowl discussion. These discussions allowed for conversations that included different perspectives from my students. Sometimes I found myself facilitating a discussion by offering perspectives that were not mentioned. I was mostly silent during these discussions unless discussions were one-sided, stereotypical, or insensitive. Over the years, I adjusted the form and expectations for our weekly discussions ensuring that all perspectives be heard and validated. I was getting there.

I persistently look for the strengths of all my students and consistently utilize individual cultural identities to bolster learning. One afternoon during a data dive with my grade level content team a coworker asked me why my Black boys were doing so well. Then, I had no idea. Now, I understand I maintain a culturally sustaining classroom. I graded essays based on content, and I did not take points off for language usage not considered proper English. I used stories that were mirrors for some of my students, and windows for others. I made sure that the videos we watched were culturally diverse, and the images on my walls were diverse. I encouraged talking in our class, and I held high expectations for every student. I taught with the platinum rule: Treat/Teach others the way they want to be treated/taught. During this time, I did not have the knowledge to identify these as culturally responsive pedagogies. However, once I began my doctoral program, I found myself searching for ways to maintain a culturally sustaining classroom.

I want to make sure every student in my class knows that their cultural identity is valued in their learning experiences. I aim to promote equity to ensure that all students have the access and opportunities they deserve to meet intellectual and moral growth. I also want to teach

students how to ask “why” again. When children are young their go-to question is “why?”, but sometime around school age, students are answered with “Because I said so.” Eventually children stop asking why and depend on the source as telling them the truth in facts. I implore students to ask me why they should complete an assignment I give; if I cannot answer them with reasoning that promotes understanding of a topic, concept, or skill then they do not have to complete the assignment. When I present students with something to read, we dive deep into who is telling the story, how their experiences influence the writing, what a conflicting viewpoint might be, and how we can work to solve the problem presented utilizing multiple perspectives. By allowing students to question me, the dominant power in the room, they learn that dominance is not always the only or the correct way to process information. The following narrative illuminates my desire to promote culturally relevant literature in my classroom.

Queer Lit Makes a Debut. *I was assisting one of my professors with a research project on the diversity within school libraries when I inventoried my own classroom library. I came up short in several areas of multicultural inclusion. I needed more Black women authors, more stories about people of color that were not vilifying or victimizing, and need at least one queer lit book and known gay author. How could I have a Safe Zone sticker outside my classroom and not have one single gay-themed book or author? This story comes in two parts.*

Part 1. *My language arts team was about to begin a unit on short stories, which typically focused on old classics, such as “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Necklace,” and “All Summer and a Day.” All written by old White guys. As the unit was approaching, my professor asked me if I would like to write an article about the infusion of queer-literature to help foster compassion in the classroom. Perfect. Yes. So, I found a book of*

short stories called Flying Lessons & Other Stories edited by Ellen Oh that not only filled the gaps of queer literature, but it held stories by Kwame Alexander, Walter Dean Myers, and Jacqueline Woodson, to name a few writers. As a content team, we chose six stories to read with our students, two of which had a queer theme: "Secret Samantha" by Tim Federel and "Flying Lessons" by Soman Chainani, These are two queer-themed stories, one gay author. I was making progress.

"Secret Samantha" revolved around the main character's personal identity and her struggle to understand her feelings for a same-sex classmate during a secret Santa exchange. After she was met with torment for insisting on being called Sam and having short hair, she retreated to Samantha and grew her hair. Then, a new girl shows up at school with black nail polish and military boots who doesn't allow the jeers to penetrate her thick skin. Sam pulls "Blade's" name for secret Santa, and Sam's mom picks out make-up as her gift, which did not go over well with Sam. In the end, she gave her skull shoelaces to go with her boots, but Blade turns them into matching bracelets that acknowledge their connection to one another.

Looking back on this choice as my first queer-themed story in class, I feel like I nailed it. It didn't victimize anyone, it wasn't a sobby coming out story, and the main character emerged unscathed and triumphant with a new sense of her own identity. I know you are wondering how the students reacted. They reacted without judgement in regards to the theme. They were highly upset with the mom, and disappointed when Sam allowed her identity to be pushed out by a few immature boys. They were compassionate, empathetic, and realistic. It was a relief, mixed with a sense of guilt for not incorporating a more diverse reading list earlier. Forward. The only way to go.

Part 2. Donors Choose is an organization that allows teachers to post projects and items they need or want for their classroom and donors from around the world can choose projects to partially or fully fund. The suggestion is to keep your project under \$200 to encourage donors to fund the project; I went all in with an \$800 wish list of diverse books, and within a week it was fully funded by a handful of donors. I had six copies of eleven new, diverse books, three of which were queer-themed, and not one of them was written by an old White person.

*I like to put the horse before the buggy sometimes, this was one of those times. I needed permission to stray off course and not follow curriculum resource guidelines, so I readied my case and presented it to my administration. It worked, but I had to send permission slips home. I compiled a list of the books complete with synopsis, and added two “safe” choices in case a parent did not want their child to be present in the 21st century of society. We would read the books in self-selected literature circles. I sent 122 permission slips home, and only one parent wrote in sharpie that their child would not be privy to the “indoctrination of a liberalist educator” and would read *The Outsiders*. Okay, so, gangs, murder, and underage drinking are fine? Fine by me. One hundred and twenty-one parents allowed their child to pick any book they wanted! Of course, there were bumps in the road; some kids choose books that were 120 pages, while others had 400+ pages, but there weren’t issues with content, inappropriate conversations or unpleasant inferences.*

Interpretation

Admittedly, I still struggle accepting the perspectives of those parents who do not want their children to read books that illuminate a variety of cultures and experiences. Through all of

my narrative accounts, analysis, and reflection I do not own stock in the perspective of someone who does not want their child to have varying perspectives of a culture. That is not part of my identity, personal experience, or moral understanding. However, I am currently pondering if the grudge I am holding is at all helpful to a culturally sustaining classroom. After all, it is part of some students' perspectives, it is part of their home culture, and therefore it is part of their identity. How do I manage including moral beliefs that do not mirror the goal of a collective classroom culture? I will work to withhold the deficit lens I initially used and instead I will work within the classroom community to infuse the cultures represented in my class in order to keep moving forward in my progress of inclusive teaching and learning practices for all of my individual students.

Classroom Connection

A lot of good came from that unit. Later in the year, when we completed a research project, I had seven students present on gay rights, and one present on conversion therapy (she learned about them from her literature circle book, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*). That was four school years ago, and I continue to grow my collection of books, and I continue find opportunities to infuse queer-themed literature and topics seamlessly into my curriculum.

Research Questions and Interpretations

In what ways do my reflections mirror heteronormative systems and practices?

Honestly, how do they not? My entire life has only seen perspectives from heteronormative systems. In my narratives, I wrote about what it means to be a female, and the roles and expectations associated with femininity. The ideas of what it means to be female obviously still resonate with me as I wrote:

I kept shaving. I don't really know why. Reflection makes me wonder if it was

because I had never been considered feminine, and in comparison to my new friends and the status quo of femininity, I had a place to feel like I was the most feminine. Was being perceived as a feminine girl actually important to me? I still shave under my arms, my legs are another story. Full transparency, I shave my legs if other people will see them.

I also rambled about not having a boyfriend, and being called a lesbian as an insult. The categorizing and grouping with binary genders, assigning a dress code according to binary genders, explaining to deaf ears the spectrum of gender and sexuality all mirror heteronormative systems in our schools. We still have gendered bathrooms. We are still asked for “two boys and two girls” to nominate for accolades and awards. We still ask for mom and dad’s information. We still ask boys to do the heavy lifting and girls to complete the clerical work. It is a mess of perpetuating an ingrained belief that boys and girls should have specific roles that cannot overlap.

In what ways have I recognized the individual stories of identity that students bring with them?

In order to establish a culture of community in my classroom, I begin each school year with the goal of getting to know each student. I do not assign seats. I let students choose their own seats, which gives me insight into who they are. I have learned that students who sit front and center are avid students that actively participate, ask questions, and prod for clarification. Students who sit beside my desk assume I will be there, and they often need a little extra attention, but quietly. The students who sit in the middle usually are quiet and want to blend in. There are also the students who save a seat for a friend, and others who ask where they should sit to make sure they do not break rules or sit somewhere they should not. I also give each student a large notecard to write the name each student would like for their classmates and me to call

them, and I take note of this on my roster as they introduce themselves instead of me calling roll. To further recognize the individual identities in my classroom the students create four squares on their notecard. Each square represents the student's family dynamics, religious, moral, and spiritual tenets of their lives, extracurricular activities and hobbies, triumphs in their first thirteen years, and fears and goals for the future. This activity gives me great insight into the progress of each student's personal identity development. I am able to see which students are still holding the mirror their family has provided. These students are finished with the project quickly, do not ask questions, or think too hard about what they should depict in each section. Some are unsure of their goals, some say they do not have triumphs, some view the task as busy work and write what they think I want them to write, and some never finish. All of this gives me insight into the culture that needs to take place in our classroom. While the students are working, I only ask questions, and I try to reserve comments. Questions, I have found, attend to the middle school child's need for attention and approval.

For me, respect is a huge component of success when working with middle school students and to gain their respect I must first give it. To accomplish this I actively listen and ask quality questions that prove I am sincere. I want to be able to offer my students the tools to identify different perspectives and use those perspectives to better understand themselves and the world. This is not an easy task because if you did not already know, teenagers know everything. Allowing them the space to figure things out onto their own benefits my objectives of understanding the individual student and fostering the development of individual identities. I let them emerge, and I do not prejudge. When a student's previous teacher wants to see my class list in order to give me information about students, I do not take it. I push against placing stereotypes

on children with the perspectives of anyone else. My worldviews are not that of anyone else, and carrying stereotypes perpetuates fear.

Which culturally relevant teaching practices seem to provide the most support for my LGBTQ+ students?

I find it difficult to delineate between supporting my LGBTQ+ students and supporting all students. This process has enlightened my understanding of why I view the world the way I do and has allowed me to understand that I lean into new learning with an open mind. I provided too much space in my thinking trying to answer my research questions with straightforward answers. This methodology is forgiving that way. I teach students, individuals who shine in their own light and deserve a space for belonging. Part of being culturally relevant is experience, but most importantly it is the teacher's willingness to teach the student, not just the content. The theory of critical literacy place a large role in what and how I teach my literacy classes. I was certain this autoethnography would tell the reader that, yes, queer-literature is a solid way to include the LGBTQ+ population. Hanging my Safe Zone sticker and other allied signs in our classroom would absolutely make the list of strategies crucial to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ students, and do not forget I foster self-identification techniques too. Yes, I believe all of those things help create an inclusive classroom, but I encourage fellow educators to begin with learning their own cultural identity, and then learn as much as you can about as many other cultures as possible to build the toolkit that fosters a classroom climate where all students are accepted and capable of learning. This learning must allow you to immerse yourself in new cultures respectfully. Listen, watch, learn, read, and find a gatekeeper to allow you access into the inner workings. Revisit past relationships that affect your life's theories, unpack them, identify biases, and find moments of authenticity in your personal identity.

Conclusion: What Does it All Mean?

Using this method of narrative reflections was initially very intriguing to me. After all, I am a language arts teacher. I set myself up with research questions and narratives in mind. I worked tirelessly to identify topics for my literature review allowing my research questions to guide my search. Through this process I answered more questions than I asked, and the moments of clarity were enlightening. I was not prepared to dip into my personal identity, but I was unable to find answers to my questions without a reflexive look inside. The process was therapeutic; I laughed, I cried, I discussed my parents, and I watered seeds that had yet to begin growing.

The middle school student is still learning to view themselves in their own mirror and they still make the mistakes of assuming we all have the same image looking back at us. I have found that I first need to foster their abilities to take a close look at themselves before I ask them to look out the window at others. Hearing and understanding all the stories of my students makes me a better person, and provide more perspectives to look through and ways to adapt to my teaching. Student stories have given me pieces of my life's theories and afforded me the ability to become a better human. The insight that my dad played an integral role in developing my culturally relevant pedagogies was unexpected yet salient. All of my relationships, including those categorized within the culture findings, fertilized growing seeds of my place in the world and my grasp on my own identity. Who I am is because of who we were. Each relationship, those mentioned and those not, fostered my growth as a person. The impact of these relationships allows me to recognize my desire to build relationships with my students. I find this the single most important part of my job. Sometimes, it is one thing in one moment that a person engages when a seed is planted.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The Growing Trees

Autoethnography provided a unique opportunity to access memories and experiences in order to explore theoretical concepts that may otherwise be lost. As I began to unpack my experiences that maintain a culturally sustained classroom, I found a myriad of experiences that directly connected my own developing identity to the practices that unfold in my classroom. Who we are and how we become is a result of the seeds our experiences plant. Through a garden of cultures, relationships, and seemingly insignificant events, tiny seeds are planted. With each experience a series of conscious decisions cultivate the seeds to grow and take root into part of the wholeness of identity.

In this study, I examined my role as a teacher working with my LGBTQ+ students through an examination of my own adolescence, general experiences, and my classroom practices. To do this, I examined my relationships, use of culturally relevant teaching practices, and personal cultural immersion. The intention of this study was to give an insider view of how my classroom practices promote an inclusive environment that illuminates the lives of LGBTQ+ people as a component of cultural awareness and acceptance. Chapters 1 and 2 described the study, examined literature correlated with my study, and set the stage for my autoethnography's purpose to uncover how my personal identity affects my classroom climate. Chapter 3 explained the methodology used to establish credibility to my autoethnography. My personal narratives, interpretations, and classroom connections unfolded in the fourth chapter. Finally, the fifth chapter culminates with conclusions, implications, contributions, and research opportunities for future studies. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. In what ways do my reflections mirror heteronormative systems and practices?

2. In what ways have I recognized the individual stories of identity that my students bring with them?
3. Which culturally relevant teaching practices seem to provide the most support for my LGBTQ+ students?

The following section unpacks the theoretical framework used to guide this study.

This study was theoretically framed with queer theory as a lens to transform normalizing categories beyond binary definitions that upheave the stratus of power structures (Meyer, 2007). A qualitative research approach was used for this study and was conducted through an autoethnography. Autoethnography retrospectively and selectively examines and writes about epiphanies that are made possible through a particular cultural identity (Ellis et al., 2011). Illuminating the personal nature of autoethnographies, this study was written in first person and offered the readers an opportunity to join the journey, not interpret or analyze.

For this study, I situated myself as a teacher in my 8th grade English language arts classroom and I explored substantial events from my own adolescents. I reflected, listened to, interpreted, and analyzed the data to construct my personal identity as an ally for LGBTQ+ students by isolating experiences that provided insight into my classroom practices. All of my data was presented in the form of narrative vignettes. This style allows for insiders and outsiders to become part of my story in order to experience my experiences (Ellis et al., 2011). I investigated my personal experiences of gender and sexuality and examined my classroom practices and pedagogy in relation to my LGBTQ+ students. In Chapter 4, I revealed my journey of self-awareness in relation to my own personal identity and how I play a role in promoting a safe, inclusive classroom for all students by highlighting the LGBTQ+ culture. Initially, I had eight narratives written and coded for topics. Within the eight narratives, I was able to identify

six topics: *relationships, culture, teaching philosophy, identity, silence and gender roles, and stereotypes*. From the six topics, three themes emerged; *identity is formed through people, cultures, and experiences; cultural immersion diversifies my identity; and my teaching philosophy is a direct result of my experiences with others*. In addition to the initial eight narratives, Chapter 4 presented specific epiphanies written as narrative vignettes realized through initial data analysis. All names and places are pseudonyms and therefore this study received IRB exemption.

These findings raised questions about the implications of including LGBTQ+ people as a cultural component within all educational curriculums. In Chapter 5, I offer recommendations for policy development of content curriculums, teacher training, and future research.

Identity Development

Taking for granted that we are who we are without influence from societal norms is naive and dangerous for LGBTQ+ people. The mirror being held for our LGBTQ+ students can distort personal identities, especially when policies, systems, and practices resort to dismantling equality.

During the Obama administration, a federal task force to prevent bullying was created. A directive for same-sex partnerships to benefit full legal rights was initiated, and “don’t ask don’t tell” was repealed to allow LGBTQ+ people into the armed forces. There are multiple steps to promote the safety and equality of transgender and non-binary individuals, and national landmarks visibly represented the history that includes LGBTQ+ culture and people (obamawhitehouse.gov, 2016). Under Obama’s administration, The Department of Education and the Department of Justice told schools that they needed to treat transgender students according to their gender identity under the Title IX law. Weeks into Trump’s presidency, the

policy was reversed. Statistics from GLSEN's 2019 study indicated a steady decrease in victimization based on sexual orientation from 2007-2015, yet from 2015-2019 the data has flat lined, finding no real improvements. In the past four years, students report that their peers are less likely to defend against homophobic remarks than in previous survey results, and adherence to gender norms was significantly higher in 2017 and 2019 than previous years. I anticipate the next GLSEN survey in 2021.

Positive youth identity is fostered through strong relationships, especially relationships with teachers (Garvey et al., 2012; Kuh et al., 2005; Linley, 2015; Pascarella et al., 2005). Students in my classroom are not capable of losing my respect. Simple practices, such as offering product choices, allowing assistance in formulating the processes in which they gain information, and encouraging conversations promote a mutual respect in my classroom. Once students feel safe and validated in my classroom they have space to better formulate their personal identity. Students need treated as mutual players in their education. It is important that teachers stay abreast of current youth culture ideologies and trends in order to infuse them into daily lessons and classroom practices.

Specifically for my LGBTQ+ students I ensure that they can see themselves in our classroom. Through classroom wall displays, specific queer literature, queering binary and heteronormative curriculum and policies, dismantling stereotypes, not allowing harmful language, and identifying bigotry my LGBTQ+ students are able to sit authentically in their skin. It is important for their identity to not feel "othered" or feel like a victim. School based surveys could be administered to identify teachers and other staff who create an LGBTQ+ inclusive classroom. From the results, those identified teachers could offer suggestions, training, and

lessons to teachers who are ready to be an ally for LGBTQ+ students. The identified teachers could also mentor students who need an adult ally.

Heteronormative Practices and Systems

Jackson (2006) and Oswald et al., (2005) defined heteronormativity as a system that privileges the hierarchy of gender and sexuality through arbitrary, binary labels that insist on a societal acceptance of gender and sexuality (Toomey et al., 2012), falling short of acknowledging gender and sexual variants. Schools, by their nature, mimic societal norms that include the normative perspective of gender and sexuality being binary (Pascoe, 2007; Toomey et al., 2012). There are certain expectations for the binary gender roles (Jackson, 2006 & Toomey et al., 2012) that appear as hardwired givens for adolescents that are physically and emotionally struggling to find their own identities.

The term and notion of heteronormativity was not part of the 1990's conversation, yet reflecting on my adolescence I found myself deep in the binary:

I was not a lesbian, but I loved my girlfriends more than I loved any boy, therefore I was called a lesbian. During those times, I was met with outrage that I could not match, I didn't care enough to fight for my own heterosexuality—think what you want. Because I did not fight against the binary label, it must mean I was gay; I even had a teacher tell me I should probably defend myself if I was not.

I remember, vividly, lying in bed at night convincing myself that I was not gay. I did not actually understand sexuality; I only understood whom I wanted to spend time around. The thought of a teacher speaking up to encourage me to defend an identity that he perceived as my own seems archaic, but unfortunately not so outdated. According to GLSEN's (2019) survey results, over half of LGBTQ+ students surveyed heard homophobic remarks from school

personnel, and two-thirds heard negative remarks about students' gender expression. To put this in perspective in relation to culturally sustaining pedagogies, I was internalizing these words. A culturally sustaining teacher would have removed the name-calling, and allowed me a space to confront these messages with others and myself (Nash et al., in pub).

In *Miseducation: Why I Never Had a Boyfriend*, I battled my own gender expression stating, "by college I knew how to impose girliness in my appearance" ignoring my deep desire to dress comfortably over the tight-fitting clothes I wore to fit in with the gender norm of my peers. I was in college, still searching for identity, still falling for societal regulations, and I attempted to balance this with the youth culture today. The LGBTQ+ culture is not easily identifiable as ethnic and racial cultures. The natural judgement based on appearance becomes a nuisance when adolescents are working through identity development (Mathison, 1998) and do not self-identify as the perceived notions of others. Middle and high school students who do not conform to normative stereotypes are at a higher risk of victimization from their peers (Aspenlieder et al., 2009; Toomey, et al, 2012; Wyss, 2004), and often school adults (GLSEN, 2019). Comparing this data to my own, I find contradiction when students demand that school staff explain, "Why is his identity not important?" and "Why can't he wear whatever he wants?" when a peer assigned male at birth wore a dress to school. I witnessed to students defending another's identity more times than I have witnessed any victimization. I am not naïve. I have two teenagers of my own, and I know that hateful words are said behind an anonymous keyboard. I am also aware that students know that I do not allow hateful, discriminative language in my presence and the likelihood of that language being said around me is significantly lower than those who do not admonish such behaviors. These moments of clarity allow me to acknowledge my place as a culturally relevant teacher.

Students, teachers, administrators, and other staff need to work together to identify and then dismantle heteronormative systems and practices in their schools and classrooms. A committee of all stakeholders can work with school, district, and state officials to change policies and procedures that perpetrate heteronormative systems. In my classroom, I work to remove binary systems and identification. I also ask students to identify when I promote heteronormative ideologies in order to rectify my practices. All teachers should have the ability and willingness to challenge the systems that withhold inclusive practices from LGBTQ+ students.

Culturally Relevant Teaching

Culturally relevant teaching is typically tied to race and ethnicity, I implore that gender and sexuality be consistently included. Today, most English teachers and curriculum programs include diverse literature that window and mirror for our children of color, but I have yet to see a curriculum in my county that includes stories of LGBTQ+ people. When I include such literature through critical literacy, I must get administration and parent permission. The stereotypes surrounding LGBTQ+ people avoid personal perspectives of identity and focus on conversations about sexual relationships. Just as I would not suggest a heterosexual story about sexual relationships, I would not suggest this of queer-themed literature either. Encouraged by Paris and Alim's push to include the empowerment of students' voices to enact social change I facilitate these opportunities often. LGBTQ+ people should not only be included in curriculum, they should be included in the definition of culture and their voices need to be heard.

In my classroom, students are encouraged to diversify their perspectives. They are given opportunities to formulate their own ideologies through peer interactions, diverse content integration, and direct affirmation from me, their teacher. A continuous upkeep of my understanding of popular culture is a key component to a successful outcome for my student

learners. Social media is a friend to most youths; they adapt their identity choices, struggle over power, and find their political beliefs through the current youth culture (Best, 2000; Pertrone, 2013). Fostering all aspects of student culture includes our LGBTQ+ youth culture, popular culture, and current youth culture. To sustain identity in a pluralistic society “the many and the one need to remain vibrant” (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

Change begins with education. Gains in LGBTQ+ curriculum inclusion are on the rise according to GLSEN’s 2017 and 2019 studies, but they are growing slowly. Comparing the 2017 and 2019 GLSEN surveys, student respondents report a slight increase in available LGBTQ+ curriculum resources with the exception of a slight decrease in an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. The .1% growth of textbooks and readings, and the >.3 growth for LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula indicates a lack of state and national policies that includes the LGBTQ+ culture as a necessary component to inclusive education. Currently, California, Colorado, and New Jersey are the only states with a mandated LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum, while six states have restrictions on LGBTQ+ curriculum, called “no promo homo” laws. These states prohibit teachers from mentioning LGBTQ+ identities invalidating the individual identities of all queer students (Prescott, 2019). There are always consequences to actions as seen in the 2019 Trevor Project’s study, which found that 40% of LGBTQ student respondents seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, and more than half of transgender and nonbinary youth seriously considered suicide. Students who can visibly identify just one supportive educator in their school have higher self-esteem and feel encouraged to learn (GLSEN, 2019). GLSEN’s 2019 study found that nearly all students were able to identify at least one LGBTQ+ supportive school staff member, and 42.3% could identify eleven or more supportive staff members. These

are promising numbers for the overall well-being of LGBTQ+ students. Educators not only have the ability, we have the obligation to save lives.

Implications

Education and Curriculum

LGBTQ+ students are at a higher risk to experience harassment due to their gender non-conforming identity, and they are less likely to have access to LGBTQ+ resources (Wargo, 2017). In 2009, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) called for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics in textbooks and curriculum. However, the mass production of LGBTQ+ content and mandated curriculum inclusion may not be ideal for LGBTQ+ students because “the result is often the further marginalization of students from historically oppressed groups (Boler, 2004; Jones, 2004; Kavanagh, 2016; Mansbridge, 1991). Reflections and analysis of my use of LGBTQ+ content with eighth-grade students falls short of an inclusive classroom for LGBTQ+ students. In my state, LGBTQ+ content and curriculum is not available for teachers. Following a district pacing guide and state standards puts content autonomy in a small box. The use of queer-themed literature three or four times a year does not allow for a culturally sustaining classroom for LGBTQ+ students. Understanding my limitations, yet desiring full inclusion, I include LGBTQ+ posters, a Safe Zone sticker, a rainbow flag on my identification badge, my pronouns during class introductions, and immediate reprimand of homophobic hate speech. The education and curriculum mandates are not indicators of a culturally sustaining classroom when the classroom teacher has the knowledge and tools to inform the positive environment within the classroom walls.

Teacher Training

The University of Oregon Teacher Education Program threw their curriculum away and started over in 2008. Courses now include requirements for two “equal opportunity” courses that includes “Education as Homophobia” (Rosiek et al., 2017, p. 9) which happens to be one of the most popular courses. This is proof those teachers want to learn. Queer theorists (Kumashiro, 2002; Mayo, 2014) have demanded that education discuss and encourage learning about those who are oppressed regardless of their personal identification and to also acknowledge that there are pedagogical practices within the traditional curriculum that categorizes information in a heteronormative manner. States that are more progressive are taking action within public education. California’s Senate Bill 48 includes new contributions in curriculum standards: Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, European Americans, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans, persons with disabilities, and other cultural groups (California Department of Education, 2020). In 2012, all school districts in California adopted new standards to include LGBTQ+ curriculum, however, the California Department of Education will not have a fully functioning training program for teachers until 2021. I agree, it is admirable that California has taken the lead to include LGBTQ+ curriculum, however, without proper teacher training this could ultimately do more harm than good. A person’s implicit bias is an important factor when being tasked with teaching a truly diverse curriculum. Teacher training should begin with the exploration of personal identities in order to surface bias, acknowledge prejudices, and combat binary thinking. Current and future teachers should also be trained with queer theory so that they are better able to identify heteronormative practices and policies, have a full understanding of gender, sexuality, and culture, and learn strategies to queer their curriculum through different perspectives. Finally, teacher training must include culturally relevant

pedagogies within every course. CRT should not be isolated, as it should not be isolated in an elementary, middle, or high school classroom.

My own teacher training did not train me for CRP, queering a curriculum, or including LGBTQ+ resources. My relationships, experiences, and immersion in varying cultures prepared me for CRT. But, what if my experiences and relationships were not conducive to being able to have an open mind to new perspectives and different cultures? I see it everyday from teachers who were not part of the CRT movement and treat teaching like a factory of inputting information to get a standard output of information. For example, I overheard a student ask another teacher if he supported LGBTQ+ people. This teacher's response was, "I don't share my opinions with students." I work very hard to never tell a student they have given me a wrong answer, but I do not have a problem telling a fellow teacher they are flat out wrong. Therein lies the problem. Even if all teacher education programs promote and include an LGBTQ+ curriculum, we have thousands of teachers in the classroom who hold bias and misinformation about what it means to be a teacher. Within the country there is a swift push of cultural trainings for teachers, however, I do not see the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ culture within these trainings. The first step must be the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people as a culture within America.

Recommendation for Future Research

These data analyses and findings cannot be broadly applied. By attending to my own experiences, identity, and relationships, I was able to identify implications for current and future teachers to acknowledge. There are limitations to my study because it is independent and personal to me and should not be directly attributed to others. However, this study contributed to the field by providing insight into the complexity of multicultural ideologies that allow for a culturally sustainable classroom, specifically for LGBTQ+ students.

More research is needed on the comfort levels, knowledge, and bias of current classroom teachers in relation to LGBTQ+ students and topics. Research is relatively attainable in regards to college and university education curricula that include the LGBTQ+ population as part of their cultural studies, but more research is needed to identify professional development in K-12 schools. This should also include research around the curriculum inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics, themes, and histories within K-12 curriculum and standards. Research questions could include: In what ways does a school include LGBTQ+ culture into the curriculum? What professional development opportunities have been required or offered to help teachers support the LGBTQ+ population?

Within my school environment, heteronormative practices are not readily countered. In some cases, heteronormative and binary ideologies are privileged. More research is encouraged to identify state and district policies that do not unify the student and staff population. Furthermore, individual schools need identifiable measures to rework status quo policies that enforce heteronormative practices. Possible research questions include: What state and district policies promote heteronormative practices within K-12 schools? What measures are taken within individual schools that dismantle heteronormative practices? How do districts, schools, or classrooms use queer theory to remove heteronormative systems?

Summary

Middle school students are navigating a shift from being their parent's children to becoming independent individuals. It is a difficult time for all youth. However, LGBTQ+ students are even more vulnerable and require intentional inclusion. To ensure adequate inclusion, teachers must have appropriate and thorough training about the LGBTQ+ youth culture. Teaching teachers how to use a student's culture to their personal advantage as a teacher

will promote a desire for LGBTQ+ curriculum and classroom practices to be inclusive. Today's students need varying perspectives in order to feel comfortable navigating and including themselves in a diverse society. Ultimately, a re-learning of how to teach the whole child is imperative in our pluralistic society.

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