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It is better: An autoethnographic study; "why" it is and the perceived protective factors along the way

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IT IS BETTER: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY; “WHY” IT IS AND THE PERCEIVED
PROTECTIVE FACTORS ALONG THE WAY

by

Michael D. Cowan

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2018

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By

Michael D. Cowan

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It Is Better: An Autoethnographic Study; “Why” It Is and the Perceived Protective Factors Along
the Way

Abstract

by Michael D. Cowan

University of the Pacific
2018

LGBTQ individuals have many risk factors and have difficulty navigating going through school because of all the social issues. This study is an autoethnography that looks into the perceived protective factors of a gay male educator. I was challenged to change my dissertation to share my story of being a teacher and dealing with many different risk factors. My committee introduced me to autoethnography and shortly after, I was speaking with a student when the topic of the “It Gets Better” campaign came up. The student said to me, “Prove it.” My dissertation has been a living document with many changes. However, this is my truth of having to navigate being an educator in a small town and being gay. While risk factors are always present for LGBTQ individuals, the focus here is on the positive. The underlying explorations involve going back into the closet for my job, reflections, support systems, and how/why my life is perceived to be better.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Prolog

While coming from a family that includes mostly teachers, administrators, or those who work for a school district, I truly did not want to go into education. I started my career wanting to go in a different direction. My plan was to go into the Peace Corp and leave the area. I never really wanted to leave my little town, but felt it was expected because that is what gay men in little towns do (leave for the big city). This all changed for me when my grandmother told me about job teaching seventh- and eighth-grade English. While I was working full-time for a drugstore and planning on leaving in June for the Peace Corp, I thought it might be a great experience for me. I applied for the job and started teaching in January in the middle of the school year. I fell in love with teaching and working with students. I should say the rest is history, but this dissertation is the exploration of that history. I begin my dissertation telling about my start in education simply to open the conversation regarding the fact that I never thought I could be a teacher because I am a gay man.

Background

Educational research can be designed by considering subgroups of students who are not getting their needs met through traditional means such as from educational programs, other social agencies, or support from caregivers (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). One such subgroup of youth is students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ). LGBTQ students face many risk factors, which lead them to not being able to meet the expectations of education such as high school graduation and furthering their education in college. Research has shown that students who are a sexual minority face a greater adversity to psychological and educational barriers than heterosexual

students, including suicide, sexually transmitted diseases, substance abuse, social pressure, disownment, and harassment (bullying) (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Elze, 2007; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Russell, Driscoll, & Truong, 2002; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). This dissertation is an autoethnography of a gay male educator within the educational setting, including risk factors, resiliency, education barriers, and the harassment faced while coming out.

Before going further into the research questions and methodology of the study, I must first address my own cultural bias, autobiography, and autoethnographic story and how these pertain to this dissertation. While most autobiographers write about events that “significantly impacted the person’s life [...] and events after which life does not seem quite the same,” ethnography researchers “study a culture’s relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders and outsiders better understand the culture” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, pp. 3-4). Autoethnographic research is one way to acknowledge that the “researcher decides who, what, when, where, and how to research, decisions necessarily tied to institutional requirements, resources, and personal circumstances” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 3). The personal experience of the researcher can lead to research as well as choices made within the research process, “which lets you use yourself to get to culture” (Pelias, 2003, p. 372). Since the postmodern time period, narratives have been fueling social movement groups and “revealing truths about [the] human experience” (Riessman, 2008, p. 10). The collective research suggests I include my own autoethnographic overview at the beginning of this dissertation. The overview is what motivated my dissertation committee to suggest switching my dissertation into a full autoethnographic study. While this is an overarching look into my past, it sets the stage for the dissertation’s further inquiry into my past and examination of adversity (Chang, 2008).

Growing up in the Central Valley of California can lead to the perception that the liberal ideologies of most California cities are the same. However, living in the Central Valley with the highly dominant Catholic beliefs outweighs the perceived liberalness most people believe Californians have. In the mid-1990s, I began high school where the football stadium was named after a family member and most of my family taught or worked for the school district. It was a community where everyone knew everyone and always knew what you were doing. This led to many students leaving the town and traveling to bigger cities to explore and begin the self-identity process. Besides the after-football game orchard parties, there was not much else to do in the Central Valley, and many students who did not “fit in” traveled to cities like San Francisco or Sacramento. Having experiences like these at such a young age, I was able to self-identify and understand that I was gay. I knew I was different and not the typical farm boy of the California Central Valley. When I came out to my friends, it was not a shock, and I had much support. However, students in high school can be difficult, and being harassed by other students was a daily occurrence. I also found that coming out was very uplifting, and I found strength in places I never expected. In the time of “Don’t ask, Don’t Tell,” I was a target because I told. I was a target for most students and even teachers at the school. The words and insulting phrases directed towards me because I was gay made me not care about school or education. I only cared about getting out of town and connecting with the people who showed me support, as most of those people did not live in the same town. I had a few safe places on campus where I could go and feel like I would not be harassed. My “safe space” included in part the teachers who welcomed me and made sure it was a place for all students.

The turning point in my education was when a teacher first came to me after seeing me get harassed and tell me it was okay, that she knew other gay people. This was an important

moment in my life because I truly felt I was “population 1,” as I often would tell myself. I truly thought I was the only gay person in this town and that I had to travel to a big city to find another LGBTQ person. I was often told I was not welcomed in my town and I needed to leave like all the other LGBTQ people. I was even told by the LGBTQ community not to worry because once I turned 18, I could move to the big city and life would be better. However, this teacher introduced me to another teacher on campus who was lesbian, and the three teachers gave me hope and strength as I walked the halls. I was not alone, and I was not the only one: “strength in numbers.” At this time, I was well on my way to dropping out of high school and was not on track for graduation; but with the support and encouragement of these three teachers, I was able to come out to my family. I did not get the best reactions from my parents or siblings. However, I learned it took me time to be okay with me being gay, and I needed to give the same amount of time to my family. My true strength came when I told my Grandpa, a teacher at the high school I went to. I am sure he already knew because I was out at school and everyone knew, but I needed to tell him. One day, I went by his classroom and no one was there, and I said I had something to tell him. “I’m Gay.” Two little words with so much power and I truly thought the Catholicism was going to kick in and I was going to be disowned. He took a deep breath, and I will never forget his words, “I know, and I can live with that.” His smile and reassurance was all I needed. It does not seem like much, but it meant the world to me. My Grandpa helped me get on track and graduate from high school, and it was my Grandma, a principal and teacher as well, who gave me the jumpstart to get into college. After much self-reflection, I found it was with the teacher support that I was able to make it through high school and with much encouragement from my grandparents that I chose to get a post-secondary education.

It was years later that I began to question being out in my community. I started teaching seventh- and eighth-grade language arts in my hometown. I was scared to be back on a campus, and all the feelings and emotions came back to the forefront. I was terrified but I wanted to make a difference for my students. At that point, I started hiding who I was and was back in the closet after being out for over 10 years. It was difficult and I only shared who I was with people who were close to me. I eventually started teaching at the same high school I had gone to. It was difficult going back to where so many bad memories were held for me, but I wanted to teach and be there for students. There, I was able to teach with the two of the three teachers who made such a difference for me. I was able to find my strength again and to live my life. I don't think I was really enjoying or living my life until I rediscovered myself. I still have never come out to a class or to my students but was finally not scared anymore. This is when I started to question how I ever made it out of high school. I saw my students who did not fit the norm of the Central Valley and saw many of them have difficulties that I had. I began to question and reflect on what was the change in my life that made a difference for me. Could I reproduce that, could I be the difference? Was my experience unique or have other people received the same/different interventions that helped them achieve going to college? If so, can we as educators duplicate these interventions so students who are struggling will not fall through the cracks? Therefore, I wanted my research to focus on LGBTQ students who had come out in high school, who faced some form of harassment, and who were still able to overcome these difficulties and to find out what their leading factor in seeking a post-secondary education was. While these are more questions than can be answered in a dissertation, it is with my own self-reflection I have been given an amazing opportunity to do an autoethnography study for my dissertation. As an

educator and knowing the importance of self-reflections, I was excited and nervous to begin this undertaking (Chang, 2008).

While this dissertation did not begin as autoethnography, it is important to share how it was shaped into being. While doing the first proposal of my dissertation where the focus was on narrative research, my dissertation committee recommended I write an autoethnography or at least explore the idea. I have for a very long time been very picky about with whom I share personal information; I do not go in-depth but just discuss superficial parts of my life. Chang (2008) stated, “that doing, sharing, and reading autoethnography can also help transform researchers and readers (listeners) in the process” and it is within this “self-awareness and cultural understanding” my story can help add to the body of research (p. 53).

Statement of the Problem

LGBTQ Students face (or have the potential to face) major risk factors within the high school setting; however, many LGBTQ students overcome the adversity and move on to a post-secondary educational setting despite the risk factors. Students who face obstacles, including suicide, sexually transmitted diseases, substance abuse, social pressure, disownment, and harassment (bullying), are reported to be more likely to drop out school, have a lower-income job, and be less likely to enter into a post-secondary education (Horowitz, Weis, & Laflin, 2001; Mustanski, Garofal, Emerson, 2010; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Russell et al., 2001). Sexual minority youth facing such barriers at a higher magnitude is a reason or can be a cause for students to not complete their education and not seek a post-secondary education (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Russell et al., 2001). Despite the high risk LGBTQ students face when coming to terms with their sexuality, some students are able to overcome these barriers, graduate from high school,

and enter into a post-secondary education (Savin-Williams, 2005). The literature and some LGBTQ groups give some recommendations on what they believe will help students navigate high school and some recommendations to help educators help LGBTQ students, but there is a lack of connections as to why students enter into a post-secondary education and why/how they gain resiliency in the face of adversity.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to share my own autoethnography of why “it is better” with the hope that my story will be able to help other LGBTQ students/individuals understand the potential resiliency around them. Unlike most LGBTQ research, which focuses on the risk factors and the dangers LGBTQ students can face, this personal reflection focuses on the positive interactions despite the negative setbacks.

Research Questions

While developing my knowledge and understanding of autoethnography, I was working with a committee for my school district on suicide prevention strategies and potential trainings to implement for other teachers and students. It was during the discussions and in-depth conversations that we talked about the *It Gets Better Project*, a video project designed to share the message of hope of a better life outside of high school for LGBTQ students (Savage & Miller, 2011). It was later when I was sharing this information with another individual who was struggling that we talked about life as we get older and how it does get better. Her response changed my focus: “prove it.” While this is not a question, it is the driving focus of this autoethnography. This statement made me think about my own life and how things have changed so much for me. My life is better than it once was, and yes, I suffered and faced many of the same unjust trials and tribulations that so many LGBTQ students face, but it is in the face

of these prevailing risk factors that I have developed into the person I am today and gained the resiliency necessary to say my life is better. This statement is so unfair to have to make since I, like so many other LGBTQ individuals, should have not been given these scars or have been forced to go through any form of trials or tribulations just to live my life. While this dissertation tries to look at the positive aspects of the LGBTQ community, it is due to the inherent risk factors that the research questions were developed.

- Despite the inherent risks faced as a gay male educator, are there potential protective factors present?
- Is my life better?

Significance of the Study

Research has shown that students who identify as LGBTQ face higher levels of risk for suicide, mental health, substance abuse, and social pressure (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Elze, 2007; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Russell, Driscoll et al., 2002; Russell, Seif et al., 2001). Sexual minority youth can experience such risk factors at a rate 30% higher than students who do not identify as LGBTQ (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Research has also suggested many recommendations to help LGBTQ students while they are in high school (Russell, 2005). Research also shares with us that LGBTQ students are more resilient adults, and through the *It Gets Better Project*, many stories have shown that. Nonetheless, research does not look at the connection between resiliency and LGBTQ individuals. Research also does not look at LGBTQ individuals and the development of these perceived protective factors.

Methodology

This qualitative study uses autoethnography in a reverse chronology. Much of the research on LGTBQ individuals revolves around “self-identity,” to come out or not to come out,

and whether or not people know you are gay if you do not come out (Sedgwick, 2008). For a gay male and many other LGTBQ individuals, it is not easy to have the internal struggle of coming out repeatedly and experience fear, negative thoughts, self-doubts, and or simply the worries of whether a person is going to have an issue or how it might affect a job. For many LGTBQ, this internal dialog is played over and over within the mind and continuously reflected upon. By writing an autoethnography, the unique subgroups can be examined through “the study of self-narratives thought self-reflection is beneficial to cultural understanding” (Chang, 2008, p. 34). For many, the only way to understand the LGBTQ culture is through narratives and the reflections of each group. While LGBTQ issues are often lumped into one group in research, it is within each of these categories and identities we find very unique challenges despite facing many of the same adversities.

This autoethnography is analyzed by seeing ongoing trends and themes that become present throughout the different reflective experiences. These experiences “prompts the reader to think beyond the surface of a text, and there is a move toward a broader commentary; [which] can generate “categories” or, to put in differently, general concepts, as other case-based methods do” (Riessman, 2008, p. 13). This study investigated the relationship between my reflective experiences and potential resiliency factors. While autoethnography is defined as “autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation” (Chang, 2008, p. 46), it is hoped the reflective experiences will help others gain insight into the cultural aspects of the LGBTQ or help others going through the same struggles find strategies while dealing with risk.

Theoretical Framework

Resilience Theory looks at students who “have beaten the odds of life characterized by multiple risks [and] in developmental research, resilience is used to describe young people whose development is optimal in the context of significant adversity” (Russell, 2005, p. 8). Resilience can be described as “an end state of positive adaptation and development” (Russell, p. 8). Some of the aspects of Resilience Theory are more accepted than others. Resilience is concerned with how a child who has faced a “trauma or a toxic environment” achieves success (by social standards) through the means “of the child’s abilities, motivations, and support systems” (Condly, 2006, p. 213). Within Resilience Theory, there are four major models: invincibility, challenge, compensatory, and protective. For this study, the protective model framed the discussion for the results.

Definition of Terms

Adversity

Developing protective factors that allow people to become very successful in education and life (Savin-Williams, 2005).

Coming out

A person identifying and telling others they are homosexual or LGBTQ (D’Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Savin-Williams, 2005).

Grade Point Average (GPA)

The average grade points of a student (over all or by term) in their high school setting.

Graduation

Completing all the requirements and finishing K-12 education.

Harassment

“‘Gay-related stress’ stems from homophobia, heterosexism, prejudice and stigma as the causes of risk outcomes, which embodies harassment and places LGBTQ students as an ‘at risk’ category or population” (Russell, 2005, p. 8). “Unwanted behaviour related to a protected characteristic that has the purpose or effect of violating a person’s dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, or offensive environment for them”

(University of Brighton, 2016, p. 4)

Homosexual Youth

An LGBTQ person under the age of 18 or who has not graduated high school yet.

LGBTQ

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, & questioning (Sell, 2011).

Mental Health

Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. (World Health Organization, 2014, para. 1)

PFLAG

Parents, Families, & Friends of Lesbians and Gays group (McDougall, 2006).

Post-Secondary Education

Any education past high school.

Protective Factors

A person, place, thing, or event (action) in an individual’s life that helps the person overcome a negative person, place, thing, or event (action).

Resiliency Theory

Concerned with how a child who has faced a “trauma or a toxic environment” achieves success (by social standards) through the means “of the child’s abilities, motivations, and support systems” (Condly, 2006, p. 213).

Risk Factors

A person, place, thing, or event (action) in an individual’s life that causes harm; the person may not be able to overcome the negative person, place, thing, or event (action).

Sexual Minority

A person who is LGBTQ or could be perceived as LGBTQ even though they are heterosexual (D’Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Gup, 1998; Huegel, 2003; Savin-Williams, 1995; Sell, 2011).

Sexual Orientation

The attraction to the same or opposite sex.

Sexual Preference

The identification or label of the gender a person is attracted to.

Social Pressure

Harassment, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and persecution from peers, causing an individual to do something they may not want to do (even acting a particular way).

Substance Abuse

Having a problem with alcohol, drugs, and tobacco, or who cannot limit and are dependent upon alcohol, drugs, and tobacco.

Suicidality

The act, thought, or likelihood a person would end their own life.

Victimization

A person who is harassed (ongoing).

Chapter Summary

Research has shown that students who are part of a sexual minority face greater adversity to psychological and educational disasters than heterosexual students, including suicide, sexually transmitted diseases, substance abuse, social pressure, disownment, and harassment (bullying) (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Elze, 2007; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Russell, Driscoll et al., 2002; Russell, Seif et al., 2001). Nonetheless, some sexual minority students overcome the risk factors and become resilient adults, thus entering post-secondary education despite the odds. This purposed study examined what protective factors help LGBTQ students overcome adversity. Through the lens of the Resiliency Theory, the research questions ere explored and the answers are discussed. After obtaining IRB approval, an autoethnographic study was conducted.

Chapter 2 is an in-depth review of literature in the following areas: identification and problems within research for high school students, LGBTQ population, risk factors for LGBTQ students (suicide, mental health, STD, substance abuse, social pressures, harassment, LGBTQ student dropout rates), protective factors and resources, LGBTQ students and resiliency, and the *It Gets Better Project*. The topics where chosen because research shows that some students who come out in high school face risk factors at a higher level than non-sexual-minority students.

Chapter 3 explains the justification of the study and explores the autoethnography that was used. Chapter 3 also discusses how Resiliency Theory was applied as a lens to the research data.

Chapter 4 reviews the experiences of the author's time in education, both positive and negative, and his reflection on those experiences. The study was designed this way for me to be

able to write about and reflect on the experiences or events in my life in a more practical way.

Chapter 4 reviews three major time periods in my life (going into administration, working at the high school, and teaching seventh- and eighth-grade English).

Chapter 5 reviews the common themes found in these experiences and reflections about the different events. Chapter 5 also reviews connections to current practices and connections to literature.

Chapter 6 reviews and reflects on my themes founded in Chapters 4 and 5. In this chapter, I relook at the questions that drove this dissertation, particularly is my life better and where does this research go from here?

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Writing a non-traditional dissertation has been a challenge, and to write something so personal is truly something I cannot explain. I forced myself to write this dissertation for a few reasons and they are listed in the chapters. This chapter's data and information show the damage social norms cause the LGBTQ community. I am personally not a fan of research that is negative and that looks at adversity without hope. I pushed myself to do this for the hope that adversities for LGBTQ will be minimized and it will help future gay educators not have to be emotional scarred anymore.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify protective factors that helped LGBTQ gain the resilience to overcome adversity. The purpose of the study was also to share my autoethnography of why "it is better" now, with hope that my story will help other LGBTQ students/individuals understand the potential resiliency around them. Unlike most LGBTQ research, which focuses on the risk factors and the dangers LGBTQ students can face, this personal reflection focuses on the positive interactions despite the negative setbacks. My dissertation is not focused on a question but more of a statement of "proof;" it is developed around the concept that LGBTQ students/individuals are resilient and incorporate protective factors around them (Savin-Williams, 2005). It is also focused around the *It Gets Better Project's* notion that life gets better as you get older (Savage & Miller, 2011).

General Statement of the Problem

One characteristic of educational research is it looks into subgroups of students who are not getting their needs met through traditional means such as from educational programs, other social agencies, or by support from caregivers (Gall et al., 2007; McMillan & Schumacher,

2006). One such subgroup of youth includes students who identify as LGBTQ, sexual minority youth, or homosexual students. These students face many risk factors, which lead them to not meet the expectations of education such as graduating from high school or furthering their education by going to college. Research has shown that students who are a sexual minority face a greater adversity to psychological and educational barriers than heterosexual students that may include suicide, sexually transmitted diseases, substance abuse, social pressure, disownment, and harassment (bullying) (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Elze, 2007; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Russell, Driscoll et al., 2002; Russell, Seif et al., 2001). The LGBTQ student population can experience all these risk factors concurrently while trying to navigate the school expectations. While navigating the traditional pitfalls typical students go through during the teenage years, sexual minority youth encounter events that can be traumatizing, which can ultimately hinder their potential in life.

Population

Not only are there problems with putting homosexual students into one classification, but also the number of LGBTQ students in America high schools is mostly speculative. Research studies show inconsistent and different percentages of students who are LGBTQ (D'Augelli, Patterson, & Savin-Williams, 1995; Gup, 1998; Huegel, 2003; Sell, 2011). Though the following information reveals some very conflicting results, it shows that the LGBTQ population numbers are difficult to figure numerically. Some research says about 10% of the population of youth is homosexual, a number often used because of Kinsey's report in the 1948. His findings showed that 10% of the population was unsure of their sexual orientation. Nonetheless, more current research has been done: other studies show "between five and six percent of the youth are gay, lesbian, or bisexual" (Huegel, 2003, p. 5). Furthermore, Huegel (2003) said, "According to

the 2000 U.S. Census, there are over 49 million school-age kids in America. That means there are over two and a half million kids” who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual (p. 5). In addition, *The Seattle Teen Health Risk Survey* (conducted in 1995) surveyed 8,406 9th-12th-grade students and found that “9% either did not consider themselves heterosexual or stated that they were not sure. Of this 9%, only 1% identified themselves as gay or lesbian, 4% described themselves as bisexual, and 4% were not sure of their orientations” (Gup, 1998, p. 6). Within this survey, 9% of the youth could fit into the LGBTQ models. In a different study, conducted in 1992, the findings showed that “less than one percent of those who were sure about their sexual orientation identified themselves as lesbian or gay and another 10 percent were ‘unsure’ of their sexual orientation” (Savin-Williams, 1995, p. 197). Despite the differences in the numbers of LGBTQ students and population, these reports suggest there are LGBTQ students in our schools, and they are facing numerous factors that get in the way of their education attainment.

Identification

Students who fit into the category of LGBTQ are not easily identified for many reasons, mostly because they choose not to tell anyone. In the book, *The New Gay Teen*, the author Savin-Williams phrased this identification process by asking a series of questions:

You probably believe you’d know a gay person if you saw one. Chances are, you’re basing your judgment on particular characteristics that you’ve learn to associate with being gay. Maybe the person you spotted is gay. But what about all those you’d miss—those who don’t fit your image? And what about the ones who fit your image but aren’t gay? Who really is gay, anyway? (2005, p. 23)

Thus the questions of who is really gay, what does it mean to be a teenager and identify as gay or bisexual, and is it appropriate to use labels to understand different groups or students?

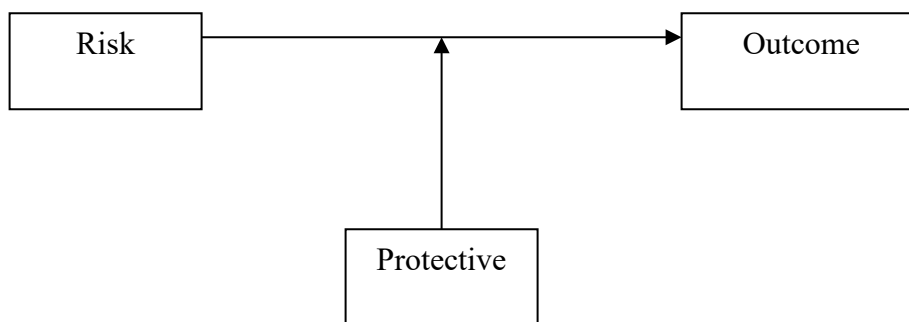
Sometimes a label does not work. As Savin-Williams (2005) described, teenagers are more likely to not self-identify as “gay.” Students are no longer self-identifying as “gay” but

“they have same-sex desires and attractions but, unlike earlier generations, new gay teens have much less interest in naming these feeling or behaviors as gay” (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 23). LGBTQ youth do not self-identify as gay, straight, or bisexual. Nonetheless current youth populations do not need to be labeled, even though “Survey research extracts responses by using generalized identifications for individuals that may not fully fit a given category” (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 24). Surveys that focus on sexual orientation may include questions such as: “How do you identify yourself? Check the appropriate box (check only one): heterosexual, gay/lesbian, bisexual, don’t know” (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 24). However, this question does not truly allow a person to fully answer the question. Often, people will check “heterosexual” because they are unsure or do not want to self-identify as any of the other choices. To overcome this limitation, some researchers use a different scale to help individuals self-identify, such as in the Shively scale (see Appendix A) or the Kinsey Scale (see Appendix B). However, both scales are very problematic, and researchers argue about the validity or political use of the scales (Sell, 2011). Identifying homosexuality is very difficult for researchers to do because of the range of self-identification and given factor of choice. Often, people use LGBTQ labels to try to incorporate everyone. Researchers have begun to separate out the transgender population because the transgender population needs different areas of study than the LGBQ population (Sell, 2011). For the purpose of this study, LGBTQ is used because it refers to the whole population that does or is struggling with their own sexual identity, and much of the research studies use the whole population to talk about the risk factors. While this study focuses on myself who is a gay male, it is hopeful that because most of the risk factors are the same within this group, the protective factors maybe beneficial to all.

Resilience Theory

This study employed Resiliency Theory to explore the risk and protective factors of LGBTQ students. As well, the analysis drew on the Resilience Theory. Resilience, as a research area, looks at students who “have beaten the odds of life characterized by multiple risks [and] in developmental research, resilience is used to describe young people whose development is optimal in the context of significant adversity” (Russell, 2005, p. 8). Resilience can be described as “an end state of positive adaptation and development” (Russell, 2005, p. 8). Some of the aspects of Resilience Theory are more accepted than others. Resilience is concerned with how a child who has faced a “trauma or a toxic environment” achieves success (by social standards) through the means “of the child’s abilities, motivations, and support systems” (Condly, 2006, p. 213). Within Resilience Theory, there are four major models: invincibility, challenge, compensatory, and protective. For this study, the protective model is a lens that frames the discussion for the results.

Protective model. The Protective model has been the most frequently studied model and can be defined by identifying an individual risk and its negative outcome (Hallett, 2009). Within this model, protective factors can be put into place to avoid unwanted outcomes. The protective model discusses adding protective factors and diminishing the risk factor, thus resulting in a positive outcome (see Figure 1).



Source: Hallett (2009, p. 28)

Figure 1: Protective model of resilience

LGBTQ Students and Resiliency

LGBTQ students are very diverse and hard to identify. Nonetheless, they are still part of our schools and often overlooked by high school teachers, administration, and school staff. This subgroup of students is a small population but faces all the same risk factors as well as other risks other teenagers face; their experience with risk may be at a higher level. Furthermore, these students have a great opportunity to become highly resilient adults, as understood in the following:

Finally, a nationally based survey reveals that those who have had same-sex partners since age eighteen did not differ from the general population on a number of variables, including happiness, job satisfaction, substance abuse, perceived health, participation in sports, nervous breakdowns, mental health problems, being punched or beaten, suffering trauma, knowing someone who committed suicide, having positive feelings, and having negative feelings. Another review of the literature reports few differences in quality of life based on sexual orientation. (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 185)

It is very hard to identify the protective factors for these students. However, it is clear that students who do identify as LGBTQ become the so-called “normal.” If the second goal is to have students live and become a productive member of society, it is important for a school to

develop protective factors at the school site for these students, so they can meet their educational goals and go to college.

Risk Factors for LGBTQ Students

LGBTQ students experience a large number of different risk factors they may need to overcome. Students who are LGBTQ are more likely to face the following risk factors: suicide, difficulties with their mental health, substance abuse, and resistance to social pressure, which affect LGBTQ students' education attainment. Russell (2005) also classified risk factors for LGBTQ youth as:

- coming out at a young age, which is associated with suicidality (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Pietrantonio, 1999; Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1991; Schneider, Farberow, & Kruks, 1989);
- coming out at school, which is associated with peer harassment and victimization (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002);
- coming out to parents, which is associated with suicidality (Rothe-ram-Borus, Hunter, & Rosario, 1994);
- conflict at home due to an adolescent's sexual orientation, which has been linked to running away (Remafedi, 1987);
- sexual orientation-based victimization, which is associated with psychological distress, personal homonegativity (Carragher, 2000), suicidality (Hershberger, Pilkington, & D'Augelli, 1997), sexual risk-taking (Carragher & Rivers, 2002), school drop-out and truancy (Remafedi, 1987); and
- gay-related stress (gay-related stressful events, negative attitudes toward or discomfort with homosexuality), which is associated with compromised emotional health, conduct problems (Rosario, Rotheram-Borus, & Reid, 1996), and suicide attempts (Rotheram-Borus Hunter, & Rosario, 1994). (as cited in Russell, 2005, p. 10)

Research on LGBTQ students has primarily focused on the risk factors affecting this youth population.

Suicide. Students who identify as LGBTQ have a higher rate for suicide, thoughts of suicide, or attempts of suicide than students who identify as heterosexual (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Espelage et al., 2008; Robinson

& Espelage, 2011; Safren & Heimberg, 1999). Most researchers concede that 30% of the LGBTQ or questioning students are in danger of committing suicide, have thoughts of suicide, or attempt suicide (Espelage et al., 2008; Savin-Williams, 2005); and in “The Child Welfare League of America” report, the writers found that in 2005, 45% of gay, lesbian, or bisexual youth attempted suicide, compared with 8% of heterosexual youth (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Through many different studies listed in “Prevalence of Suicidality and Contributing Risk Factors Among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth,” Nancy J. Gup (1998) found that there was “a 14-times greater risk for suicide attempt” (p. 12) and that LGBTQ students were “three to seven times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual male youth” (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 27). Despite these alarming numbers, it is significant that 70% of these individuals do not attempt suicide. Savin-Williams (2005) stated, “Given the documented levels of intimidation and harassment young gay people receive, the fact that the vast majority of them do not attempt suicide is noteworthy; it suggests that these teenagers have exceptional, but unacknowledged, coping skills and resiliency” (p. 184). This may be because “when school climate is perceived as positive, it may serve to buffer against the experience of negative psychological and social concerns among sexual minority youth” (Espelage et al., 2008, p. 663).

Mental health. Mental Health among LGBTQ students can be controversial, due to the fact that the research is not clearly defined. Nonetheless, researchers have found that LGBTQ students do have a higher prevalence of mental disorders (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D’Augelli et al., 2002; Espelage et al., 2008; Savin-Williams, 2005). The reasoning and findings support “stigma, prejudice, and discrimination against gay people create a hostile and stressful social environment that causes mental health problems” (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 184). There are some major problems with studies involving LGBTQ individuals and mental health mostly

because current research has not been done to confirm or dispute past findings, or there are problems with the ways in which the research can be done (2005). Again, there are more LGBTQ youth who do not have mental health issues than there are LGBTQ youth with mental health issues, and the LGBTQ population as a whole does not report mental disorders (Horowitz et al., 2001).

Substance abuse. Even though all teens may face peer pressure to use alcohol, drugs, and tobacco, “According to a 1999 article in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, GLBTQ teens are 50 percent more likely to use alcohol, three times more likely to use marijuana, and eight times more likely to use crack cocaine” (Huegel, 2003, p. 135). It is believed that LGBTQ students face higher levels of risk because of physical harassment, stereotypes, and because when teens reach out for the “GLBTQ community” they look to “bars and clubs” (2003, p. 135). Furthermore, LGBTQ youth look to these places because there “they feel comfortable expressing their sexuality” (2003, p. 139).

Sexual promiscuity. Another risk factor for LGBTQ youth is sexual promiscuity. Part of the Healthy People Government Initiative is “eliminating LGBT health disparities and enhancing efforts to improve LGBT health are necessary to ensure that LGBT individuals can lead long, healthy lives” (HealthyPeople 2020, n.d., para. 7). While the goal is to “improve the health, safety, and well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals,” this initiative cites that LGBTQ are more likely to engage in sexual activities and are more likely to contract a sexually transmitted infection/sexually transmitted diseases (STI/STD) or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (HealthyPeople 2020, n.d.).

LGB youth are more likely to report being sexually active, and report earlier initiation of sexual intercourse than heterosexual youth. LGB youth are also more likely than heterosexual youth to have had sex with higher numbers of sexual partners, and to have

been under the influence of alcohol or other drugs the last time they had sex (Gowen, 2011, p. 24).

Table 1: Differences in Sexual Behaviors Among Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Youth

TABLE 1. Differences in sexual behaviors among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual youth¹³			
	US Gay/Lesbian Youth	US Bisexual Youth	US Heterosexual Youth
Had sexual intercourse before age 13	19.8%	14.6%	4.8%
Had sexual intercourse with 4 or more persons	29.9%	28.2%	11.1%
Sex in the past 3 months	53.2%	52.6%	32.0%
Substance use before last sex	35.1%	29.9%	18.7%
Experienced dating violence	27.5%	23.3%	10.2%

Source: Gowen (2011, p. 24)

It is clear LGBTQ youth are more likely to engage in sexually promiscuous behaviors.

Some of the causes acknowledged for this increased risk behaviors are due to:

LGB youth are more likely to have experienced physical and sexual abuse as children, and that these experiences contribute to the likelihood of poorer sexual health outcomes. Discrimination and higher levels of violence and harassment due to one's sexual orientation, and lack of supportive resources also predict poorer sexual health outcomes, along with lower self-esteem and higher levels of anxious symptoms. (Gowen, 2011, p. 25)

The report *A Call to Action* shares that many sexually risky behaviors are a result of LGBTQ sexual education not being provided, and there is a "limited number of trusted adults they [LGBTQ] feel comfortable talking with about sexual health, so they frequently seek

information online or from peers” (Human Rights Campaign, 2015, p. 2). While this indicates the possibility of further risk factors for LGBTQ students, the lack of role models in the LGBTQ community, lack of trusted adults to speak to, and the lack of education for LGBTQ often lead LGBTQ youth to getting wrong information, getting misguided information, or even being victimized because of the lack of information.

Social pressure. Despite the level of research on the topic of homosexuality, there are still often negative perceptions towards homosexuals. Often LGBTQ students are faced with harassment, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and persecution from their peers. Additionally, many religious groups excommunicate homosexuals from their congregations. Furthermore:

If your religion teaches that it’s wrong to be GLBTQ, which belief may surface throughout the culture, not just inside the temple, church, or mosque. Religion and culture sometimes are difficult to separate as influences because religion can play such a key role in defining a culture’s beliefs and traditions. (Huegel, 2003, p. 147)

Students who are LGBTQ face the risk of social and family isolation or disownment. This pressure then could lead LGBTQ youth to other risk factors.

Harassment. “‘Gay-related stress’ stems from homophobia, heterosexism, prejudice and stigma as the causes of risk outcomes, which embodies harassment and places LGBTQ students as an ‘at risk’ category or population” (Russell, 2005, p. 8). Harassment is “Unwanted behaviour related to a protected characteristic that has the purpose or effect of violating a person’s dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, or offensive environment for them” (University of Brighton, 2016, p. 4). Harassment leads to emotional health issues: depression, self-esteem issues, suicidality, dropping out of school, substance abuse, and discrimination “regardless of sexual orientation, identity, or behavior” are all forms or endangerment of a student being “at

risk” (Russell, 2005, p. 9). However, when an LGBTQ student is harassed, he or she can face all these risk factors at the same time.

LGBTQ student dropout rates. The primary focus of this study was to look at why LGBTQ students graduate from high school. Why is it that some students are able to overcome risk factors/adversity and make it to graduation and move on to college, while others cannot? What are the protective factors for these students? In Huegel’s (2003) book, *The Survival Guide for Queer & Questioning Teens*, the author conveys that, “The 1999 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey reported a 20 percent dropout rate among GLBTQ students – that’s one out of five teens” (p. 74). If using the figures stated previously, there are 2.5 million LGBTQ students and a 20% dropout rate, which would mean about 500,000 LGBTQ students will dropout of high school. What is noteworthy is the fact that 80% of the population is not dropping out of high school. The protective factors for LGBTQ students have been documented and have been recommended by numerous agencies to help LGBTQ students make it to graduation. Out of these protective factors, what ones are working and how are these factors helping students make it to graduation and on to college?

Protective factors and resources. Research within the LGBTQ population is beginning to shift from focusing on the “risk factors” or behaviors and beginning to look at how or why LGBTQ students are overcoming adversity and why protective factors are helping student achieve different milestones they were not achieving before (Russell, 2011). This is explained further, as follows:

In the face of adversity many LGBTQ students develop protective factors that allow them to become very successful in education and life. Savin-Williams states that Elite-college recruiters view gay-identified high school students as an appealing new niche because of these young people’s assumed moxie, toughness, and resolve. Coping with the coming-out experience in high school breeds characteristics that colleges want in their students:

self-confidence, leadership abilities, and cultural awareness. (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 186)

About 1% of the student population self-identifies as LGBTQ. That leaves about another 9% out of a proposed 10% of the population that because of some type of risk will not self-identify (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli et al., 2002; Espelage et al., 2008, Savin-Williams, 2005). The “coming out” process becomes a protective factor despite the risk for many LGBTQ students. The question is how do we (as educators) make a school environment safe for students to take the step of coming out? While many resources exist for LGBTQ students, oftentimes they are not found or provided at the high school level or to high school teachers or counselors. These resources are not available to high school students because many people have the misconception that LGBTQ students are not at “their school.”

Positive Supports for LGBTQ

One of the major protective factors for LGBTQ students is having a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) group/club at the school site. This type of organization seems to have a positive effect on students' academic performance, social relationships (peer to peer, family, community), physical safety (at the school site), comfort level, and a sense of belonging to the school. In a study titled “The Impact of Belonging to a High School Gay/Straight Alliance,” Camille Lee (2001) categorized, “gay youth as an “at risk” population . . . believing that school-based support groups can help to counter the negative statistics in the lives of gay youth (homelessness, high school dropouts, drug and alcohol abuse, victims of physical violence, and suicide)” (p. 22).

Resilience can “come from supportive school policies, unconditional family affirmation, close friendships, or individual strengths such as positive self-esteem,” which can be provided or obtained by different motivational, organized groups, or school clubs (Russell, 2005, p. 7). The

first recommendation for any school site would be to contact the schools/communities' local PFLAG group (McDougall, 2006). This group should have information that can be given to students who may be facing risk at the high school. Secondly, more research into the student protective factors needs to be done. Finding other ways to see how LGBTQ students are successful in high school could help those who are not. Furthermore, more research needs to be conducted on identifying how many LGBTQ students are really at a school site. Also, as a community, the identification process needs to be clearly defined. Finally, Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN; 2009), author of *The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Middle School Students: Findings from the 2007 National School Climate Survey* makes the following recommendations:

- Implement comprehensive anti-harassment policies that specifically enumerate sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression as protected categories, and with clear and effective systems for reporting and addressing incidents that students experience;
- Support Gay-Straight Alliances and similar student-led clubs that address LGBTQ students' issues and work to improve school climate;
- Provide training for middle school [high school] staff to improve rates of intervention and increase the number of supportive staff available to students; and
- Increase middle school students' access to appropriate and accurate information regarding LGBTQ people, history, and events through inclusive curricula, library resources, and access to Internet resources through school computers. (p. 6)

The recommendations are geared towards middle school students; however, they are also needed within high school. The major recommendation from this point is to provide training for school personnel. The recommendations are needed at many school levels to provide the protection from the risk factors that LGBTQ students face. Schools should be a safe place where students are able to learn. GLEN's (2009) research has also shown that LGBTQ students can become very resilient adults. However, research has not looked at why or how some students overcome the adversity and become resilient adults. Furthermore, why or how do LGBTQ

students, despite facing higher levels of risk, go to college or make the choice to go to college?

By identifying these factors, schools can focus on specific recommendations and further help LGBTQ students obtain their high school degrees and reach for a college degree.

Resilience

Researchers who look at or study LGBTQ students focus on levels of harassment, mental health, suicide, dropout rates, and drug and alcohol abuse (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Elze, 2007; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Russell, 2005; Russell, Driscoll et al., 2002; Russell, Seif et al., 2001). Few studies have used Resiliency Theory when studying LGBTQ student issues.

However, when using the Resiliency Theory lens to investigate levels of harassment or protections, the California PSH survey, according to Russell (2005), found lower risk outcomes and resilience:

When students report that their schools have (1) specific anti-harassment policies, (2) teachers who intervene when they hear slurs, (3) a GSA or similar student club, and (4) information and support related to sexual orientation and gender identity, they score higher on multiple scales of resilience, including feeling that adults care feeling that teachers are fair, and feeling that students have a voice and can make contributions at their school. (p. 14)

The risk factors have been well documented, but further research in resiliency is needed regarding the protective factors that help keep students in school and help them obtain college access. Russell illustrates there is limited research in the area of protective factors of LGBTQ students and resiliency:

- attending a school characterized by gay-sensitive HIV instruction, which is associated with less sexual risk-taking among sexual minority youth (Blake et al., 2001),
- experiencing social support from LGBTQ peers and a preadolescent sense of difference related to homosexuality, both of which were linked to positive self-esteem in a study of gay adolescent males (Anderson, 1998),
- coming out, which is linked with positive self-esteem (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1999), or in another study being out to one's mother, which was associated with positive self-esteem for gay boys (Savin-Williams, 1989a)

- holding positive attitudes about homosexuality, which is associated with high self-esteem among gay male teens (Savin-Williams, 1989b). (as cited in Russell, 2005, p. 10)

The majority of LGBTQ research and the youth population have focused on the risks associated with self-identification as LGBTQ or “coming-out.” However, protective factors that help students become resilient is where current research is needed and will continue to develop (Russell, 2005).

It Gets Better Project

The *It Gets Better Project* was developed by Dan Savage and Terry Miller when they uploaded a video on YouTube speaking to young LGBTQ students/individuals with a message of “hope” (Savage & Miller, 2011). Dan Savage wrote the introduction to the *It Gets Better* book and explained that he and his partner Terry Miller created their video in response to the number of young gay teenagers who were committing suicide because they were bullied and harassed for being gay or were perceived as gay. Dan explained that through this project, he hoped to have 100 or so people contribute and create their own videos but was overwhelmed by the amount of support from people who created and uploaded their videos. These videos are available through YouTube and still provide the message of hope and support to LGBTQ teens. Dan also offered a unique point:

Thousands of LGBT adults who thought they were just going to contribute a video found themselves talking with LGBT youth, offering them not just hope but advice, insight, and something too many LGBT youth lack: the ear of a supportive adult who understands what they’re going through. (p. 6)

While the project was created to help stop LGBTQ students from committing suicide, it provides something missing for so many LGBT students/individuals: role models. Many LGBT students growing up do not know or see other LGBTQ individuals except through social media

and the Internet; the *It Gets Better Project* has helped bridge that gap. Dan also acknowledged that the *It Gets Better Project* “won’t solve the problem of anti-gay bullying, everywhere, all at once, forever, overnight. The point of the project is to give despairing LGBT kids *hope*” (Savage & Miller, 2011, p. 6).

Current Policies

While LGBTQ advocacy groups have been around for many decades, it has been in the last few years that major changes have taken place. Though LGBTQ individuals are no longer in the shadow of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” it was a military policy stating people are allowed to serve in the military but those “who revealed their sexual orientation were subject to discharge upon discovery” (JURIST, 2017, p. 1). “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” ended in 2011. Though California has been a strong advocate for the LGBTQ community, in some parts, it is only recently that policies and laws have started providing protections for LGBTQ youth. In 2012, Seth’s Law or AB9 came into effect. Seth’s Law requires school districts to adopt a policy that prohibits:

. . . discrimination, harassment, intimidation, and bullying based on these actual or perceived characteristics: disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, nationality, race or ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. (ACLU of California, 2012, p. 2)

AB 9 is a major achievement for the protection of the LGBTQ community and youth; however, it came at a high price: the loss of Seth, a 13-year-old who took his own life in 2010 after reporting being bullied at school.

A handful of states are proactive and currently have both anti-bullying laws and nondiscrimination laws, which specifically address sexual orientation and gender identity (GLSEN, 2017). The GLSEN has released a model district anti-bullying and harassment policy.

Even though this is not the standard policy for all states, it is a good educational tool to help provide the protections for all students.

Summary

Students who are sexual minority youth have the potential to experience risk factors that can lead the student down a path of not being a productive adult. Most research on LGBTQ populations focuses on the risk factors but not on the protective factors or the recommendations that help these students become resilient adults. Research also does not look at the recommendations to see if these proposed protective factors are helping students overcome the risk factors and if these factors are helping students pursue higher education.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of the study was to identify protective factors that help LGBTQ students/individuals. Research has shown that students who identify as LGBTQ face higher levels of risk for suicide, mental health, substance abuse, and social pressure (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Elze, 2007; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Russell, Driscoll et al., 2002; Russell, Seif et al., 2001). Research has also suggested many recommendations to help LGBTQ students while they are in high school (GLSEN, 2015). However, there are disconnects with the recommendations, protective factors, and risk factors sexual minority students face.

The intent of the study was to illuminate the protective factors LGBTQ students identify as leading to their success. This study drew on much research that clearly articulates the levels of harassment and dangers LGBTQ students face (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Elze, 2007; GLSEN, 2015; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Russell, Driscoll et al., 2002; Russell, Seif et al., 2001). Most of the research focuses on the students, the organizations (school/work place), and what they are not doing right. However, very little of the research points at what is helping LGBTQ students overcome these risk factors and become resilient adults (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002). For these reasons, and for the personal reasons articulated in Chapter 1, this study explores my self-reflections to understand difficult times faced throughout my educational career; and despite the inherent risk factors presented by these experiences, I show there were protective factors that helped me overcome adversity that can also possibly help other LGBTQ students/individuals.

In addition, this study drew from the Resiliency Theory. Resilience, as a research area, looks at students who “have beaten the odds of life characterized by multiple risks [and] in developmental research, resilience is used to describe young people whose development is

optimal in the context of significant adversity” (Russell, 2005, p. 8). In this study, Resiliency Theory is used to highlight reflections on positive interactions, which detoured a person from the potentially negative outcomes. By identifying potential protective interactions or factors, school systems can use them to train teachers, administrators, and or help write policies that will limit LGBTQ risk factors within the school systems. Using an autoethnography helps highlight these protective factors and potentially reveal the connections between perceived recommendations.

Qualitative studies have many different approaches, allows a researcher to collect data and understand “social actions, beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions” of individuals (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006 p. 315). For the purpose of this study, a thematic analysis was used, which allowed me to determine “thematic elements across the different reflective experiences and draw conclusions between the experiences” (Riessman, 2008, p. 74). It is thought that stories “prompt the reader to think beyond the surface of a text, and there is a move toward a broader commentary; [which] can generate ‘categories’ or, to put in differently, general concepts, as other case-based methods do” (Riessman, 2008, p. 13). The categories or themes were generated from the reflections and commonality of experiences.

Qualitative Study – Importance of Autoethnographies

Qualitative research uses data collection methods that allow the researcher to conduct the study in a more personal way and allows the researcher interactions with the participants, which ultimately allows the researcher to “reveal truths about [the] human experience” (Riessman, 2008, p. 10). Narrative “continues to be a tool for organizing and mobilizing identity groups . . . fueling a movement to challenge discrimination . . . [and] reveal[ing] truths about human experience” (Riessman, 2008, p. 10). It is with this in mind that this study utilized autoethnography. Autoethnography is literally broken down to mean oneself in relation to

culture and research (Chang, 2008). Autoethnography is described as a “useful and powerful tool for researchers and practitioners who deal with human relations in multicultural settings, such as educators, social workers, medical professionals, clergy and counselors (Chang, 2008, p. 52). Being an educator, a student, and a gay male, my unique story may provide insight into the culture of the LGBTQ community. Chang says there are three major benefits in writing an autoethnography:

1. It offers a research method friendly to researchers and readers;
2. It enhances cultural understanding of self and others, and
3. It has a potential to transform self and others to motivate them to work towards cross-cultural coalitions buildings. (p. 52)

The reflections will help others gain experience from the life of a gay male educator going through potential difficult times and, despite the inherent risk factors faced, these experiences may show that protective factors can help other LGBTQ students/individuals overcome adversity. It is important to note that these conversations and stories may help offer insight into the storyteller’s culture, which can lead to social changes (Riessman, 2008, p. 10). Autoethnographies are all very unique and different in their approaches and methodologies. Just like the stories they are telling, autoethnographers are all different and have an inimitable approach.

Arthur Bochner (2013) described autoethnography as a form of writing that allows the researcher to connect the “multiple layers of consciousness [and connect] the personal to the cultural” (p. 50). The use of autoethnography creates a level of research that allows individuals to make a connection with a cultural identity that they may not belong to or even know anything about. The experiences of the individual may also give insight into the challenges shared by the culture and conclusions may be drawn to help others. Brochner further stated:

Our work as autoethnographers invites others to become involved with a life, engaged with it, and responsible for doing something about what its tragic, qualities may signal or foreshadow; to commit to alleviate the narrative situation; in short, to make happiness more probable. (p. 54)

It is important to share through these stories that tragic experiences might have a message of hope, giving the “readers or listeners” a chance to acknowledge experiences and make a change (p. 54).

Researcher Role

While most autobiographers write about events that “significantly impacted the person’s life [. . .] and events after which life does not seem quite the same,” ethnography researchers “study a culture’s relation practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders and outsiders better understand the culture (MASO, 2011)” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 7). Autoethnographic research is one way to acknowledge that the “researcher decides who, what, when, where, and how to research, decisions necessarily tied to institutional requirements, resources, and personal circumstances” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 3). The personal experience of the researcher can lead to research as well as choices made within the research process, “which lets you use yourself to get to culture” (Pelias, 2003, p. 372). Since the postmodern time period, narratives have been fueling social movement groups and “revealing truths about [the] human experience” (Riessman, 2008, p. 10). This research is focused on the “self” and recognizes that the assumptions and research questions are driven from personal experiences and events.

Writing this section was a personal difficulty and despite being biased toward qualitative research practices, I have personally had to look at qualitative practices to search out my own biases. First, I am gay male who came out to friends and family during high school (about 14 or

15 during the time). Through my own experiences, I had to overcome many risk factors to achieve high school completion, and it was a very difficult choice to enter into college. I had many fears of getting back into any form of educational setting. However, my own supportive factors (protective factors) that helped me overcome the large amount of risk factors were, and are, my grandparents. Through their guidance and support, I was able to overcome many fears I had about going to college. On some level, this milestone in my life propelled my desires to research LGBTQ students and factors for these students entering college despite the challenges (risk factors) they may have faced in a previous educational setting. I elaborated on my experiences in Chapter 1, and I also analyze my own experience within Chapter 4. However, it is one's own narrative or assumptions that often propels the research (Riessman, 2008). It is through these assumptions and my own narrative that my autoethnography will be used as research.

Research Design

The design of this research study was based on the previously discussed criteria. The autoethnography was written in a reverse chronological order. While it is not typical to write a timeline backwards, it provides the means to begin with my own assumption that my life is better. Adams and Ellis (2012) shared in the *Trekking Through Autoethnography* that the reflections can be drawn up, allowing the readers to make a connection to the cultural identity. After writing my autoethnography, I analyzed my experiences by asking the following questions and looking for common themes within each answer:

1. What protective factors did I have around or did I seek out after a risk factor presented?
2. How did the protective factor help overcome the potential risk faced?

3. How did that risk, the protective factor, create a perceived resiliency?

The questions were designed to help draw a conclusion of potential protective factors that could be helpful to other LGBTQ students and educators. These questions also guide the readers to understand and gain insight into the cultural ideologies of being a gay, male educator and the inherent risk factors as well as potential protective factors.

Thematic analysis – Finding themes. After reviewing the different approaches to analyzing narratives, it was believed that the thematic analysis would provide insight into this study to gain a new understanding of the LGBTQ culture. The approach to thematic analysis is focused on the storyteller and the events and or experiences they can provide (Riesmann, 2008). Furthermore, thematic analysis can take the individual storyteller's narrative and create "social identities, group belonging, and collective action" (Riesmann, 2008, p. 54). It is within the thematic interpretations that data can be abstracted, which allows the researcher to focus on the events and or experiences of the different stories and thus develop general findings (Riesmann, 2008).

The analysis focuses on the events and or experiences of the researcher and not just short conclusions of words. By drawing connections to events and or experiences, the reflection can be analyzed as a whole and not taken apart (Riesmann, 2008). The data were analyzed for emergent themes of like experiences, events, specifically in this autoethnography, like protective factors (Creswell, 2007). After reviewing the emergent themes, the data are analyzed through the lens of Resiliency Theory. By connecting the themes within the experiences/events, Resiliency Theory was applied to see if patterns emerged from the perceived protective factors and risk factors and ultimately these outcomes could allow conclusions to be drawn regarding the cultural experiences of a gay, male educator.

Chapter Summary

Through the autoethnography, reflections, and experiences, this dissertation explores the potential protective factors and risk factors and reflects on any common themes that support the notion that my life is better. As Stated in Chapters 1 and 3, I faced clearly articulated struggles and difficulties in high school, chose to go to college, and eventually returned to teach at my former high school. In Chapter 3, I detailed the outline for my bias and offered my reflections to be analyzed and speak for themselves. Despite the autoethnography being inherently biased, the analysis and conclusion allow insight into the cultural identity and ideologies of a gay, male educator in California's Central Valley.

Chapter 4 illustrates my experiences in a reverse chronological time period. Chapter 5 includes analysis of the experiences and events while identifying emergent themes, which connect the risk and protective factors. The questions listed in Chapter 3 are applied to each event or experience. Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation with a review of these shared experiences and examines the current gap in the literature while making recommendations to address the need for protective factors for LGBTQ students/individuals.

Chapter 4: Autoethnography

Timeline and Reflection

Chapter 4 integrates events and my reflection of those events to help the reader better draw conclusions and make connections to potential protective factors. Chapter 4 draws a conclusion between the different reflections and connections made to determine if there are any similarities of factors that are overall apparent within my life experiences.

In Chapter 5, the reflections on my experiences and journals are explored for the potential protective factors that helped me navigate through my teaching, with hope of understanding how things got better. Reflection is a major part of an educator's life, and I have spent many hours thinking about my lessons and conversations with students, parents, and my fellow colleagues. I have dwelled on many of these events and hashed out what happened, what could have been done differently, and what I wished would have happened. Nonetheless, it is with internal dialogue that I explored these struggles, things that have helped me, and my narrative of being a gay educator. While Chapter 5 discusses the themes, Chapter 4 is designed to help the reader understand and make the same connections between my life and potential protective factors; it is these reflections for which meaning can be shared and found. Ultimately, I hope these reflections can bring a voice to LGBTQ educators and inspire future educators or administrators.

12/3/17

As I am working on my chapter 1 and I reread my lines over and over, looking for corrections and errors, I read the line that says: "My life is better than it once was, and yes, I suffered and faced many of the same trials and tribulations that so many LGBTQ students face, but it is within the face of these prevailing risk factors that I have developed as the person I am today and gained the resiliency that is necessary to say my life is better."

And I begin to cry. I get hung up on the idea that my life is better, and I don't know why I am crying because of that. The only reason that I can think of, I never truly/never believed that it would be. The fact that I am finally at the point that it is or at least what I think is better. Yes, do I wish or want more, or have dreams of other things?

yes. However, that is life and what I always thought of a good life is something I finally have. I am just shocked that despite everything, I have what I believe is “better.”

When I was first presented with the idea of writing an autoethnography (after asking what it was), I almost immediately dismissed it. For years, I have learned to downplay a part of who I was, found ways to dismiss myself, make jokes, and to recognize others’ discomfort with me being gay. Hence, ultimately, I got great with the pronoun game. For those who do not know the pronoun game, it is when you have conversations about your boyfriend/date but instead say words like partner, other half, and instead of “him,” you use “them,” “they,” “my date,” etc. My life became smoke and mirrors, shadow games, and truly, I felt I was back in the closet because of my profession. Within education, it is like the fear of coming out for the first time is always present and something that you have to do over and over again or hide in the closet. You do not come out once in a lifetime, but it is always on your mind. These events that I share express the fear, pain, happiness, or overall just difficult moments I have had in my educational career, whether it be someone outing me, me coming out to someone, or moral issues I have about working in a very rural area, or even the political climate. It has truly only been in the last three to four years that social standards have changed and the fear of the “don’t ask, don’t tell” mentality has seemed to fade from my day-to-day thoughts. There are many reasons why I can finally make this examination into my own life. Most of them come from the changes, growth, and personal pursuits in higher education. Throughout these chapters, I explore those growths, setbacks, and the difficulties going through them. While social standards have helped open many opportunities for the LGBTQ community, the personal growth and struggles within education are the focus.

While working in education is very rewarding and there are no true words I can share about how much I love my job, it has been often in my career I have questioned myself because of others' actions. These memories and experiences are the focus. Therefore, because of these interactions, I feel I have found my voice and found my "it's better."

Three years ago, I met my husband who inspires me in so many ways. In summer 2017, we were married on the White Cliffs of Dover England and we had the pleasure of having my grandparents, my mom, and some friends attend our very special day. Things have changed so much for me in three years. I love my husband but what works for us is the fact we do not need each other to be happy; we want each other in our lives. We both met much later in life and both are very successful in our careers. We are both very career orientated and driven by our love for education. Before meeting, we both were very happy with our lives and enjoyed working in education/careers. It is through that shared passion I have been able to open myself up to being able to share some of the more difficult parts of being a gay male educator and coming out at such a young age.

Chapter 4 is broken into three different areas based on my educational career and timeline. I start with my current job as a vice principal, for which I am in my fifth year. When I first started as a vice principal, I was split between two schools for two years. After my second year, I remained at one school site. The second part of Chapter 4 focuses on my years teaching high school. I was a single-subject 9th-12th-grade English teacher. The third part focuses on my first years of teaching seventh- and eighth-grade English and teaching adult night school.

Current Position – Vice Principal

I talk about my current position in life because being married seems to take away the fear, the pressure of people finding out, and the worry I have had about harassment. I have also

been at the same school for about four years and I am very comfortable with my staff. This past year, I did find out that not everyone has felt the same. I was approached by a spouse of one of the teachers, who asked if she could hug me. I am not the biggest of huggers, but I said yes. As the spouse gave me a hug, she began to cry. She expressed to me some very personal things about their family and the staff member not being able to go to their child's same-sex wedding. However, after working with me, the staff member has since opened a relationship with their daughter. She told me it was because of working with me that he has learned to find respect for the person not based on whether they are gay or lesbian. She went on to talk about her husband and the relationship he now has with his daughter. This staff member is a veteran staff for whom I have much respect, and I had no clue he was struggling with having a lesbian daughter and going to her wedding. This same struggle I, too, faced in reverse about my own father not being at my wedding. He said he did not have the funds to go to the wedding. Nonetheless, we have worked really hard to change the relationship we used to have. For many years, I did not talk to my dad or have him in my life. I have since learned that time, exposures, and making the choice to overcome the issues of others makes for improvement for the future.

Journal Reflection – My Dad

The first event I talked about was the relationship between a staff member and their daughter. I have since heard how their relationship has changed. It is much like the story of my father and me. My dad's relationship was changed because of a gift he gave me as a kid. While growing up, my dad would take me to work with him. He was a handyman and did all kinds of work from plumbing, electrical, tile, cleaning carpets, building bathrooms, kitchens, and fixing anything around the house. The gift he gave me is a strong work ethic and the love for building or fixing things. As a kid and early high school, I would spend many hours watching and

working with my dad. He always had some kind of woodworking project going on, working on the boat motor and fixing things around the house; if not, we were off camping, fishing, riding dirt bikes, and so many other activities. It was shortly after coming out that things changed. I did not speak to my dad much in my late teenage years or college days; however, it was after I moved home from college and bought a major fixer-upper house that we began to mend our relationship. I asked my dad to help me fix up my house, and we spent many days working together to get different projects done. It was through our work together that we found we had much in common and shared more interests. My dad is now one of my favorite people to do things with and, while this dissertation is not about my relationship with my dad, there are memories I feel the need to share (see Appendix C). It was nice to be able to share some of these stories with my staff member and his wife. It is an amazing feeling to be able to share my story and hear that this staff member is now going over to work on his daughter's house and to hear that they are developing a deep relationship with each other. Throughout my career, I have had many people be there for me and I have had to lean on them for support, but as I grow and develop myself, I am finding I am able to be the support and change for others.

This current year (2018), I have worked with other educators on developing the suicide prevention protocols for our school district. This committee has been tasked with updating our current policies to match the new laws requiring school districts to have post-intervention, intervention, and prevention protocols (California Legislative Information, n.d.). While on this committee, I have had the chance to share my research on LGBTQ and help provide the support to this community that has been overlooked in many different ways.

My dissertation chair told me my autoethnography will take on a life of its own and that I should let it. My dissertation did not start out with me sharing my story or the events of my life

but I was encouraged by my committee to open the possibility. The thought of me doing any kind of research dealing with the LGBTQ community was always something I wanted but was difficult for me. I had abandoned the community for my job and had pushed away from having anything to do with it. It was about half-way through my dissertation program that I was able to do an independent study class in which I was able to explore LGBTQ research and Resiliency Theory. During that semester, I explored the concept of going into the closet for my job. I was given the opportunity to speak at a junior college about hiding my being a gay male and realized that some people are doing the same thing for a job and no one is talking about it. This gave me insight to start exploring LGBTQ research. After leaving the proposal meeting and processing the next day I wrote:

Meeting for my proposal, I was asked to consider writing an autoethnography. After calling home and talking with my husband and giving him all the details, many questions came up about what it would look like, how I would begin, and what are the implications for sharing my story. My story is not so different than many other LGBTQ people who work in education. I feel like it's much the same but just not one that was shared with others. I think as we get older the coming out over and over, again and again it becomes tedious and daunting. It's fearful and painful and the what if, walking on eggshells, and I don't care just seems too much. Instead the fight to be who I am, it gets directed into the job, working too many hours for our students/school as almost a distraction from the part of me being gay or seems like a different closet to hide into.

The autoethnography process has been a challenge to fully understand. Journaling has been a great way to get out the emotions and allow myself to make more connection to the process and the research question. My husband, who has a Ph.D. and conducts research, has been very supportive and excited about this opportunity. While this process is very emotional at times and can be very difficult, Jarrett, my husband, has been here to listen to me and bounce ideas off of. Even though I did not want to go down this path, it has been with his support, encouragement, and enthusiasm that I chose to do this autoethnography.

Journal Reflection – Prove It

While I express my feelings and articulate some clear frustrations I have had working in education, it was when I was working with a student and sharing the *It Gets Better Project* that she told me to “Prove it,” and when my opinion changed. Yes, I had very difficult adventures in teaching and there have been some very emotional times when I thought about changing careers. Nonetheless, it always comes back to the fact that students make the job, and working with kids is the most rewarding, life changing, and best job you could ever have. This was the motivation behind writing my story and it is not to brush over the negative but to highlight the positive. So much of the LGBTQ research is focused on the many risk factors, and I did not want my story to be negative but positive, hopeful, and inspiring to other LGBTQ individuals wanting to go into the profession.

Despite feeling more and more comfortable with myself, mostly because I think I am comfortable with my job, the coming out process still lingers. It is much more well received but there is, and I think will always be, a hesitation before I say anything. The many coming out stories as a vice principal are much more different than those as a teacher. Even to this day, I still do not enjoy coming out and try to avoid it as much as I can. I think I still live with the words running through my head that I was told growing up (don’t remember from whom), “It’s no one’s business to know you’re gay.” I think that is the way I avoid the subject as much as I can. As a vice principal, there are different reactions from other administrators, teacher, staff, and parents. Some people have been very forward and will ask.

One of my principals (after working with them for a few months) asked me, “Are you gay?” My reply was, “You did not know?” She told me she did not like to listen to what people said and surely did not want to assume. While I can see how some people find this line of

questions and assumption offensive (as I do, too), this time I look at it a little differently. I have worked with a few different administrators, and the reactions I have received have not always been the best. I have often seen a look of worry, fear, doubt, and reservation when my bosses have found out I am gay. This was one of the first times I did not see those emotions but rather a look of concern and a look of not wanting to offend me. It was the first time I felt like a boss was truly supportive of me as a person. It was refreshing that me being gay was not in the forefront, but my abilities were.

While most of the people I work with and most of the administrators in my district are amazing people, not everyone is comfortable with gay people. As an administrator, I have never been overtly discriminated against. However, it is the absence of conversation from some people or the clear avoidance that makes it difficult. I am okay with people not liking me or wanting to talk with me, but in my opinion, it is a lack of professionalism that is more offensive. I know I personally do not agree with or care to work with some of the administrators in our district, but that goes for every profession or job. I do not and would never not talk to someone or avoid them because of a small aspect about the person.

While working with my parent community, I have grown close to many families. It was about the third year as a vice principal that I said something about my weekend travels. It was interesting because one of the moms pushed and asked more questions about who I was with. I finally tired of playing the pronoun game and felt comfortable saying I was with Jarrett (my now husband). The reaction I received was invigorating. The mom was very excited, and she embraced me in a hug and said it was about time. This was the first time coming out to a parent. It is a very small town and I am sure I have had parents who know my family and friends, who surely would have told them. Nonetheless, this was the first time I openly said so to a parent.

While the reaction from this parent was great, I did begin to question who she was going to tell. There is always fear not of the reaction but who they will tell and will there be fallout because of someone else? I was not concerned this parent knew. I knew she should would never say anything negative, but in a passive conversation, what if someone overheard that and was not okay with it? As an administrator, it is the running rule of do not do anything to get your name on the front page of the newspaper. I do not mean that me being gay in newsworthy, I just mean there is no reason to give people a reason to cause a problem. The sad reality about this is me being gay is not newsworthy, but unfortunately it is a topic of conversation.

Social media has also changed the reactions I have received. I have a Facebook page and love posting my travels. After teaching for many years, students come out of the woodwork, send messages, and add me as a friend. While I have posted pictures of Jarrett and me, I do not have to update my status or post things about being in love. While I do not remember the conversation directly, I do always ask Jarrett before posting things with his picture or of us together. However, all that changed. These last few years, I posted two different things that truly changed my reaction about coming out. I announced my engagement and posted pictures of my wedding. The fear I had about students, parents, and staff knowing I was gay almost seemed to change, and their comments challenged all the emotions that have shaped my world:

Congrats Mr. Cowan !!! I wish you guys nothing but happiness ! For 6 years you provided guidance and a positive influence for me and I can never thank you enough for that !!! -Hamlet 😊

I am so happy for you both. I am so happy for you! I am so happy for you!

Awwweeee... that makes my heart sing! Beautiful!

I have to give a special shout out today, on this man's big day! [Michael Cowan](#) I'm extremely happy for you and your husband! And I can truly thank you for everything you ever did for me and not giving up on me in my high school days. You put me on the right

track and I will always look back and know you were the only one who stood by me when no one else would. You showed me tough love but it made me who I am today. Again, congrats on the marriage and wish you nothing but the best from now and in the future.

One of the best teachers ever.

Dude beyond one to the best, love this man.

This makes me so happy.

Congratulation Michael!!! May your marriage always be full of blessings. You both look amazing.

Congratulations! May you be blessed to the moon and back!

Yeah!!! Congrats to you both!!!

Best Wishes to you both. And happiness forever.

There are so many comments and, seeing them, I am overwhelmed all over again. Many of the comments expressed so much happiness from students, parents, and people I work with. I was truly shocked with the responses and how many well wishes I received. I did not think the outcry of love and compassion from so many people would have been shared. While I do not go to church, I was raised in the Catholic church and still have “Catholic guilt.” I think this is why I was even more shocked that so many people were celebrating our marriage. I truly only posted and shared for the family that could not make it and wanted to see pictures. One of the best days was when I married my husband but also because of all the amazing people I have been able to have in my life. I know my life is better because of the amazing people I have had come and go through it.

Journal Reflection – My Husband

Over the last few years, I have to say my fears, apprehension, self-doubt, and the questioning whether it was okay to allude to the fact I am gay have diminished. This could be

because of the change in politics or because of many other reasons. Nonetheless, I think many of my own fears have changed because I am married to a man and I am not ashamed of that. As I reflect and journal on all the different reason for things getting better and why it is, I think it is because I always felt ashamed for dating a man. I felt like I was doing something wrong or it was just not okay. When over half the world tells you being gay is wrong, there is no way to not have a little bit of that present in your mind or simply believe it just a little. Now that I am married and with my husband, I do not feel any guilt or doubt, and it is so much easier to say “this is my husband” or “my husband and I did this” as of way of outing myself than it is to say I am gay. Also, maybe the fact that marriage is socially accepted and not hearing that marriage is bad my whole life makes it easier. The fear of saying, “I am gay” is so ingrained in myself, I do not think I will ever be able to overcome that fear, but I have found ways to do it without the same reservations.

It is important to know that this is no fairy tale and is my life. I was very content with being single and was very happy with my accomplishments. While meeting Jarrett and being with him makes me very happy, many times we have talked about how we would have never worked or stayed together unless we met at the right time. We are both so very strong-willed and very set in our ways. We work so well together and we have accomplished and developed much in our relationship because of the point at which we were in our lives. This dissertation has been very difficult to write, and fear of expressing some of my biggest emotional scars or thoughts causes me to feel reservation for publishing this research. Through the difficulty of writing, I tell myself that social norms can be challenged and changed through the power of a single voice. While I force myself to write, these deep-seated core beliefs, values, and struggles all begin to surface. While talking about getting married and knowing I have found so much

strength in being married, the internal struggle to get married was a difficult one. Even though I do not practice a religion, I grew up going to a Catholic church and going to catechism. I do not have any issues with my upbringing in the church and am still thankful for the experience. However, being told that being gay is a sin and that I am going to hell is a deep-seated statement that I do not think I will ever be able to change. Getting married and making that life-long commitment to a man was a difficult choice to make and almost felt like I was going against a core value. Even though it is not something I believe, I still felt like I was doing something wrong.

While I have had my job for five years and am very thankful for getting the position I did, I have often questioned why I got it when I did. This is something that has perplexed me for many reasons. I started applying for administration positions about six years before I was hired as vice principal. I did apply for other administration jobs outside the district and was offered two different jobs. I declined those jobs because I did not want to leave the district I grew up in and this is my home. I only applied for jobs outside the district because I was told I should practice my interview skills. The two jobs I applied for both offered me jobs. It took me about eight different job interviews to finally get a vice principal job. After every interview, I was told that I was too young, not next in line, was not the right fit, or better luck next time. It was a very difficult time in my life because I worked very hard to move up in my career and was being told by everyone around me how surprised they were “I was passed over again.” It was not until I had a conversation with a friend who is in the LGBTQ family that they too had been passed over for advancement. Through this conversation, I felt like we both were given the same parting line. We both were told that we might be better suited for a larger district. Now granted, things change, people retire, and progress moves forward. The patience of waiting, the desire for

working in my hometown, and not being willing to move paid off in the long run. Time and experience are very important in any job, and they have helped me make the growth I needed to be a good administrator.

I know it seems that I should have left and why would I fight to stay in an area that does not want me? I love where I work and love where I live, mostly because of my family, friends, and because of some of the people I work with. Despite a few bad apples, there are many other people, teachers, parents, my brother, sister, dad, mom, grandparents, and the rest of my family/friends that make this home. No matter where you live and work, it is about the community you build around you that you find the love and compassion to make it home. My friends and family are my support group and the reason I stay in this area. I have, over time, rediscovered faith in the district that I work in and a sense of feeling safe and not being discriminated against.

During this time, I found that I am not good with being complacent. While I did not get a job right away, I found other things to consume my time. These years are the years I started my doctorate program. Once again, I threw myself into education. This might sound like a negative thing but for me, but it is a place of comfort.

Journal Reflection – My Support (Grandma and Grandpa)

I have been blessed with much support in my little community. However, as I try and recall the emotions after each job interview, I do not have any feeling of let down but memories of visiting with my Grandma and Grandpa. Often, I would have moments of spending time and visiting with them. It was through their support that I was able to share my frustrations, listen to their experiences, and hear their stories that kept me motivated. It was conversations of how they got their jobs, how they dealt with situations, or worked with their administration that gave

me hope that being here and working here is worth it. Despite the time period/decade, there are always going to be people we work with who will have different opinions or different beliefs. My grandparents are some of the strongest people I know and some of the most morally fair in their ideologies. It is through our many conversations that I have learned to stop over-reacting and try and see how or where another person is coming from. It is from that point of view I can gain perspective and have empathy for others. The reason I talk about what I learned from them is because whenever I have been upset, I have been able to express my own emotion through the support of my grandparents. I am able to draw upon the stories they have shared or share my stories with them and trust their feedback. It is by being open enough to listen and hear what they have to say that I am able to make better decisions.

Journal Reflection – 9th-12th High School English

Writing about my time at the high school is some of the more difficult writing I have done. Working at the high school from which I graduated brings up so many different emotions. I was very blessed with getting moved to the high school even though the stress about going to the high school was so elevated. In 2008, many teachers were laid off and put on a call-back list due to the budget crisis. My job was downsized at the elementary school, and I was moved to the high school. While I have had high school experiences of teaching freshman English for night school and for summer school, it was still not something I felt comfortable doing. I really did not want to teach at the high school and I definitely did not want to go back to the high school I went to. However, that was what was given to me and I was still excited to be teaching. I truly do not remember the first day with students but remember how scared I was walking across the campus and through the quad with all the students around. It was as if I was back in high school and all the same fears of being a teenager came rushing back; but this time I was not

able to be the out, proud, gay man. It was not the easiest of starts but toward the end of my time at the high school, I found so much joy in what I was doing. I worked with some of the best teachers in the English department and had so many teaching friends throughout the school. I also built so much of my life into my job and spent many hours doing extras for my amazing students. I was the senior class advisor, administrator designee, and club advisor, and I lead many fundraisers and completed extra administrator or adjunct duties.

While my tenure at the high school was amazing, it did not start that way. My overall experience was very rewarding, and I would not change it for anything. What I learned, the students I had, and people I got to work with changed my life and helped me grow into something so much more than I ever thought possible. I owe so much to the students and the staff there; thus, this process has been so difficult to write about. Through journaling on my high school teaching experiences, I have come to a few conclusions. It was an extremely overwhelming start. It was through the connections I created and the dedication to my job that things started to get better. Before becoming a workaholic, I was able to make connections with other staff and students. Through those interactions, I began to feel like myself. The only difference this time was I could not hide in the work closet because many of the teachers I had had as a student still taught there. They had already seen and known me as a gay student. I was forced to navigate between people knowing and not knowing, which presented a new understanding that coming out is not something you do once but are forced to do all the time. I have to choose at times using an internal dialogue of do I say something, is it okay to say something, or do I steer the conversation in another direction. The constant need for self-awareness or self-check to see if it is safe can be and is daunting. Not only was there that challenge but the challenge of people already knowing. People knew, and some would talk

about the new gay teacher hired. High school is a very different place to teach because there are so many teachers. I was then confronted by people I did not know and asked if I was gay or put on the spot. It is not easy when for years I was hiding in the closet and then I was being questioned about being gay. It was a difficult time.

One of the administrators who wrote me a letter of commendation was a person with whom I had many difficulties in the beginning. He was known for making inappropriate comments to people, and when I first met him, he told me I was not his choice that I was placed at his school. I understand his point of view now, as being in administration and getting a teacher placed at your site is not always a good thing. Nonetheless, I have learned many things from our rocky start. In the first year of teaching at the high school, this administrator made comments about my sexuality and made references to when I was a student there, even though he was not at the school site while I was a student. He would tell me he hoped I did not float around the school like I did when I was a student or he would make comments about women and say I was not interested in things like that. While I was a student, many teachers I had had were still working there. They knew who I was as a student and I felt they made judgments about what kind of teacher I would be. As a student and teenager, I was very vocal and had no problem being out and telling people I am gay; though I had difficulty coming out as a teenager, I had not feared losing my job and I had welcomed the challenge. There were many other things and actions in that first year that were very difficult to navigate. I have always been one to respect my boss and not make waves for them; however, I just could not take the harassment. After working with his boss and my boss, we found a much better way to work together. Through my master's program, I had to do a job shadow at a school. These were pre-chosen prior to my being moved to the high school, and I ended up being placed with him. This was

great because it forced us to work with each other. I learned many things from him and remember sitting down in his office to go over all the paper work we needed to fill out for me to be his intern; he told me the good news was I would learn how to do his job, and the bad news was I would be doing it. I truly appreciated learning from him because he gave me real work to do and helped me through the work. The very next year, I was his administrator designee and admin intern. I worked side-by-side with him learning all I could. I found much more respect for him, and he was much more professional with me. He recognized me for all my hard work and dedication to the students and the school and wrote me a letter of commendation as well as a letter of recommendation.

Letter of Commendation

This letter is to commend your work at [...] High School over the last twelve months. Your efforts at your school during this time added significant value to our school your endless efforts such as creating an electronic pathway on our web site for parents and students to pay for books, fines, yearbook, and dances have saved valuable time in our accounting office.

Volunteering to be an administrative designee over the time period has greatly assisted the administration and teacher very supportively. You have supervised many different types of sporting events such as basketball, football, volleyball and more. Dances and night rallies have taken place with your leadership and supervision which had little or no incidents.

Last Saturday [...] with your presence at a fundraiser from 6:30 am to 2:30 pm, made a significant impact. Your efforts to arrange and organized this event was tremendous and the school event earned over \$12,000 for the club and cheerleaders. Your day did not end at 2:30pm as you returned to school at 6:00pm to assist in supervising a dance until midnight.

Your attitude and efforts to [...] High School have greatly impacted our school very positively and financially. Your ability to work as a member of an organization, your well-organized manner, and your concern for making the school a better place are obvious to all who work with you. Additionally, you are a tremendous capable person who is easy to work with. I can always expect a professional job from you, no matter what the task and never worry about ye quality of your decisions and work product. It is easy to see that kids come first with you. You are commended for your efforts which have positively impacted our school. Thank you for such a fine effort over these last twelve months.

Letter of Recommendation

I am writing this letter in support of Michael Cowan's application for an administrative position in your district. It is a pleasure for me to do so.

Mr. Cowan began his tenure at [...] school at the beginning of last school year [...]. during this time, Mr. Cowan taught English for the 9th and 10th grades. He has done an excellent job in fulfilling his duties and demonstrated consistency and fairness in answering the needs and expectations of students, colleagues, and administration. His enthusiasm, innovativeness, and genuine concern for his classes are exemplary. His flexibility in working with students, teachers, and parents earned him an enviable reputation as an excellent teacher who truly cares about students.

During his brief tenure [...] Mr. Cowan also served as an administrator-in-training. His college program to earn his administrative credit allowed for him to work as an administrator for 20 school days. His service was invaluable during these days and he extended his availability for administrative opening throughout the year. Mr. Cowan served on the Principal's cabinet and was involved and gave input to many school-wide decisions.

Mr. Cowan went above-and-beyond the call of duty serving as an administrator-in-training. He was responsible for countless sporting events and special school-wide events. Our administrative team did not lose a step when having him around to complete many supervision roles. He was instrumental in developing a program to enable parents to use a credit card collection system through the web. He also assisted in using our data collection system with our teachers and demonstrating the uses of the programs to increase the use of current data and assessment.

Mr. Cowan is an effective and efficient communicator. During this stay at [...] school, I have found Mr. Cowan to be a very positive, honest, and understanding person. He is definitely a good character model for young adults to with in a school setting. I find it difficult to find young teachers with his talent, ambition, and drive and I recommend him without reservation for the administrative position he is seeking.

During my time at the high school, I always volunteered for any administrative duties needed. While I did this mostly for my own benefit and my knowing that throwing myself into work was a defense for not having a personal life (hiding in my work closet), I found there were benefits to being so dedicated. I found that working so hard and all the time was a great distraction and reason to not have a personal life. I worked to the point of being so busy I did not have time to date; it almost seemed as if I was not gay because I was not dating. Denying myself a personal life was just a way to deny being gay and also having to talk about it to anyone.

Journal Reflection – Hard Work Paid Off

I include the two letters for a few reasons. One is because of the mixed emotions I have about my time at the high school and the second is because of the things I endured as a student as well as a teacher there. I have seen I would not be the person I am today. I have spent many hours of my life at the high school and because of all the things I have gone through, I am a much stronger person, teacher, and administrator. I think my time at the high school was a great reminder of who I was as a teenager. The overall experience helped me find myself again and helped show me that I can be a gay man and educator. The idea of my dissertation began with a student telling me to “prove it” because I made the statement that my life is better; that idea truly has helped redefine and reconfirm who I am as a person. As I reflect on this experience and talk about it with my husband, the theme of this dissertation comes alive. My experience at the high school shows that despite working in a very difficult environment, hard work and dedication even with the most challenging of people (my former principal) can help me learn to show support or that there is more to me than just being gay. My former principal personally might not ever agree with me being gay, but he cannot fault me as a person and me being gay is a small part of the many amazing things that make up who I am. It was through time and the love for my job that helped make my time at the high school so amazing. I really enjoyed working with the administration and learned so much from all of them. Through my own resiliency and hard work, I was able to make an impact on the school and students. I think in this experience, time and exposure are two key elements for change. I think my time at the high school was also an important self-reminder that it is okay for me to be gay. While I was there as a teenager, I came out and discovered that it is okay to be gay, despite the harassment. I found my voice as a teenager and found it again as an adult. Many people in my community have not worked with

LGBTQ individuals, and sometimes their reactions are not always the best. This is not to say their actions are correct, but by taking a moment to understand that, I think I am better able to handle situations and use them as teachable moments. It is also hard to always have that feeling that I have to prove myself and work harder than others, so they can see my work ethic instead of just that I am gay. It is not easy to hide who I am, my mannerisms speak for themselves. So, it takes time for people to see more than just a gay man and get past their own perceived ideologies.

During my time at the school, I had many events that made me question being a teacher—fear of students finding out, parents, and other interactions—that brought out so many anxieties. After working with my administration, being on the WASC committee, School Site Council, and many other activities, I was asked by the administration to put on the Mix It Up Day event. I later found out it was determined that we needed to have more awareness at the school and or anti-bullying events. Mix It Up Day is an event in the fall about teaching tolerance. There are many different activities for students and different ways of supporting this event. The major part of the event is to get students to eat with different people during lunchtime so they could learn about different groups or be exposed to something new. Also, it is an opportunity to have an assembly about anti-bullying. One of the speakers was a former student. Freshmen students also worked in small groups to talk about issues they had seen or experienced at school. They worked with senior Link Crew and the Leadership students. While this event went over really well with students, it was very difficult for me. It was hard to have people talk about the harassment they faced as students and to hear about students talking about what they are having to deal with outside of school as well. The most difficult speaker was a gay male who moved away because of the harassment in our little town and school.

Journal Reflection – Mix It Up Day

I include a copy of a paper I wrote, which is a review of the Mix It Up Day event, to help shed light on my experience being at the high school. It was a reflective experience prior to me writing my dissertation. Even though this paper was writing about the event for an organizational theory class and uses Bolman and Deal as a framework, I think it gives good insight into my perspective at that time and also gives more details than I first recalled. While this paper and framework is the purpose of this dissertation, I feel this paper shows the internal struggles and illustrates what/how I was dealing with being gay in education.

Research paper.

Background. In November there is a nation origination that tries to promote tolerance/diversity at school. This origination, Teaching Tolerance (<http://www.tolerance.org/>), puts on an event call Mix It Up Day. Two weeks before this event, I was approached by my principal saying that we needed to do something at our school for this day. I knew nothing about this event and being very last minute, I had to learn everything I could about the origination, what the event is about, as well as what has been done at our school site in the past. I began talking with teachers that had done it in the past. I found out that club that always organized this day was the Gay Straight Alliance club (GSA). However, we no longer had the club because the teacher that was in charge was no longer at my site.

After talking to the teacher who left the school, I found out my principal was contacted by a former student who now works for [a store], asking what we are doing for our students who are gay, and if we are going to participate in the Mix It Up Day. This email and several phone calls were directed not only to the school principal but also to

the superintendent. After talking with my principal again, I found out the superintendent was going to be coming to our Mix It Up Day, and I still knew nothing about it nor had anything planned.

Personal note. The former student is an older brother of a student that I went to school with. So, he decided to email me and began to question me. He asked what I was doing for students of diversity. I was bothered by his line of questioning when he started to question my reasons for not being out at school. He asked me why I was not out to my students, to my community, and why I did not have more pride. This was a very difficult thing for me because I was out all throughout high school and only stopped telling people when I started to teach. I was and still am afraid that if anyone finds out, I will no longer have a job or I will not get an administrative position because of it.

Breakdown of the event. Nonetheless, with the help of teachers and other staff, this is that was planned for the day:

Lunchtime activity. Diversity lunch in – students were given a form where they had to introduce themselves to a different group of students other than the group they normally had lunch with. On the list they had to check things off. All students in leadership, link crew, and many other clubs/groups on campus participated.

Health and Drivers Ed classes. All students in these classes went to a presentation in the gym. The presentation started with boys working in a group and girls working in another group. The students were asked a lot of questions about what it means to be a boy or a girl, and what it means if someone breaks those social norms. After the groups, students came back together to hear from a guest speaker. The speaker was the former student that worked for a company. He graduated in earlier in the 1990s and did not

come out as a homosexual until after high school. This was because of the harassment within the school. He came and told his story. After school there was an informational meeting, with the new adviser, for the GSA.

Issues.

Students. Throughout the day, there were a few issues that came up among the students, some of which the teachers, staff, and myself talked about prior to the event, which allowed us to stop the issues from spreading. Students in the small groups did not always maintain and behave when talking about sensitive issues. Students would use inappropriate words and find it funny, and they also had a hard time staying on topic with the groups. This was seen more so in the boys' groups and not as much in the girls' group. Nonetheless, this was part of the activity and part of the learning objective.

Teachers/staff. Not all teachers are very supportive of this topic and feel students should not be introduced to the idea of diversity or talked to about homosexuality. Furthermore, the faculty that feels this way looks down on the teachers who participate in these types of activities. This makes it hard to get some teachers to participate in these types of activities.

District office. The district office was an issue because of the former student's involvement. His email sparked the people at the district office to make sure the site was seen as supportive on this topic to avoid any unfortunate press coverage.

News/public. This day was not covered by our school news, published to the community, or really talked about prior to the event. It was suggested to me that we needed to make sure this information is covered, but it does not need to be spread about the community that we are. Furthermore, I was reminded that this community is not as

supportive of this information and it is better to not publicize the information that is being covered or that it is even part of the curriculum.

Part II. This event can further be explained by using Bolman and Deal's (2008) four organizational frames (Structural, Human Resource, Political, and Symbolic frames). These frames are used to organize how this event took place, and the obstacles, conflicts, and dilemmas that occurred throughout this particular experience. The four frames are not discussed in this section; however, they are just used to outline and give a deeper understanding of the event.

Structural. After having the event planned or the goals identified for this event, a few key structural elements needed to happen. One of the first major elements was to make sure the gym space was available. I had never reserved the gym for an event and had to figure out the proper periodicals for doing so. After asking the leadership teacher, I was directed to one of the office ladies who was in charge of reserving the gym. She told me the gym was free that day and that I would be able to use it for the day. The next element was making sure the technology needed for the gym was in there and ready to go (microphone, projector, projector screen, bleachers pulled out). This was all done through the custodian who took care of it. Next was presenting the activities to the Health and Drivers Ed teachers. They were going to be the ones bringing their students to the gym that day. After that, because I was in charge of the event, I needed to be there for the day, so I needed to get a sub to teach my classes, which requires funding. This required me to fill out paperwork and request funds from the leadership/ASB class. Once everything was in place, I could present the event to the principal for final approval.

Human resources. Under the human resources frame, it is best to place the major conversations that took place: Principal, teacher in charge of the event, teacher running the club next year, and the former student.

The principal first forwarded the email sent by the former student asking me to read the email and then asking if I could come and talk with him during my prep. After reading the email, I went and talked to him about it. This event took place a while ago and I do not remember how the full conversation went. The principal asked if I knew anything about the Teaching Tolerance organization (<http://www.tolerance.org/>) and if I knew about the National Mix It Up Day. I told him I did not. He said that [a teacher] was in charge of running the event years ago and he would like it if I could help her out with making sure it was taken care of. Also, the superintendent was aware of the event and would be coming to make sure the event was done correctly. I was then reminded that the activities do not need to be fully publicized. At this point, I questioned the principal as to the nature of why I should not ask the school newspaper to cover it, or why it should not be placed in the town paper. I have a very open relationship with the principal and questioned him often. The reason I can do this is because I was his administrative intern last year and we talked about the spirit of my questions not being a question of actions but understanding why he does things. For this reason, I understand why I got the answer I did. He told me that this works best if some topics are not publicly discussed but just done without it being put into the community's face. This answer I do not fully agree with but understand that there is no reason to "make a mountain out of a mole hill." I asked him why he was asking me to do this, and he told

me because he knew I would do it right and there would be no issues. Also, that it would be a great learning opportunity for me.

After talking with the principal, I went to the [teacher] and talked with her after school to find out what she had planned for the event. I found that she had not planned anything and really did not know that she needed to. [The teacher] is a former teacher of mine and we are close friends, which made this process much easier. I asked her if she could organize part of the event and hold the after-school activities in her room. She agreed and also agreed to working with the former student. She then planned the after-school meeting with an agenda for me as well as worked with [the former student] and got him to talk with the students. This allowed me to focus on the activities with the students, figuring out what Mix It Up Day was, and working with the other teachers and getting them to bring their students.

The following day, I talked with [another teacher] who has helped plan the Mix It Up Day event before. When I talked to her, she told me she wanted to start the GSA club next year and that she wanted to take over the event. However, this year she did not have the time. Nonetheless, she gave me all the event information she had and a few handouts that were used for lunchtime activities. The handouts came from the Teaching Tolerance website.

Next, I met with both the Link Crew teacher and the Leadership teacher. I asked if they would get their student to participate in the lunchtime activities. If their students did, they would be put into a drawing and could get a prize. Both teachers agreed to help get their kids involved and they both said they would make it part of a class assignment.

Then I had to meet with the Health and Drivers Ed teachers. Two of the teachers were very happy to bring their students, but one teacher did not want to bring his kids. He had a few objections but, in the end, he agreed to bring his students. The teacher that did not want to bring his students went to the principal and asked if he had to participate or if he could not go. I was unaware that he did this and only found out when I was going over the final plan with the principal.

The final step before meeting with the principal again was to talk with [...] the former student. I needed to get a copy/outline of what he was going to talk to the students about, and what his goals were for coming. Secondly, because he worked for [a store], I thought it would be great to ask for donations. The donations were for the prizes to be given out to the students who participated in the lunchtime activities. [...] He] was able to get me ten \$20.00 gift cards to [store....].

The last person I needed to talk with was the principal and make sure the plan for the event would be okay. I met with him a few days before the event and everything was okay to go. This is when the principal told me about a teacher asking if he had to go. The principal told me he said yes, the teacher had to go, and all freshmen would be participating in this activity. This is part of their curriculum and will be incorporated into WASSC.

Political. The day before the event, I got an email from the PE department telling me I was not allowed to use the gym. The email said it was reserved by the PE department and anyone wanting to use the gym needed to ask if they could use it. Even though the proper channel was to go through the woman in the office, it was very apparent that I did not think about the PE department and them using the gym. I went to

the PE teacher who sent the email and asked if there was any way we could work it out to use the gym still. After getting a lecture on how important it is to ask the PE teacher before using the gym during the day, I was told it would be very difficult for the students to play basketball outside instead of in the gym, but thanks to the sacrifice of two of the PE teachers, they would make the arrangements.

Symbolic. Through the Symbolic frame, there are a few key points. First, the nature of tolerance and homosexuality carry some major negative symbolic terms that needed to be identified and discussed with the students. This was done with the freshmen in the breakout groups the day of the event. Secondly, because we were calling this Mix It Up Day, it was important that we follow the Teaching Tolerance's plan and uphold their mission.

Part III. In their text *Reframing Organizations*, Bolman and Deal (2008) outlined four frameworks that here are discussed and used to analyze this personal case study.

Structural. The structural frame has a few key elements that make up how the structural frame can be applied to different situations. Bolman and Deal (2008) listed the elements as assumptions. The first assumption is to establish goals and or objectives. In this case study, different individuals had their own goals for the day. However, in the structural frame it "looks beyond individuals" (p. 68). Despite the individual goals, there was a clear agenda that needed to be accomplished. Bolman and Deal identified authority in options for integration (p. 60). By looking at the authority in this case study, it is clear that the goals for having this day were established. It was important to not only my principal but to the district office. Their goals were to make sure the high school was

promoting tolerance and diversity. Furthermore, it was clear they did not want to have any issues by not participating in this national organized event.

Bolman and Deal (2008) further break down the structural frame using the heading “division of labor,” looking at function, time, product, and process (p. 60).

There was a clear issue of timing. Not much time was given to set the event. It was clear that because of the time constraints, different people needed to work on different things to making sure everything came together. This guided the function or process into a different direction. Had there been more time given to organize this event, it would have allowed me to plan more activities and follow the Teaching Tolerance guidelines for the event, allowed teachers to have more of an advanced notice, more clubs would have been asked to join in, and it would allow more time to get donations for prizes for students.

The nature of having a deadline caused issues mostly with the staff. Had there been more time, the one teacher who did not want to bring his students most likely would not have had an issue, and the PE department that was mad they were not asked sooner to use the gym would have had plenty of time to prepare other activities for PE that day.

The structural frame uses Team Configurations to help break down the division of power or authority (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 103). Based on their different examples, this situation used a simple hierarchy. It starts with the district office personnel, then to my principal, and then to myself. This event was a top-down directive. It was clear my principal had no desire to plan this event and instead he passed the role of leadership or authority to me to make sure the event took place. If he was doing this event, fewer people would have questioned him during the process and would have gone along with

the planned activities. He also would not have had to request funds from the ASB class for guest teachers.

Lastly, Bolman and Deal (2008) identified the team structure and top performance. The structural frame recognizes expertise and accountability. These two elements are important because they consider the individual and what is best for the organization as a whole. In this situation, my principal relied on my expertise of organization and work ethics. Also, he was accountable for the activities and structure of the day. By asking me to do this event, he placed the accountability onto me.

Human resources. The human resources frame has become rather important in the way situations are viewed. This is because this frame looks at how people interact/function within an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). If schools are the organization, then staff, parents, community, and students are the people that make up its individuals.

It is important to note that human behavior often takes on a role that is not always best for the organization but what is best for the individual. For this event, a few different issues caused a personal conflict for individuals. First, there was a teacher who did not want to bring his students because he did not want to move his lesson plans back a day. When talking with this teacher, it never came up that that was the main reason he did not want to bring his students. Only after he participated in the event (the principal made him go) did he tell me he was glad he rewrote his lesson plans. This shows that sometimes the organization takes over personal desires.

Another issue was with the PE department. This shows a breakdown in the organization. The rules/structure on how to get access to use the gym for a day are very

simple. The only thing that needs to be done is to talk with the office personnel to see if the gym is being used. However, because the PE department uses the gym every day, they are not written in the book. They never have been, and it has never been an issue. Even though the protocol was followed, the individual needs of the PE department were stepped on. This shows the flaw in the structure of the organization.

Next was my own personal issue with questioning myself. The organization serves the community, and they have needs as well as employees. Do the needs of the community outweigh the needs of an individual employee? Secondly, do the individual needs outweigh the student needs? Lastly, does the organization have a right to overpower humans' ability to be themselves? These questions are not answered but are an important discovery while reading the human resource frame.

Political. The political frame involves the ongoing negotiations between individuals/groups, power, allocations, and agendas, which is part of the decision-making process determined by goals or creation of goals.

It is an important notation that this event would not have gone as smoothly as it did if I was not able to be a part of the day. I am not meaning that it was because of myself but because the ASB allowed funding for me to be there. This made the transitions and supervision possible for all the activities. By learning the proper channels in dealing with the ASB and leadership teacher, I was able to get the funds. This was after trying to get the funds from the principal who said he had no money.

An important part to the political frame is the idea or understanding of power. Who is in position of authority, who has control, reputations, and personal agenda (Bolman & Deal, 2008)?

In the case of authority, not including the principal because his role is clear, but an oversight on my part lead to a major issue. The PE department is often overlooked and not thought of when planning events. I say this because after looking back at this situation, I felt the need to go and talk with the person in charge of the PE department. In the conversation that took place, I found that using the gym and not letting the PE department know has been a problem. Even though earlier I had said it was not. This issue of control over the gym can be easily solved. The head of the department just said that they only thing they would like is to be told at least one week in advance before someone uses the gym. They use the gym almost every day but can very easily change plans as long as they are told. To solve this issue, I asked the office personnel if she would be so kind as to email the PE department chair when a request comes through to use the gym regarding who is requesting and the purpose. She agreed, and the PE department was okay with that. A new procedure/structure has been implemented because no one ever looked at the chain of communication but rather just took the authority into his or her own hands.

Symbolic. In an event like this, there are so many different symbols. Bolman and Deal's (2008) symbolic frame says it is the hidden meaning and belief behind the symbols that make them so powerful (p. 253). In this frame, the organizational symbols of myths were key to the group activities (p. 254). The goal for the breakout groups was for students to identify the myths behind the symbolic nature of what it means to be a "boy" or a "girl." In high school, there are clear rituals that boys follow and what girls follow. However, the goals were for students to think about what happens when someone does not follow those rituals/norms and how those students are treated. Not only that, but

it was for students to learn why it is so hurtful for those students not to be treated in a negative way because they do not follow the traditional ideologies.

Furthermore, Bolman and Deal (2008) state that stories, like folk or fairy tales, offer more than entertainment or moral instruction for small children; they grant comfort, reassurance, direction, and hope to people of all ages (p. 259). This idea was carried out by having the guest speaker come and talk to the students. His story was something that allowed the students to see the outcome of their actions. [The former student's] story was not just about him not being himself in high school or being teased for not fitting the social norms, but it was a story about being the "fat kid." [The former student] began his story talking about what it was like being at the same high school as the students and being picked on for being fat. Then he talked about how he felt so different for being fat that he felt there was no way he could come out for fear of more harassment. His story is very symbolic and it is hoped the students did find some reassurance that it does get better.

The Teaching Tolerance website says this:

Students thrive—socially and academically—in schools that are inclusive. Yet, for far too many students, schools are hotbeds of exclusion. Social scientists have long maintained that contact between diverse groups helps alleviate tensions and reduce prejudice. Mix It Up seeks to break down the barriers between students and improve intergroup relations so there are fewer misunderstandings that can lead to conflicts, bullying and harassment (<http://www.tolerance.org/mix-it-up>). This vision of their program was key when planning the day's events.

Furthermore, through the website, different activities, handouts for students, information for teacher/staff, and links to resources can be used by the schools. So, while planning the event, it was very symbolic that we kept the vision of Teaching Tolerance in mind.

Reflection. After going through this process of looking at this event through Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frames, I find that there is nothing I would have done differently. However, throughout this case study I have highlighted things I have thought about because of the frames. Also, one of the major issues with the PE department has been resolved and because of analyzing this case with the political frame, I was able to go back and talk to the PE department and make a change for the better.

Another thing the frames showed through this evaluation is the idea of time, not only my time, but also other people's time. It was clear that if I had more time, this event would have been different, issues could have never occurred, and more activities and involvement from others could have taken place.

The paper shows so many elements of what my dissertation has become. While this event took place almost 10 years ago, it shows how I have gotten to where I am. I think it helps outline some of the personal struggles I was dealing with while being a teacher at the high school. As I reread this paper, I have seen how much I have learned and grown as an educator and as administrator. Even though this paper was written for another class and does not fully develop all aspects for this dissertation, I left it unchanged to demonstrate my thoughts during that time and to show the connections I had with people at the school. This truly shows that you never know how people may come into your life and go, but also you never know when or how they will show back up.

People have come and gone in and out of my life. In education, it has been very prevalent because of changing schools, retirement, and or moving. However, I was truly blessed with getting to have two amazing teachers while I was at high school. I was also very fortunate to be able to get to know them as colleagues. I could not begin to express what they did for me

as a teacher and how much they got me through the day-to-day torments of being a high school student. As a fellow teacher, I was able to find new respect for what they did for me and the challenges they faced. As a teacher, supporting students can be a very difficult thing. Not all teachers are good and not all teachers care about all their students. When I was a high school student, I was shunned by a few teachers and made to feel unwelcomed or even harassed by a few of them. So, to have two teachers step up and do the right thing and support a student struggling with bigger issues than school work was very empowering for me as a teacher.

The first teacher was the first adult that I ever came out to who was not a friend. As a student, I could not articulate all the amazing things this teacher did to protect me, encourage me, and support me to be who I am. That is for another dissertation and another time. As an adult and educator, it is much more difficult but is where the focus of this dissertation lives. One of the best parts of coming to work with this teacher was being able to express how much they did for me as a student. This teacher was there for me a second time in my life. While I struggled with many emotions of teaching and being at the high school, I was able to find comfort in just having a person to sit with. Something as simple as have a friendly face in a crowd of people can make such a difference. Most people can recognize that scene in every high school movie when the teenager is getting the tray of food and walking in the cafeteria looking around for someone they know or at least a friendly face. That was my experience of me walking into my first faculty meeting. I felt like everyone already was talking about me and knew I was a new gay teacher who was a former student. Through the sea of faces, I could see her waving me down to come and sit with her.

The second teacher was close to retirement by the time I was there and soon left. However, this teacher once again shared with me something so important. While I was a

student, this teacher's classroom was always a safe space for me; no matter what was going on outside the room, in this room no one could touch me or bother me about being gay. As a teacher, I saw this again, not from a student's point a view but from a teacher's point of view. I saw the same old classroom but just a new group of students. I knew I wanted to make sure my classroom was some form of safe space for all students. I spent time dropping by and seeing this teacher during breaks and lunches, and the room was always filled with students seeking the same comfort as I did. I am not sure I was ever able to replicate what she did for so many students, but I know it was a personal mission and still is to make sure all students are treated with respect. I tell my students that we all have the right to fill our personal bubbles with whatever we want, but we do not have the right to impose our bubble onto someone else.

Journal Reflection – Lifelong Learner

During my first year teaching high school, I learned a few things. First, it can be very isolating if you let it. Often while teaching, we get behind a closed door; teach the students; and work on lesson plans, grading, and all the other crazy things we have to do to get our jobs done. We do not participate in the school or with each other. Always in a rush to get things done or almost caught up, we forget to take time and work with each other, talk about our students, and the emotional side of teaching. That isolation and working within our own four walls takes away from the art of teaching. Another thing is letting other teachers' negativity effect our own interactions or set a prejudgment about a student or faculty. High school teachers can be very judgmental, very much like high school students themselves. Lastly, I learned that high school students have some of the biggest hearts in the world and it is a teacher's job to bring that out of them.

About two years ago, I was tagged in a Facebook post from a former student. The tag line was Mr. Cowan's quotes. I never knew it at the time, but a group of students always posted "Mr. Cowan's quotes" from all the many things I said. Apparently, I gave a lot of life lesson talks. The one that stands out the most is "don't be sorry, be smart." It was always a pet peeve when students came up to me and said they were sorry about something. There was never truly a sorry but it was just something they would say. All my students knew my saying by the end of the year; they knew actions have meaning and they should not be sorry in life but work hard to be smart, so you do not ever have to be sorry. I bring this up because as I reflect on how two teachers touched my life, how they helped set up my life to get better, and how thankful I am for these two people, I am reminded that I, too, am able to make an impact on my students. I am not sure if I have or will ever make as much of a difference as these two people did for me, but I know I work hard every day hoping that I will. Seeing that students comment and then being tagged in the comment saying thank you for all the great members is truly a wonderful reminder of why I am doing my job and why I love it so much.

First Years Teaching – Seventh, Eighth, and Adult Education

I did not think I would go into public school teaching. I really thought I would go back to school and get my master's in teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) and teach in English overseas. However, a job opened in the middle of the school year in my hometown and because I was qualified for the job, I got it. I thought it might be something temporary I would do until the master's program started. That soon changed when I began working with seventh- and eighth-grade students. I fell in love with teaching and really enjoyed learning to work with students with special needs, English learners, and with a very difficult population. The reason for the job opening was because the prior teacher resigned by November and I was hired in

January. The students had a very difficult start of the school year, and I enjoyed all the challenges of learning a new job and getting the students back into the swing of being students. Over the two or three years of teaching seventh and eighth grades, I had a few issues, a moral dilemma about staying in education, and teaching in the Central Valley. It is not always easy to try and be myself and be an educator. We are and have to be neutral on so many issues and allow students to explore their own learning. I felt that in so many ways, I had to deny who I was or give up part of who I am to protect my students from hearing negative reaction/thoughts about their teacher. There have been many times students would ask me if I had a girlfriend and I would always reply, “No they are too expensive.” Denial came in the form of defensive humor.

One of the more difficult moments in my career and times when I thought about walking out of education was during election time and Proposition 8. After George W. Bush was elected a second time, California introduced Proposition 8.

Prop 8, officially titled Proposition 8 – Eliminates Right of Same-Sex Couples to Marry, was a statewide ballot proposition in California. On November 4, 2008 voters approved the measure and made same-sex marriage illegal in California . . . Proposition 8 [. . .] created a new amendment to the California Constitution which said, “only marriage BETWEEN A MAN AND WOMEN IS VALID OR RECOGNIZED IN California.” Before it passed, same-sex marriage was constitutionally-protected right in California; a majority of the justices of the California Supreme Court affirmed this understanding of the constitution in May 2008. (Ballotpedia, 2008, para. 1-2)

While Proposition 8 (Prop 8) has nothing to do with teaching, it was a major political event for me and in my town. This was very difficult for me because wherever I went, I was forced to see my community showing signs of hate or what I felt was discrimination towards gays and lesbians. This was even more of an issue because I was in high school when Proposition 22 was passed, “which changed California Family Code to formally define marriage in California [to be] between a man and a woman [only]” (Ballotpedia, 2008, para. 4). This was

extremely important to me because it was the first time I was allowed to vote on an issue and I actively protested against it. I marched in Sacramento and San Francisco, I carried signs, and I stood for what I believed in. Nonetheless, when Prop 8 came around, I was quiet. I did not protest and only went to one rally in Sacramento. I felt I let myself down and denied who I was once again for the job I loved. During the Prop 8 campaign, signs all over my community read “Protect marriage, one man one woman,” and “Yes on 8.” There were no signs in my community saying “No on 8” or “No on Hate.” It was the community I worked so hard for, that I dedicated my life for, and I hid my heart for; I felt betrayed. I was faced everyday with hate speech towards gays and lesbians and felt for the first time that this community did not want me and that maybe I needed to leave the community or maybe the profession. I was so conflicted and was in more pain and was more devastated than I had ever felt before.

I will never forget the morning when the election results were announced. I was waiting all night for them to post but it was not until the next morning it was declared the voters approved Prop 8. I remember reading and feeling my heart sink with despair and my eyes starting to water. I did everything I could to hold on and go to work. While I was at work prepping my classroom for a staff meeting (which is where they held the meetings), someone walked in with a newspaper and on the front page were the demographics on how each county voted for Prop 8. My county was almost 80% for Prop 8. I lost it and had to step out of my classroom.

Journal Reflection – The Power of a Hug

After many tears and telling myself I must pull it together, my vice principal at that time saw me. She came over and asked what was going on. I shared with her my disappointment and the betrayal I felt. She gave me the biggest hug (the mom hug that takes away all the pain) and

told me not everyone feels that way. Her smile and compassion made me take a deep breath and realize how much I loved my community. I realized that despite so many people voting for Prop 8, it had nothing to do with me as a person; they just did not know what they did. My community was still “population 1;” gay people were just not known in my town and not heard from and I put myself back into the closet. I say population 1 as a running joke from high school that I was the only gay person in town. How would they ever know the population 1 if I was so closeted? Through the strength of a hug and compassion of another, I remembered that I am strong, and I will not let others keep me from doing what I love or drive me away from doing what I love or where I love to live. Resiliency is the reminder from a development of self-worth and a reminder during a struggle. I personally find those reminders through reflections with others and with myself.

Like most first-year teachers, I learned the harsh reality that I would never make much money in education. When I first began, I was an intern making about \$30,000 a year. An intern teacher is also required to take classes two nights a week for credentials. To be able to pay for school, I also had to work two nights a week teaching adult education, teaching summer school, and I still worked for Longs Drugs on the weekends. I was a busy intern but enjoyed teaching the night school classes and during summer school. Most of the students were seniors who needed to make up their English 1 class because they had failed it. This class ran from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm two nights a week. I did this for about two years and had many different classes. Granted, I was very young when I started and most of the students looked older than me. I was often questioned by parents, administrators, and students if I was old enough to teach the class. One evening, I went to the office to get my keys to the classroom and was told by the administration that students should not be on campus right now and was asked why I was there.

When I told them I was the night school teacher, they did not believe me. After they figured out who I was, they gave me the keys and I was on my way.

Journal Reflection – My Shield

I reflect on this first experience because this happened many times. I was often questioned about my age and was overlooked because of how young I looked. Most people would think this to be a happy problem, but it was just another reason for people to discount me. I have found over the years that when I am discounted, it makes me fight harder for what I want. I remember my grandfather talking to me before I started teaching and him telling me the requirements for him to teach and the dress code they had. He also told me that education is a professional job and one should dress the part. Through his experiences, I learned that dressing the part is also like getting ready to take on the world, or in my case, wearing my tie gave me the confidence to handle any situation. I wear a tie everyday and it was only in the last few years that I have started to even wear my school spirit shirts. While this might not seem to have anything to do with being a gay teacher, it has everything to do with me and my personality. When I dress for work, I am like a rock and able to take on the more difficult parts of my job. I am able to be what the students need, and I find strength in professionalism. As often as I have found strength in others, my ties are like carrying their strength with me. It is a reminder that I am more than and able to do anything. I am sure there is much research that talks about appearance and the importance we place on the clothing we wear. A few days ago, I wore a purple shirt that I have not put on in years, and I remember when I first bought it. It was when I was teaching high school and we had a school dance. It was a very bright shirt, neon in color, and I got a neon green tie to go with it. The theme for the dance was Candyland and Neon. It worked perfectly for the dance, but I was so worried about wearing this shirt because I was afraid

it was too flamboyant, or people might see through me and see my gay side. I bring this up now because of how much clothing can represent in a day. While I was scared to wear this shirt so many years ago, I now had no worry about wearing it today. In fact, I told my husband I am wearing my bright purple shirt so people will remember me today. I was going to a new teacher hiring event for my district, and I wanted to make sure the teaching candidates remembered me and my school.

When first going into teaching, I was told by a few people that “gay people should not teach.” Many people say being gay has nothing to do with education and it should not even be a conversation. They are correct that me being gay does not have to do with education nor my abilities to be a good teacher. However, it has everything to do with the person. Something people might not understand is coming out is a big deal, and even though being gay is only a small part of who I am, it is still part of me. How do you hide something that you have identified as then spent many years building a world where it is okay and getting a job you love but deny part of yourself for that job? It was a crazy notion but something I did to start. I was told many things like: I don’t have to tell my students I am straight, why do you have to tell them your gay? I was very young and in that arena I did not feel safe. It was easier to hide in my work closet than to be who I was.

Journal Reflection – Back in the Closet

During the spring of 2012, I was invited to speak at an information session for the LGBTQ community. This event was being put on by a community college. The college had several people speaking about their professions and talking about some of the struggles. My topic was going back into the closet for a profession and how difficult it is. It is a constant struggle and battle to deal with not being true to yourself. For so many years, I was me without

worries, an out, proud, gay man. I am not saying being gay is all that I am, but it is a part of me, and denying a part of yourself is so difficult. It is like lying to yourself every day. This event was the first event where I felt like myself for the first time since I started teaching. It was so nice to be advocating for the LGBTQ community and to be open and free. It was nice for the first time to share about being gay and being in education or even just to say I am a teacher and gay.

As I have spent most of my life reflecting on my job, I have also spent many hours focusing on understanding myself. This process has been very rewarding and yet unnerving. I end my final reflection with one of the most recent events.

March 15, 2018

Today I had an employee come to talk to me about going into teaching. It started out about different options for teaching (internship, traditional pathways, etc.). The conversation soon turned into asking questions about how to be gay and a teacher, the fear that comes along with it and the questions you have as a gay man in education. For many, it is not easy to hide the fact that we are gay, and people know or at least question it. As we talked, I realized that this has changed many times for myself. Throughout my career, my identity has changed again and again. I made the effort to go back into the closet as a gay man for my job. I worked and spent many hours trying to learn how to be the best educator that I could be. I shared this with the young man and said I threw myself into the job and focused on being a teacher. I did not date as much and when I did, I was quick to end the relationship for fear someone might know, or I kept it very distant and did not allow the relationship into my personal life. Listening to this young person, I saw the same issues I had when I first went into teaching. I realized that the fear of people finding out was not the issue; it was the fear of being questioned, shown hate, and being rejected for doing something you worked so hard to do (being a teacher and/or getting your bachelor's degree). For him and me, earning a degree was very important and something we both had to work very hard for. Furthermore, being a teacher takes so many hours of work and dedication; it becomes more than a job but a way of life. It becomes part of who you are. Finally, accepting who I was as a gay man, I spent many hours (as everyone does) trying to be the best person I can be. Having that rejected or the fear of being rejected, harassed, bullied, or in some cases in the US being fired, is an unbearable thought.

Chapter 5: Research Themes

Throughout Chapter 5, I explore my truth of being a gay male educator in a rural area. After reading and rereading these words, I have found a few common themes I need to examine further. What I perceive as protective factors that helped me prevail in my life and career, which ultimately helped to say my life is better, are: people/reflection and dedication/drive for my job. While this could be broken down into further themes, I think keeping them together creates a better link related to how I think have personally drawn upon them and used them in my life. While some people might read my dissertation and find other strengths, this is my truth in what I see that has given me the passion and strength to succeed in the educational world.

People and Reflection

Reflection is a powerful tool, but I include people in my life with my reflections. I have often found myself talking with amazing people in my life; and having a sounding board is so importation to me. I love sharing my thoughts, and having people that I can talk openly with has been so powerful in my journey. It is not easy living in fear and having so much self-doubt. These feelings I have tried to share with people before and they just have not understood what is living inside. It is beyond understanding and even articulation at times. However, they do not need to know how I feel to be there and listen to issues or problems that I am facing. I have had many people (my grandparents, teachers, colleagues, and friends) who have been there to just listen and lend support. I have been in many difficult situations and been reflecting on an issue when I realize I need to just share with someone. It is through sharing that I am able to help find resolution and or I am able to overcome whatever it might be. There are even times when there are no solutions to issues but by having a conversation or reflection about the issues, I am able to apply these protective factors and overcome any obstacle. By building a strong support team, I

feel I have been able to accomplish so much more in my life. It is so easy to isolate in education, put your head down, focus on the classroom, and hide in your classroom “closet.” However, I think that to be a strong teacher and find strength for who you are, it is important to have a strong support system. You do not need to have an LGBTQ community to have a support community. So many people who are LGBTQ and heterosexual are supportive of me for who I am as a person, and not just because I am gay. There may be some people who are not as much of a people person as I am, but in education it is so important to be open and to talk with colleagues, family, and friends. Without the support of good adults around, you are left with only students, and like I tell my students, it is okay to be a kid but sometimes you need to find an adult to share problems with so they can help fix your problems.

Throughout these chapters, I have shared many different events that could have pushed me out of education and pushed me away from teaching in my little city. However, that is not what I wanted or what I worked so hard for. It has been a difficult road throughout my career but I have been able to navigate it and manage the negativity in my life by the amazing people I have. Also, taking time without overreacting is something I have had to learn, stopping to think about a situation and trying to see it from all points of view. Creating these moments to reflect on the adverse issues allows me to identify or play out different outcomes. It is like in sports when you visualize different plays or movements. You see what you should do next. In many different situations, I have been able to apply reflection/visualization to play out all the different scenarios of how I think things may go. This allows me to diminish my own fears and self-doubt. Living in a small town and not always the most of welcoming of communities for LGBTQ people, I have found that it is using my own support system that allows me to navigate the many different risk factors I have faced as a gay, male educator.

Dedication and Drive

Having heard all the negative things I had heard about teaching, being a new teacher was beyond difficult. I would never want to relive those moments. I made a choice, whether it was conscious or not, to hide who I was. This was a very painful thing for me to talk about because I was such a proud and out, gay person. Through high school and college I never worried and was very active in helping support so many LGBTQ events. It was very difficult for me to then hide a part of me. However, after journaling and doing so much reflection for this dissertation, I have now found strength in this decision. I am so thankful for this process because I did not just go into the closet for my job, but I dedicated myself to being the best teacher I could be. While I talk about this as a strength, it is with a hard understanding that I denied myself and buried who I was as a person for many years for the job I loved. This is a very harsh and sad reality. I worked hard to learn everything I could and pushed myself to being more than I was. It was through that dedication and drive that I was able to share my passion with my students and the many people who have come through my life. It was very difficult and maybe a little bit of a sacrifice in the beginning, but my love for being a lifelong learner is the reason for my life being so much better now. There is power and strength in knowledge. It is hard to be a proud, out, gay educator when you are not strong in your job. At times, I feel I have to be better than anyone else, so no one can find something negative about my teaching practice. Being a teacher entails such a big learning curve, and it takes time to learn how to be an effective teacher. I am still learning every day and hope the day I retire that I will feel like a master teacher. After many years in education, I am now comfortable in my job and feel I have some skills in what I do. The comfort in my job allows me to relax a little and be able to let down my guard. This also allows me to be a little more of who I am.

I have supervised many new teachers, and I have seen, whether they are homosexual or not, that new teachers do not feel comfortable teaching and often get in their own way. I tell many new teachers that I want to be able to see them reflect on what they do in the classroom because if they can tell me the things that went wrong, they will be able to fix it for the next time and or not do it again. It also gets the teachers used to talking about what is going on in the classroom. I spend much time just talking with the new teachers, so they learn to feel comfortable talking about teaching. That is one of the first steps, learning and being able to use the academic language associated with any job.

I have worked hard to get my bachelor's degree, teaching credential, and master's degree and soon my doctorate. However, I have always gone to school to advance myself in my career. Career advancement is very different in the educational world. It is not like working in business with promotions and raises. Teachers in my district make what they make with raises and contracts and will get stipends based on continuing education and a master's degree. I have always been propelled to go to school because I love to learn. If I could be a professional student, I would be. However, making more money is a great motivator. I remember a conversation when I started my doctorate program and I was asked why I am going to get it. I would not get extra money, it is going to cost a lot, and I do not need it in my current career. It took me a while to find the answer, but it was simple and clear. For the first time, I am taking classes for me and am learning just to learn. My doctorate program has changed me in so many ways and I am very thankful for all the amazing classes I got to take. Education and learning are such a powerful gift. It is just another reason why my life is better.

Personal Reflection Conclusion

While this autoethnography has been one of the most difficult things I have ever done in my life. It is with hope that my experiences will be able to help new teachers, new administrators, or any LGBTQ person going into education. This research adds to the conversation related to LGBTQ individuals being resilient, the need for strong support groups, and that we really need to stop saying I was able to overcome despite the emotional scars. Finding strength because of harassment does not make it right, but in fact makes the individual hide the aspect of the harassment. In my case, I was able to hide back in the closet or was able to deflect my being gay because of the amount of work I did. Moving forward, I think it is important for schools, districts, administrators, and other teachers to understand the inherent risk it takes for gay men to be educators and how important it is to the LGBTQ community to have models to look up to.

Connection to Literature

After spending a year of my life writing and working on this document, I personally have learned so much. The development of this research has helped me grow and see things in many new ways. Nonetheless, I feel this dissertation adds to the body of research in a few different ways. I think one major addition to the literature is the diving deeper into what a gay male educator has to go through or potentially struggle with, which is much different than other educators: the lack of personal life, professionalism, and the need for connection to a community that is not fully supportive.

Using Resiliency Theory as a lens to view this discussion, it is important to note the outcome or the measurement of success. While many different themes emerged throughout this dissertation, the definition of success as a teacher and as an administrator is examined. This is

not to say I am a good teacher or a good administrator, but it is regarding how I was able to be a gay educator and the navigation of that. While I articulated my perceived protective factors as a teacher and administrator, Resiliency Theory would show that despite protective factors being in my life and helping me navigate the struggles of being a gay male educator, I did not achieve a very successful teaching career because I was hiding behind the professionalism and hiding aspects of me being gay.

Most literature predicts that LGBTQ individuals will hide or go back into the closet because of fear of job discrimination, employee conflicts, community perceptions, the climate within the organization, stigma, ostracism, and microaggressions (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; DeSouza & Wesselmann, 2017; Griffith & Hebl, 2002; King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008; Ward & Winstanley, 2005). These factors are all different areas of risk for the LGBTQ individuals. While I, too, was afraid of these things, I was also dealing with being a young, gay male and working as a teacher. Teachers have to answer to so many other aspects than professionals in other fields. One of the biggest irrational things I have heard in my career is gay men should not teach because teachers have too much influence over the students they teach. The way I was able to deal with the many absurdities or risk factors was to hide behind my professionalism or dedication to furthering my own personal education.

When I first started teaching, I taught seventh and eighth grades during the day, went to school two nights a week, taught night school two nights a week, and worked for a drug store on the weekends. I dedicated myself to being so busy that I did not have time for a personal life and was determined to make sure no one was able to talk about me expect for how hard I was working or how much I was doing. When I went to the high school, I also started my master's program (going to school two nights a week), was the administrative designee, was club advisor,

was senior class advisor, worked Saturday School, and picked up any sports games or extra administrative duty I could. Again, I had no time for a personal life and worked hard so my dedication or the amount I was working would be the only topic of conversation. As I finished up my master's degree, I quickly begin taking my classes for my doctorate. After I completed my classes, I got my first vice principal job where I was working at two schools and oversaw about 1,500 students.

I did not directly make these decisions and it is only upon reflecting on my past that I am able to see how and why I did what I did, I draw the conclusion that I had a need for self-denial. These choices I made were because I did not feel like I could be myself as a gay educator and truly was not successful as an educator. Just in the last five years, I have started to find balance to my life. As an administrator, I have learned I have to have balance in my life. I have also found I am able to have a personal life and work in education. I think some of the factors are the length of time I have been in my district, the time spent at one school, the professional relationships I have developed over the years, and that I have finally worked through some of my own personal insecurities.

While beginning my career, I developed many compartments for my life as in: I had my work life, my school life, and very little friend or family life. There was no real balance and my career was the major focus. This lack of balance helped me protect myself and make sure that no one I did not want to know would find out I was gay. This has truly changed over the last years because everyone now knows I am gay and I do not really have to come out. Being in administration and being part of a larger community, everyone just knows. This could be because of social media, word of mouth, or just that I have been part of this community for so long, it is just common knowledge now.

Knowing what we know about LGBTQ individuals, and the assumption that they are going to hide their sexuality, I think as educators, we can do better or should be doing better. Our students need good role models no matter their sexual orientation. We need to be supporting teachers to find balance in their lives and allowing teachers to develop themselves as well as an educator. The literature shows that LGBTQ individuals are at risk for so many issues in their adolescence and when they start working and developing their careers. The research shows these dangers and my autoethnography supports this research but sheds light onto being a gay male educator and the pitfalls possible. Through this development of my identity/career, I hope the conversation continues and helps other administrators work with LGBTQ individuals as they enter the field of education.

Chapter 6: Review and Future Research

Population 1

Writing about myself has been one of the most rewarding and difficult things I have done. I have spent months trying to articulate and reflect on why my life is better. There are so many reasons why it is, and I have progressed so much in my life. I feel I have grown, changed, and made a difference in my little community. However, this all has come with a cost. I do not end my dissertation with the standard overview and recommendations. I end this dissertation with three things: my final thoughts about LGBTQ and education, my hopes for this dissertation, and my future research.

I titled this section Population 1 because there are so many LGBTQ individuals living and working all over the world. I have felt being gay was very lonely at times. I think one of the major reasons is this, and I am just as guilty of it: we do not have anyone to look to. I say that because growing up, there were not gay people as role models or someone for me to look at and be inspired. If there was a gay person or a gay person was talked about, it was very hushed and negative. While times are getting better, we still do not have role models in our communities for young people to look up to. Sure, we have amazing people on television who have come out as actors, entertainers, and even news reporters. They may do some great things, but these are not real in the sense of everyday people. We do not have out and proud educators. I still do not feel like I could put pictures of my husband on my desk. However, I walk into every classroom and office and I see pictures of families and spouses. This is also what our youth sees. I would have loved to have a teacher who was gay and married and someone I could have looked up to who was like me. Maybe then I would have not lived in so much fear, had so much self-doubt, felt harassed and overlooked, or felt like I had and still have to hide who I am. While there are so

many positives and so many steps forward, I still have to point out that I write this and feel like I am a little bit hypocritical. I am not out fully, I still watch what I say at times, I still do not put a picture of my husband on my desk, students still do not know who I am, I still have fear that it will all be taken away, and I fear I will be fired because I am a gay educator.

I have worked hard to try and keep this dissertation from being a negative thing and instead be something positive. I was challenged with the task of proving why my life is better and how I feel it has gotten there. While working in education, I have had to deny myself and make a lot of personal sacrifices for my job. I feel like in the educational community, it is still frowned upon to be gay. People are still worried that me being gay will rub off on their kids and knowing me will make their kids gay. Also, I have heard people say that being gay is living an immoral life and is full of drugs and being promiscuous. The difference is what I stated before. People have not been exposed to the good part of the LGBTQ community. They may have seen a pride parade or television shows that point out the stereotypical aspects of the LGBTQ people. However, again those are only stereotypes and not always the truth about individuals. I would say that I am not the typical gay person. However, growing up in the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” period will forever stay with me.

Future Research

My hope is that this dissertation will one, help me overcome being stuck hiding and two, it will help other LGBTQ individuals find strength and support. I also hope it will encourage people who are LGBTQ to go into education and not be afraid. While those are lofty goals for a dissertation, I hope it will show we need support for the LGBTQ community in being role models for our youth. It is hard to go from being out at 14 years old and now being 36 feeling like I am ashamed of being gay. Yes, my life is amazing and I am very happy, healthy, and love

all the amazing people I have in it. However, we have a long way to go to make things truly better. Going through this process, I have come to the personal conclusion that it truly will not be better until no one has to go through this kind of emotional scarring or be harassed about something that is a basic part of who they are.

In the future, I would like to review other LGBTQ individuals' stories of being gay educators. As I stated before, my story is probably not unique but a story that is not told. We need to start telling our stories and get over the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." We also need to focus our LGBTQ research in the area of positivity and not negativity. The research shows clearly that LGBTQ individuals are at risk for so many different issues and topics. This just perpetuates that our community is the risk factors and nothing else. However, we do not share the positive aspects of our community, and we hide role models and leaders. Community leaders or role models who have not come out or who are "outed" can be displayed as a negative thing by the media. Community Culture Wealth Theory by Tara Yosso (2005) would also be another area by which this research could be examined. While the LGBTQ community is often faced with research that is negative, this theoretical framework could be applied to examine those stereotypes and derive conclusions for resilient LGBTQ individuals. Research needs to change its focus to why LGBTQ individuals are so resilient and able to overcome their adversities, rather than just focusing on the social and societal negative ideologies towards the LGBTQ community.

While as a community we are working towards getting over the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" time period, our community identity is changed. Savin-Williams (2005), in his book called *The New Gay Teen*, discussed how the gay teenager has changed and is developing or identifying differently. While his work is very inspiring and sheds light onto so many issues, I think that given the historical changes over the last few years, this book could be rewritten. Many

teenagers who are coming out now or who are identifying or questioning their sexuality will not know the oppression or fears. Many individuals will not understand why there is or was a negative stereotype placed on the LGBTQ population. The future research is opening and changing very rapidly.

I started my Chapters 4 and 5 with tears because I made the statement my life is better. While these tears seemed to come from a place of joy and surprise, life is so much better than I could have ever imagined. I never thought I would be allowed to marry, never thought I would be in education, and truly never thought I would have the freedoms I do have. My life is better, and I know why and how. It is hard to end this dissertation and this process on a negative note. However, that is part of research. I did not get the final outcome I wanted but found a new challenge and future research.

While I did not get the outcome I was personally seeking, this dissertation is something I wish I would have read before I started teaching. After all the negative comments I heard about gay people not being allowed to teach, I found I know I have made a positive impact on my students, parents, and fellow educators. My dissertation should give new LGBTQ individuals the boost of confidence that they are making the right choice. No matter what, the LGBTQ community has a very strong and valid place within education. It should also send the message that the educational community is a very wonderful community with a lot of positive support factors, and new teachers need to remember to seek guidance and support from those who are strong mentors, teachers, or administrators.

Within this dissertation there is a strong argument that we as a community need to have better role models and supports within the educational environment. Teachers and administrators should read this and find encouragement for those LGBTQ individuals entering

education for the first time. Education is a very large mountain with many pathways and many obstacles to learn to navigate. Teachers and administrators should read this and see the many obstacles a LGBTQ person may encounter. This should encourage all stakeholders to be that positive support person for the new gay teacher. There can be a lot of negativity in the educational world, but the power of one hug can go a long way. Be that hug in someone else's life.

Finally, people reading this from a district administration, state policy, and or from an overall educational standpoint should see that we are doing a disservice to our students and communities. We are passively allowing new gay teachers to be discriminated against just like many of our LGBTQ students are. There have been many advancements in protecting our LGBTQ students, but there is still a long way to go. From a system standpoint, until no LGBTQ student or teacher goes through the myriad risk factors, we in education are not doing our jobs. No individual should ever feel like they should have to deny who they are for many years to feel like they need to keep their job. As a system of education, we should be encouraging diversity and creating lifelong learners to advance our society. As teachers, we create the world.

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APPENDIX A: SHIVELY SCALE

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all heterosexual		Somewhat heterosexual		Very heterosexual
1	2	3	4	5
Not at all homosexual		Somewhat homosexual		Very homosexual

APPENDIX B: KINSEY SCALE

- 0 Exclusively heterosexual-** Individuals who make no physical contacts which result in erotic arousal or orgasm, and make no psychic responses to individuals of their own sex.
- 1 Predominantly heterosexual/only incidentally homosexual-** Individuals who have only incidental homosexual contacts which have involved physical or psychic response, or incidental psychic response without physical contact.
- 2 Predominantly heterosexual but more than incidentally homosexual-** individuals who have more than incidental homosexual experience, and/or if they respond rather definitely to homosexual stimuli.
- 3 Equally heterosexual and homosexual-** individuals who are about equally homosexual and heterosexual in their overt experience and/or the their psychic reactions.
- 4 Predominantly homosexual but more than incidentally heterosexual-** individuals who have more overt activity and/or psychic reactions in the homosexual, while still maintaining a fair amount of heterosexual activity and/or responding rather definitely to heterosexual contact.
- 5 Predominantly homosexual/only incidentally heterosexual-** individuals who are almost entirely homosexual in their overt activities and/or reactions.
- 6 Exclusively homosexual-** individuals who are exclusively homosexual, both in regard to their overt experience and in regard to their psychic reactions.

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APPENDIX C: MY DAD

Relationships are very complex and not always easy for me to talk about. I have learned to keep many of my emotions to myself and have even learned to let many things go that have hurt me (or swept them under the rug). I dive deep in my relationship with my dad from a positive point of view. I think it is important to talk about this because during this time, I was transitioning from teaching seventh- and eighth-grade English and moving to the high school. While being at the high school was very difficult, it was also the time period when I began to discover I was denying a big part of my life. I think I began to make this realization because of the conversations I had with my dad. While working with him, I was able to express who I was and share who I thought I wanted to be. He was also able to share what he was going through and his thoughts about me being gay. He also was able to share with me how proud he was of me for accomplishing all that I did at such a young age. One thing I remember was understanding that I expected my dad to accept me for being gay right away even though it took me years to accept myself. I also did not give my dad a chance and closed the door. I am so thankful for the times we have worked together and having the chance to talk with my dad. I have learned so much from him and am so thankful for the skills he has imparted to me. I think my dad and I were able to open up and develop a relationship through something he was able to share with me.