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THE TEACHER'S CLOSET:  
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF DUAL IDENTITIES OF LESBIAN AND GAY  
MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS IN GEORGIA

A DISSERTATION

Submitted by

Heather Ann Keilwitz

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education

LESLEY UNIVERSITY

Terrence Keeney, Ph.D. (Chair)

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of lesbian and gay Georgia middle school teachers in not disclosing their sexual identities with their students. Using a narrative inquiry, data were collected through in-depth individual interviews and a focus group discussion on the following areas of inquiry: What are the experiences of lesbian and gay Georgia middle school teachers who do not disclose their sexual identity with their students? How, if at all, do the experiences of nondisclosure inhibit their abilities as teachers? How, if at all, has the nondisclosure affected their personal lives? Ten self-identified lesbian and gay teachers participated in this study: five Caucasian females, two Caucasian males, two Hispanic females, and one African American female. Participants ranged in age from thirty-four to fifty-five. All the teachers were employed full-time at a middle school in the metro-Atlanta, Georgia area. Findings were presented in a narrative form using the participants' voices. Three themes emerged 1) managing dual identities, (2) partaking in identity management strategies, and (3) desiring to serve as openly gay role models to their students. All three of the emerged themes were interpreted through the lens of the social identity theory, which connects to the overall concept of gay teacher development. A more accurate understanding of these experiences would allow educators, administrators, and other educational faculty members to proceed from an informed perspective and appreciate the importance of allowing homosexual teachers to be free to develop and live an authentic identity, as well as be able to teach through an authentic lens.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my wonderfully loving and patient family and friends. First, to my mother: my rock, my inspiration, and my best friend. You have always believed in me, even when I did not believe in myself. My gratitude for the countless hours you gave to watch my children as I slaved over the computer can never fully be expressed. Without a doubt, I would not be the woman I am, the professional I am, nor the parent I am without you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I love you, Mom!

To my handsome son Adyn and my beautiful daughter Aynslee: you are my heartbeat, my breath, and the reason I exist in this world. Balancing mom duties and being a doctoral student was at times near impossible. I appreciate your understanding and encouragement all the times I had to write instead of spend time with you both. My desire was to show you that with hard work, anything is possible. Being your mom is the most amazing part of my life, and it is through your love that I found the courage to push my boundaries and work to live an authentic life driven by passion. My wish for you both is that you will always know how much I love you and how much I believe in YOU!

Finally, to my friends and other family members, journeys like these remind me of how fortunate I am to have such a large support network of people who believe in me and motivate me when I need it most. I would not have made it without each one of you cheering me along the way. I always strive to succeed in everything I do, and it is because of the inspiration of the incredible people around me that I am able to do so. Thank you for being a part of this journey with me.

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Next, I want to thank my participants. I was so fortunate to have found ten amazing women and men to experience this journey with me. You shared more than just precious time with me; you shared intimate parts of your lives with me. Thank you for being strong, for being bold, for being beautiful, and most importantly, for sharing your voice.

Finally, I would like to thank the members of the 2013 cohort in the ALD program. It seems like yesterday that I was walking from the train to the dorms, ready to start this adventure. I never imagined I would find such an amazing support system that would blossom into wonderful friendships. We all made a pact that we would support each other and finish together, and I am so proud of ALL OF US for making it happen. It has been quite a voyage!

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## Chapter 1: Context of the Study

But by identity and integrity I do not mean only our noble features, or the good deeds we do, or the brave faces we wear to conceal our confusions and complexities. Identity and integrity have as much to do with our shadows and limits, our wounds and fears, as with our strengths and potentials.

—Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (2010, p. 13)

### Introduction and Background of the Researcher

My initial interest in this topic stemmed from my personal experiences of living with dual identities as a middle school teacher in the state of Georgia. In this study, dual identities refers to a representation of a homosexual who discloses sexual identity in a social setting but does not disclose to students (Fingerhut, Peplau, & Ghavami, 2005). I am a teacher. Inside the four walls of my school, I have the reputation of being a hardworking, caring mother of two, and a loyal friend to all, but for many years I felt like I had to hide the fact that I am also lesbian. Although I had a sound reputation within my school as a teacher, leader, and mentor, as well as a solid relationship with my students and parents, I concealed my sexual identity from them for fear of losing my job and possibly my Georgia teaching certificate. Reflecting back, I do not recall the moment that I made the conscious decision to stay *closeted*, or refrained from disclosing my sexual identity to others (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003), I just did.

I started work at a new metro-Atlanta middle school in 2006 and decided from the beginning that I would remain closeted. I wondered if I disclosed my sexual identity whether the administrators or other teachers would think less of me. I also questioned if my colleagues would consider me morally unfit to be in the teaching profession due to the influences of the strong conservative religious beliefs many people in the South live by. I had only lived in Georgia for two years, and I did not know many people, especially any other homosexuals. Soon, however, I befriended a fellow lesbian teacher at my school, and through that association, I became friends

with even more homosexual people. I realized that being a lesbian was not something to be ashamed about; however, the idea of coming out to my students was immutable. My sexual identity was just something I did not discuss. After making friends with other homosexuals, in and outside of my school, I was no longer actively trying to *cover* or hide my identity (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; Cummings, 2009) from administrators or from my colleagues.

The first incident of *passing*, or allowing others to believe I was heterosexual by conforming to the social norm (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014), happened during my second year at my middle school when I received flowers for my birthday from a woman I was dating. She signed the card with just the first letter of her name, T. As would be expected, the gift sparked curiosity from my middle school students. The students questioned me, bantered about my “boyfriend,” and actively tried to guess “his” name. As the students began exclaiming masculine names that began with the letter T looking for confirmation, I just laughed it off, secretly desiring to just tell them HER name.

The next episode of *covering* my authentic identity occurred when rumors began to circulate around the school about me dating a teacher at the school, a *butch* lesbian, or a lesbian who demonstrates features and mannerisms that are more masculine (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Levy-Warren, 2009). Although I was, in fact, dating this particular teacher, who by first glance was easily stereotyped as a lesbian, I kept my distance from her and remained *closeted*. Following that event, the rituals of daily heteronormative behavior within my school became more noticeable every day. When students began to question me, “Are you a lesbian?” I responded with the same canned response, “Does it matter?” Maybe it did not matter to them, but I did not take the chance—I remained closeted.

Several years went by and I began to feel more comfortable in my true identity. I began to think that coming out to my students may not be such a bad idea. I decided to bring my girlfriend with me on an out-of-state field trip with my students. My students inquisitively asked if she was my sister to which I quickly replied, “No!” I never did offer an explanation of who this woman with me was, but the students did not inquire further. Reflecting back, I am sure my students began to speculate that I may be a lesbian and that the woman with me was my girlfriend, yet I was not ready or able to admit it.

A decade has passed, and I am now teaching in a metro-Atlanta high school. I have taken the time to once again think back on how things could have been different at the middle school had I chosen to be open with my students. In the nine years I was at that particular middle school, I had the opportunity to meet and to teach many questioning and self-identified homosexual students. The students were at various developmental stages of their homosexual identity: some of the students did not yet accept their sexual identity, while others would flaunt it. I ask myself what it was that kept me from disclosing with my students. My administrators knew I was a lesbian and so did most of my colleagues, but I feared the possible rejection from my students, from their parents, from the community, and from other stakeholders. Passing as heterosexual and covering my authentic identity affected my personal life on many occasions (Krane, 1996). I had to guard what I said by changing pronouns and even names of people on occasions. To this day, neither the school district in which I worked nor the state of Georgia has any policies protecting against discrimination or loss of employment due to sexual identity. I was constantly aware of my surroundings while with my partner in public for fear I would run into a student or a parent. I will never know what would have happened had I been open and honest with my middle school students.

Homosexuality seems to be a divisive topic in America, and with my personal experience as a closeted lesbian middle school teacher in the state of Georgia, I wanted to find out more about other teachers who were living this dual identity. The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore with a sample of lesbian and gay Georgia middle school teachers, their experiences of being closeted with their students and to hear their perceptions of whether or not or how living with a dual identity affects their professional and personal lives. It is expected that the knowledge generated from this study will provide new insights into the experience of lesbian and gay Georgia middle school teachers and the potential effect remaining closeted with students has on their professional and personal lives.

### **Background of the Study**

Discrimination against homosexuals has been widespread throughout the world (Walker, 2009). Heterosexuality has been positioned as the “central gender and sexual category in the generation of power, authority, and social domination” (Hill, 1996, p. 275). As recent as 1990, gay bashing saturated the news, consensual adult homosexual activity was illegal in many states in America, and there were virtually no celebrities or athletes who were openly gay, let alone portrayed on television shows (Walker, 2009). Now in 2016, it seems that American culture has a fascination with the lives of lesbian women and gay men, as shown through an increase in the visibility of homosexuality in pop culture and in the media (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010).

As a whole, societal attitudes towards persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) have been shifting dramatically over the last decade, with the latest monumental change for the LGBT community being the landmark 5-4 U.S. Supreme Court ruling on marriage equality on June 26, 2015 (Liebelson & Terkel, 2015). This ruling supports

the right for same-sex couples to marry under both the Due Process Clause and the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution (Liptak, 2015). Even with this shift in attitudes, the LGBT community remains a marginalized group that suffers discrimination in virtually all areas of life, especially in the workplace.

As of 2016, eighteen states in the U.S. offer no form of protection from discrimination based on sexual identity in the workplace (Gates & Saunders, 2016; Human Rights Campaign, 2014). The Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) is legislation proposed in the United States Congress for the last forty years that prohibits discrimination in hiring and employment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity (Badgett, Burns, Hunter, Krehely, Mallory, & Sears, 2013). ENDA has yet to pass in both the House and the Senate (Gao & Zhang, 2016; Gates & Saunders, 2016). The Employment Non-Discrimination Act would provide equal protections to all employees but, without this legislation, it is legal under federal law to terminate employment based on an employee's sexual identity. Antidiscrimination laws in the workplace have been implemented in other states, but not in Georgia (Eckes & McCarthy, 2004). Without this workplace protection, a member of the LGBT community could be fired or forced to resign due to disclosure of her or his sexual identity.

Even with the federal changes in the law regarding an individual's right to same-sex marriage, one sector that has been slow to accept change is public school systems throughout the United States (Russell, 2014). In 2013, for the first time in history, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conducted the National Health Interview and surveyed nearly 35,000 people in the United States to inquire about sexual identity. The results of the survey indicated that nearly 3% of those surveyed identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or "something else" (Ward, Dahlhamer, Galinsky, & Joestl, 2014, p. 2). Other national population census data indicate there



are approximately 3.5% of adults in the U.S. who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and there are an estimated 0.3% of adults who identify as transgender. These numbers imply that there are roughly nine million LGBT Americans in the United States (Gates, 2011). Although these statistics cannot fully represent the entire LGBT population due to the refusal of some to disclose their sexual identity, one can be certain that there are homosexuals in every community, which would include homosexual teachers in school systems around the U.S. (Russell, Clarke, & Clary, 2009).

The teaching profession is a vital and esteemed occupation in the eyes of many. Education is a diverse professional field in which teachers not only represent a variety of races and ethnic backgrounds but also represent multiple sexual identities. The United States, like other countries throughout the world, is chiefly a heteronormative society with heterosexuality the standard (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). A societal belief that identifying as anything other than heterosexual is unusual and even deviant, is dangerous, especially in the middle school educational setting in which children are coming into their own identities and learning about the world in which they live (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009).

John Dewey (1914), an educational reformist in his day, believed that teaching was equal to other highly respected occupations such as religious ministry, due to the influence a teacher has on a student's life. For most people who enter the teaching profession, there is a passion for children and a desire to change the world, one child at a time. It is common to hear stories about how a teacher helped to shape the life of a child, not necessarily because of the content taught, but because of how the teacher showed the child that he or she mattered. *Students do not care how much you know until they know how much you care* is a familiar phrase in the education profession. Ruddell (1995) suggests that teachers are remembered for "their personal attributes,

physical characteristics, and teacher style” (p. 454). The educational literature supports that teaching is a relational process, and it is important for teachers to be present and teaching from their authentic selves (Bliss & Harris, 1998; Bridgman, 2012; Carter, 1993; DeJean, 2007; Elliott, 1996; Fleischer, 2005; Macgillivray, 2008; Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008; Russ, Simonds, & Hunt, 2002; Sokolower, 2011; Vann, 2012).

### **Adult Learning Context and Need for the Study**

The state of Georgia is positioned in the southeastern portion of the United States. This southern region is often referred to as the “Bible Belt” due to its socially conservative, religiously-based positions on politics, more specifically, evangelical Protestantism (Castle, 2011; Shelton, 2015). Current literature on homosexual teachers who are living openly in the classroom discusses the importance of providing openly gay teachers as role models for the homosexual youth within school settings (Bishop, Caraway, & Stader, 2010; Eckes & McCarthy, 2008; Russell, 2010; Shelton, 2015). However, without the protection of workplace antidiscrimination laws in Georgia, many LGBT educators are not open about their sexual identity, regardless of the possible benefits this openness would provide students, for fear of losing their jobs.

In previous research within the LGBT educator community, studies have focused on how staying in the closet or coming out has affected lesbian and gay students (Bridgman, 2012; Clarke, 1996; DuBeau, 1998; Hardie, 2012; Peña-Talamantes, 2013; Renn, 2000; Russell, 2014), but there are limited studies involving lesbian and gay teachers (Capper, 1999; Mayo, 2008; Shelton, 2015; Sparkes, 1994; Vann, 2012). From a review of the literature, no study represented the population of Georgia middle school teachers and focused on the experiences of participants’ nondisclosure with students.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The United States began a new era of research concerning homosexual identity and the development of identity models in the 1970s. Since then, several researchers have recognized the significance of sexual identity models and the coming out process for homosexuals (Alderson, 2003b; Cass, 1979, 1984b; Cooper, 2008, Degges-White & Myers, 2005; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989). Between 1975 and 1982, eleven models were developed about homosexual identity (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Olive, 2010). Most of the sexual identity models and coming out models present disclosure as a singular event that occurs within a stage (Cass, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989), although more evidence is surfacing about disclosure being more of a continuous process rather than a one-time event (Ward & Winstanley, 2005).

As an extension, Jackson (2006; 2007a) conducted research to connect the lines between teachers and homosexuality and suggests a non-linear continuum for lesbian and gay teachers. For Jackson, three stages were identified for gay teachers: (1) Pre-teaching, (2) Closeted teaching, and (3) Post-coming-out. In each stage of this model, the individual becomes more open about her or his sexual identity and integrates her or his sexual identity with the professional identity as a teacher. According to Jackson (2007a), all homosexual teachers spend some time in the closeted teacher phase, but how long any particular teacher spends there—or even whether or not she or he went through all three stages—is individual. The focus throughout this study is homosexual teacher identity. This study will draw on a selected few of the sexual identity models and stages for a theoretical framework.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Homosexual teachers have difficulty in disclosing their sexual identity due to various reasons, such as the history of discrimination against homosexuals, lack of legal protections, and the traditions set forth by the education profession. Disclosing one's sexual identity or living openly is linked to better overall mental and physical health (Biegel, 2010; Fredriksen-Goldsen, Emler, Kim, Muraco, Erosheva, Goldsen, & Hoy-Ellis, 2013), but without legal protection in the state of Georgia, homosexual teachers often remain closeted to protect their careers (Button, 2001; Korte, 2007). Furthermore, although literature exists affirming many benefits of having openly gay teachers in schools, especially for homosexual students or those questioning their sexual identity (Khayatt, 1992; Renn, 2000; Russ et al., 2002; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003), many, if not most, lesbian and gay teachers remain closeted with their students, especially in the South. The *closet* has a reputation of being a place of silence and shame (Rasmussen, 2004) and with education being an interpersonal profession, how is one to teach from an authentic point of view, if not allowed to indeed be authentic?

## **Statement of Purpose**

A teacher's identity, experiences, and beliefs influence what type of teacher she or he will be (Grace, 2006). It is imperative for a teacher to be able to teach from one's authentic self in the classroom. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of a sample of lesbian and gay Georgia middle school teachers being closeted with their students and to hear of their perceptions of living with dual identities. Dual identities found in the literature refer to living as part of the majority in the "heterosexual society" but also living within the "sexual-minority world" (Fingerhut et al., 2005, p. 129). Living and presenting with two identities—a social

identity and a professional identity—can be very challenging and can affect various aspects of a person’s life (Allen, 1995; Clair et al., 2005; Clarke, 1996; Fingerhut et al., 2005).

### **Guiding Questions**

The objective of this research was to provide lesbian and gay Georgia middle school teachers a platform to share their experiences of how balancing their dual identities had affected them both professionally and personally. A qualitative narrative inquiry study was designed to explore the participant’s experiences of being closeted with their students. Data was gathered using a semi-structured interview protocol and a focus group discussion to address the following guiding questions:

- 1) What are the experiences of lesbian and gay Georgia middle school teachers who do not disclose their sexual identity with their students?
- 2) How, if at all, do the experiences of nondisclosure inhibit their abilities as teachers?
- 3) How, if at all, do the experiences of nondisclosure affect their personal lives?

### **Research Approach**

The research approach used a constructivist epistemological stance. Within the constructivist framework, the researcher recognized that knowledge is individually and socially constructed from personal experiences (Patton, 2002). There are two main branches of the constructivist mindset: Jean Piaget’s cognitive constructivism and Vygotsky’s social constructivism (Ultanir, 2012). Cognitive constructivism emphasizes truths within learners’ present knowledge sets, while social constructivism emphasizes collaboration with others and allowing learners’ individuality to come forth and be fostered in the learning process (Powell & Kalina, 2009). A transformative framework, an alternative to both cognitive constructivism and social constructivism, may be used to reflect the power and societal relationships as a way to

construct knowledge (Mertens, 2003). For both schools of thought, knowledge is built upon prior knowledge or connected to previous experiences. The constructivist epistemology centers on personal reflection and the ability to construct new meaning as an outcome of the reflection (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Constructivist researchers seek to provide a voice to persons within a marginalized population (Weiss & Greene, 1992; Williamson, 2006). Although individuals make meaning through experiences, learning can also occur through interaction within the sociocultural context (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Constructivism maintains that the individual learner combines new knowledge, past experiences, and environmental factors to construct a new scheme of knowing. Connections among prior beliefs, ideas, and past events help to construct the new knowledge of the learner (Ultanir, 2012).

Narrative inquiry is a “human-centered” approach to telling stories of one’s experiences (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 103) and values personal descriptions (Shelton, 2015). Narrative inquiry is a way of giving back through storying and is especially useful in the education field (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry is also used as a way to “transfer knowledge,” moving from personal stories to a broader topic (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p 22). One goal of qualitative research is to recognize and represent the experiences of people as they “encounter, engage, and live through situations” (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999, p. 216). Since teaching is a relational occupation and the world is composed of narratives, the life stories of the participants can be shared for insight and future learning. Narrative inquiry takes a closer look at personal stories and shares the experiences with the reader (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Furthermore, narrative inquiry provides a method to explore participants’ experiences of identity development and emphasizes process and change over time (McAdams, 2001; Pals, 2006;

Singer, 2004). There are various ways of knowing, and within a narrative paradigm, the researcher seeks to understand the experience of each participant (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). With the application of narrative inquiry, the reader is able to more fully understand how life experiences help shape the identity of a person. This understanding is significant, especially with regard to marginalized populations such as the LGBT educator community (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). By using narrative inquiry, participants will be able to share their experiences and reflect on how those experiences contribute to their lives in a holistic manner.

### **Researcher Perspective and Assumptions**

The researcher is a lesbian-identified woman with first-hand experience of some of the complications of being closeted with students. At the time of conducting this study, the researcher was employed as a high school teacher in the metro-Atlanta area; however, the previous eleven years were spent as a middle school teacher in the state of Georgia. The researcher brings to the inquiry process practical experiences, having both knowledge and experience of being a closeted middle school educator. The researcher self-disclosed to all participants in the study in order to display an understanding of what it is like to be a homosexual teacher in Georgia. The researcher hoped to alleviate vulnerability the participants may feel about participating in the study by using this disclosure. Based on the researcher's experiences and background as a lesbian middle school teacher, two primary assumptions regarding this study were made. First, remaining closeted from students affects one's ability to teach from an authentic point of view. Second, being unable to enact one's authentic self has negative repercussions in one's life, professionally or personally, and perhaps even both. To help the researcher be aware of biases and bracket them out as much as possible, the researcher used journaling as a method to summarize the participants' voices at the conclusion of each individual

interview and a memoing technique to capture any strong reactions by the researcher to the opinions of the participants.

### **Rationale and Significance**

Discrimination and social oppression are common for homosexuals who are often labeled as “sexual minorities” (Croteau, 1996; Elliott, 1993; Hetherington, Hillerbrand, & Etringer, 1989; Morgan & Brown, 1991). Georgia is known to be intolerant of homosexuality and with no workplace antidiscrimination laws in the state, most lesbian and gay educators choose to stay silent. (Castle, 2011; Shelton, 2015). As a whole, the LGBT population has been a target for negative stereotypes, and sometimes even violence (McKay, 2000; Wang, Schale, & Broz, 2010). Many individuals validate discrimination with religious interpretations of the Bible or stereotypes that homosexuals are perverts (Levine & Leonard, 1984). Another example of a negative stereotype about the LGBT population, particularly in reference to gay men, is the popular belief that homosexuality correlates with pedophilia (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Griffin, 1992a; King, 2004). Among homosexual educators, a common parental fear highlighted within the literature is that a homosexual teacher will work to “recruit” students into homosexuality (Allen, 2011; Bishop et al., 2010; Clarke, 1996; DeJean, 2007; Griffin, 1992a; King, 2004; Vann, 2012).

Middle school years have been suggested as the primary years of identity formation and exploration for adolescents, which for LGBT students can present even more of a challenge with the increase in bullying (Birkett et al., 2009; Russell et al., 2009). Research suggests that bullying peaks in middle school (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). In the 2015 report from the Institute of Education Studies (IES), 37% of sixth graders reported being a victim of bullying, compared to 22% of seniors (US Department of Education, 2015). Research also suggests that



having openly gay teachers within a school provides benefits for the LGBT student population such as providing a positive role model and an adult to talk to; however, with rampant negative stereotypes, lesbian and gay teachers often remain closeted (Renn, 2000; Russ et al., 2002; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003).

The rationale for this study stems from the researcher's desire to listen to the experiences of other Georgia middle school lesbian and gay teachers who remain closeted with their students. The goal of this study was to add to the body of educational research, specifically as it relates to the homosexual teacher population. It was the researcher's hope that the experience of sharing personal stories and experiences might benefit the participants who shared their stories and offer awareness to the readers into the often painful struggle of not being able to teach from one's authentic self. This study provided an opportunity for this specific population of educators to be heard and will possibly support a better understanding of the factors that influence a homosexual middle school teacher to remain closeted with her or his students.

The narrative interviews utilized in this study provided an opportunity for study participants not only to share their experiences but also to reflect on how the experiences may affect their professional and personal lives. The focus group discussions allowed the participants to engage with other teachers in similar situations and, once again, permitted dialogue and reflection of their individual experiences.

### **Key Terms and Definitions**

*Authentic Self:* Being able to fully accept and express oneself (Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, & Kaplan, 2007).

*Coming Out:* Identifying one's homosexual identity and disclosing it to other people (Evans & Broido, 1999).

*Covering:* Acknowledging to one's self that one is homosexual, although not portraying as heterosexual; keeping it hidden from others (Krane, 1996).

*Closeted*: The act of not disclosing one's sexual orientation to others (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003).

*Dual Identities*: The representation of a homosexual who discloses one's sexual identity in a personal/social setting but does not disclose to students. (Fingerhut et al., 2005).

*Heteronormative*: The belief that heterosexuality is the norm in society (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004).

*Heterosexism*: An ideology that excludes reference to homosexuals (Alderson, 2003a).

*Homophobia (also referred to as Homonegativity)*: Negative views held against a homosexual person (Alderson, 2003a).

*LGBT*: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (Bridgman, 2012).

*Passing*: Allowing others to believe one is heterosexual by conforming to a social or contextual norm (Krane, 1996).

*Sexual Identity*: A component of an individual's identity and how one thinks of one's self in terms of to whom one is sexually attracted (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004).

\*Throughout this study, the term gay may be used alone to include both lesbian and gay persons.

## **Organization of the Dissertation**

Chapter One provided the background, context, and structure for the current study. Chapter Two contains a review of the relevant literature focusing on homosexual identity development and current research on homosexual teachers. Chapter Three describes the methodology and analysis that formed the basis for the study's findings. Chapter Four offers the findings from the individual interviews in narrative form and focus group discussions, while Chapter Five presents a discussion of the findings. Chapter Six presents the implications of the study along with recommendations for future research that emerged from the study.

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Face to face with my students, only one resource is at my immediate command: my identity, my selfhood, my sense of this “I” who teaches—without which I have no sense of the “Thou” who learns.

—Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (2010, p. 10)

### Overview

The literature reviews begins with an introduction and brief discussion of two concepts: heteronormative culture and heterosexism in the workplace. Next, an overview of the different areas of identity development beginning with the concept of identity, authentic identity, dual identity, and finally teacher identity is provided. Various sexual identity models and stages are introduced from theorists such as Cass (1979), Coleman (1982), Troiden (1989), D’Augelli & Patterson (1995), and Fassinger & Miller (1997). Finally, information concerning disclosure of sexual identity, sexual identity development during the adolescent years, and the influences of various media outlets complete this literature review. This literature review explores the interconnectedness of authentic identity and sexual identity, and the potential for teachers to navigate a veiled identity in a heteronormative, privileged environment (Heintz, 2012).

### Discussion

Homosexuals have been considered a marginalized population—sometimes referred to as the invisible minority—and have been the topic of debate in the United States and around the world for decades (Blando, 2001; Lopez, & Chims, 1993; Stone, 2003). Homosexuals have been defined as the invisible or hidden minority because sexuality cannot be identified by ethnicity, race, or skin color, and, because of this, they often remain silent (Lee, 2002; Ward & Winstanley, 2005). People who possess this concealable stigmatized identity often choose not to reveal it in order to avoid bias and associated negative stereotypes (D’Emilio, 1983; Frable, 1993; Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). Concealing one’s sexual identity or

*passing* is an identity management strategy (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). For homosexuals, as a sexual minority living in a majority population, passing can cause a negative impact within all areas of life, including a decreased sense of belonging (Cain, 1991a; Kelly & McKillop, 1996). To some extent, concealment of one's sexual identity is a "function of experiencing or anticipating direct or indirect social costs of coming out" (Ryan, Legate, & Weinstein, 2015, p. 550). Members of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) community must continuously weigh the potential benefits and risks of disclosing their sexual identities in different environments (Hu, Wang, & Wu, 2013).

Discrimination and silence are often unmistakable when homosexuality and educational systems combine (Town, 1994). Comparable to the legislation *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* for military personnel, which stated that individuals who disclosed their homosexuality would be discharged, homosexual educators have been ignored and even denied the basic rights of presenting their authentic selves (Clair et al., 2005; Herek, 2000; Leary, 1999; Major & Gramzow, 1999; Oswald, 2007; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008). Choosing to not disclose one's sexual identity under certain circumstances is commonly due to personal fear of rejection from society (Bailey & Phariss, 1996), is associated with feelings of inauthenticity, and can result in feelings of exclusion in social situations (Lenton, Bruder, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2013).

### **Heteronormative Culture**

Heteronormativity refers to the social setting that normalizes heterosexuality (Chase & Ressler, 2009; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). It denotes "the myriad ways in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon" (Kitzinger, 2005, p. 478). Heteronormativity exists within a religious context with the fundamental tenets of most of the Judeo-Christian religions predominant in United States

culture. Judeo-Christian religion teaches the restriction of sexual activity to married, heterosexual couples and labels all other forms of sexuality as deviant (Greenberg & Bystry, 1982). There are also higher levels of sexual prejudgment among heterosexuals who frequently attend religious services or identify with fundamentalists beliefs (Fisher, Derison, Polley, Cadman, & Johnston, 1994; Herek & Capitanio, 1996; Johnson, Brems, & Alford-Keating, 1997; Marsiglio, 1993). Particularly in the southern portion of the U.S., the large number of the population affiliated with some type of organized religion that supports heterosexual marriage and the traditional family unit of a man and woman can be challenging to maneuver for the LGBT community (Greenberg & Bystry, 1982). Negative opinions towards homosexuals can be viewed as a “learned process” and, with more adverse information than supportive presented about homosexuals, it is not a wonder why homosexuals have been discriminated against as a sexual minority in essentially every setting (Wright, 1993, p. 29).

### **Heterosexism in the Workplace**

Heterosexuality is a “normalized” component of our everyday world (Gray, 2013, p. 704). Heterosexism is the belief that heterosexuality fits the societal norm (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009) and is superior to all other forms of sexual identities (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003). It is different from homophobia in that it is not a fear or dislike of homosexuals, but an overarching belief that heterosexuality is the only option for one’s sexual identity. Although both are powerful, heterosexism is much less visible than homophobia (Flowers & Buston, 2001).

From the 1960s through today, social justice movements have worked toward shedding a positive light on the LGBT community (Taylor, 2011). Since one’s sexual identity is not readily apparent to others, most heterosexual people believe there are few homosexuals in society (Allen, 1995). In actuality, the number of individuals who identify as homosexuals is on the rise;

one study suggests that approximately one in every fifty people is homosexual, with the potential for that statistic to rise to one in every ten to twenty people in major cities (Clair et al., 2005). According to another study, statistics show 10% to 14% of people who work in the United States have identified as homosexual (Waldo, 1999). Many states are still without workforce protections for homosexuals, and the disclosure of one's sexual identity can result in termination of employment. The risk of losing employment makes coming out for homosexuals a multi-layered, often intricate predicament and decision (Button, 2001; Gray, 2013; King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008).

It is common in the workplace to hear about the families of heterosexual coworkers - husbands, wives, and children - but for a heterosexual, personal exchange as such does not draw unwarranted attention. For a homosexual, conversations about partners and children do not come as easy and instead can be laden with fear of disclosure. Chojnacki and Harmon (1994) suggested four levels of heterosexism in the workplace: (1) Overt discrimination, (2) Covert discrimination, (3) Tolerance, and (4) Affirmation. Employers that overtly discriminate have policies that ban the employment of homosexuals. With covert discrimination, an employer does not have specific policies, yet discrimination within the workplace exists. Tolerant employers will protect gay employees within the workplace; however, they will not provide benefits to same-sex partners. Employers who practice affirmation will include benefits for partners, as well as training for other employees on diversity within the workplace. Despite the literature to support the benefits of being true to oneself in the workplace, the increase in social acceptance, and changes in laws surrounding the LGBT community, discrimination in the workplace is still a concern (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Bergonzi, 2009; Ménard & Brunet, 2011).

## **Identity**

One's identity, a concept that has been studied by many researchers and theorists throughout history (Erikson & Erikson, 1997), is fundamental to who a person is. Identity or the meaning that people attach to the roles that are displayed in one's identity can be socially and culturally assigned (Stryker & Burke, 2000). The development of one's identity marks an important milestone in the growth of adolescents and young adults (Marszalek & Cashwell, 1999; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Endo, Reece-Miller, and Santavicca (2010) claimed that everyone has multidimensional identities, with sexual identity representing just one of the identities a person possesses. The construct of identity is multifaceted, as one can categorize it in several ways, using a variety of components (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Jennings, 2010; Stevens, 2004). For example, an individual may identify with age, race, religion, cultural upbringing, and sexuality when classifying her- or himself (Abes, 2012; Mohr & Kendra, 2011). Identity and how one views oneself can be ever-changing and be influenced by life experiences (Marcia, 1966).

Sexual identity, a subcategory of one's complete identity, can vary dramatically from person to person. Sexual identity is believed to be influenced by nature, biology, and even the environment, which can also vary throughout a lifetime (Eliason & Schope, 2007). Sexual identity is the process by which an individual recognizes her or his sexual attractions and then uses this knowledge to sexually self-identify (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). Sexual identity can be both fluid and socially constructed (Rust, 1993) and is "often invisible" (Nielson & Alderson, 2014, p. 1086). American society portrays heterosexuality as desirable and attributes it to child rearing and forever love, while simultaneously depicting homosexuality as deviant and inappropriate (Jackson, 2006). As a whole, society views heterosexuality as the only socially

acceptable expression of sexuality, but over time, homosexuality is increasingly becoming more socially acceptable (Bogaert & Hafer, 2009). Depending on the individual, certain social components may have a greater influence than others on the overall development of identity (Jones, 2009).

### *Authentic Identity*

Enacting one's true self is also referred to as one's authentic self (Mason-Schrock, 1996; Ragins, 2004). The development of one's authentic identity connects to an individual's self-esteem and assuredness of who she or he is as a whole person and is often a process that spirals back through experiences (Fleischer, 2005). Authenticity in one's self occurs when a person is able to be fully herself or himself in every capacity of the word, in her or his private life and professional life (Clair et al., 2005). The ability to be true to the self can be difficult for anyone because to some extent everyone separates work life from personal life. However, not feeling able to or safe to share about one's personal life can be taxing (Holt & Griffin, 2003).

Coming out or disclosing one's homosexuality to others is a major psychological decision and is essential in developing a true sense of self (Cain, 1991a; Cass, 1984b; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Ragins, 2004; Wells & Kline, 1987) and also promotes psychological wellness (Cain, 1991a). When one employs a separate identity, concealing parts of one's self, there is a sense of compartmentalization (Smith & Yost, 2009). This sense of two identities is a way of self-censoring (Wood, 2005). As a homosexual in a workplace, some strive for that authentic identity to become a role model for others and to help curtail homophobia (Heintz, 2012; Wright, 1993). Sexual identity, although not an all-encompassing factor, is an important component in the development of an authentic identity (Olive, 2010). Authentic identity in relation to a



homosexual identity involves moving from a place of secrecy and denial to a place of acceptance and self-expression (Allen, 2011; Eliason & Schope, 2007).

### *Dual Identity*

Identities are shaped by societal constructs (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) and in times when there is a social conflict with one's identity, dual identities may result. It is not unusual for a person to separate her or his life in a private and professional manner, but the ensuing strain from being forced to live two separate identities can be tiresome. Olson (1987) referred to separating one's identity as leading a *double life*. Living a double life can have a negative impact on an individual and her or his psyche in terms of self-worth and self-esteem (Diamond, 2005; King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008; Town, 1994; Ward & Winstanley, 2005). Sedlovskaya, Purdie-Vaughns, Eibach, LaFrance, Romero-Canyas, & Camp, (2013) used the term "divided self" when describing the concealment of part of one's identity (p. 1).

Dual identities in relation to sexual identity involves someone disclosing her or his sexual identity within certain environments while remaining closeted or not disclosing her or his sexual identity in other circumstances. This can vary across settings and timeframes (Clarke, 1996; Eliason & Schope, 2007). Representing one's self as both pseudo-heterosexual and homosexual can leave a person unconfident of one's authentic identity. For a homosexual who lives with a dual identity, there is a constant surveillance of what is said and what is done within each social context (Town, 1994). This surveillance is even more prevalent in certain professions. A teacher, for example, is entrusted to work with young and impressionable minds and, therefore, is held to a high ethical and moral standard and is expected to serve as a role model (Gray, 2013; Rudoe, 2010; Russell, 2010; Vann, 2012). Protecting oneself from exposure as a homosexual is of utmost importance, and denial and censorship then become part of one's identity (Clarke, 1996).

Such invisibility of one's authentic self often leads to a feeling of isolation and secrecy that assist in the daily fear of being discovered (Town, 1994).

### *Teacher Identity*

Teaching is a relational profession with educators influencing students' lives and daily learning (Grace, 2006). Education is not only about content learned. It is also about learning how to build relationships. Sharing personal information with students, such as family, children, and hobbies, is regarded as acceptable and almost ritualistic for the beginning of the school year introductions. The development of student-teacher relationships can be profound on the level of student learning and the satisfaction a teacher finds within her or his career as an educator (Donahue, 2007). Authentic teaching is an important approach to help engage students in the content material (Allen & Baber, 1992). With the importance of relationship building and higher-level learning, it is essential that teachers be able to teach from an authentic point of view (Hoveid & Hoveid, 2008).

Similar to the previous discussion on identity, a teacher's identity is shaped by her or his beliefs: a combination of interactions within society and lived experiences (Gee, 2000; Geijsel & Meijers, 2005; Korthagen, 2004; Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). A teacher's personal experiences, in combination with race and gender, assist in the development of the professional teacher identity. "Identities are the result of the inescapable and ongoing process of discussion, explanation, negotiation, argumentation, and justification that partly comprises teachers' lives and practices" (Clarke, 2009, p. 197). All teachers have a personal background, a life history that consciously or subconsciously influences their teaching practice (Grace, 2006). In addition to interactions within society and life experiences, teacher identity is influenced by role relationships with other teachers and students (Galman, 2009; Wilkins, Busher, Kakos,

Mohamed, & Smith, 2012). Throughout life, the overall concept of the self is constantly evolving and is shaped by both a personal identity and a professional or public identity (Pearce & Morrison, 2011; Zembylas, 2003). For an educator, the professional identity is inevitably developed during the learning process of being a teacher (Meijer, Oolbekkink, Pillen, & Aardema, 2014). For an educator, the separation between one's authentic identity and one's professional identity can vary by the experience of the situation (Bullough, 2005). A situational identity does not conform to the norm of the contextual environment and is most likely to occur for early-career teachers (Galman, 2009).

One may argue that sexuality and being an educator have no correlation; however, enjoying the freedom of authenticity is an integral component of one's identity (Gowran, 2004; Griffin, 1992a). Lack of acceptance for homosexual teachers provides a rationale for why many lesbian and gay teachers refrain from disclosing their sexual identity (Ward & Winstanley, 2005). A large number of homosexual educators fear disclosing their sexuality will cost them their careers (Bishop et al., 2010). Specific laws and policies protecting lesbian and gay educators vary greatly between different school districts and even between states (Bliss & Harris, 1998; Griffin, 1991; Jackson, 2006, 2007a; Schneider, 1986; Woods & Harbeck, 1992). Remaining closeted is especially significant in Georgia and other southern U.S. states in which there are no antidiscrimination laws for sexual identity in the workplace (Eckes & McCarthy, 2004). In the past, terminating a teacher's employment based on sexual identity or suspicion of homosexuality fell under the moral turpitude act within a teacher's code of conduct (Eckes & McCarthy, 2008). The common misconception that homosexuals are pedophiles, or that they will recruit children into homosexuality, is simply not credible (Allen, 2011; Blount, 2003; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Khayatt, 1997; Nielson & Alderson, 2014; Rofes, 1989; Vann, 2012; Woods &

Harbeck, 1992). Other misconceptions connected to homosexuality include hypersexuality and increased incidences of molestation (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013). In southern states such as Georgia, religious beliefs often trump other personal beliefs. Homosexuals have been categorized as an *other* category and have become the “symbolic enemy of children, their parents, and public schools” by some religious groups (Lugg, 1998, p. 278). The way one seeks to manage how and when personal information is disclosed or hidden may be referred to as an identity management strategy or identity negotiation (Orne, 2011; Palkki, 2015; Rudoie, 2010). Since there are limited protections for most homosexual educators concerning disclosure, some have succumbed to representing themselves as heterosexual at work, and then being authentic after school (Jackson, 2006; Palkki, 2015). The idea of having an integrated identity, in which one is able to combine one’s homosexual identity with the social world around one, can be a challenge.

### **Sexual Identity Models and Stages**

Homosexuality has been researched for decades. Initial research on homosexuality began with an investigation of the possible reasons one identifies as a homosexual. Now, new research has expanded to include an inquiry into the process of coming out (Spitzer, 2003). Since the 1970s, several researchers have recognized the significance of sexual identity models and the coming out process for homosexuals (Alderson, 2003b; Cass, 1979, 1984b; Cooper, 2008, Degges-White & Myers, 2005; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989). Between 1975 and 1982, 11 models were developed about homosexual identity (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Olive, 2010). Most of the sexual identity models and coming out models present disclosure as a singular event that occurs within a stage (Cass, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Coleman, 1982; Milton & MacDonald, 1984; Troiden, 1989), although more evidence is surfacing about

disclosure being more of a continuous process rather than a one-time event (Ward & Winstanley, 2005). Cass (1979), Coleman (1984), Troiden (1989), D'Augelli and Patterson (1995), and Fassinger and Miller (1997) developed homosexual identity models that are some of the most researched.

#### *Cass (1979)*

Vivienne Cass created the Homosexual Identity Model (HIM) in 1979, which is still recognized as one of the most fundamental theories of homosexual identity development. Based on a psychosocial perspective, and one of the first models of its kind, the HIM includes six linear stages: (1) Identity confusion, (2) Identity comparison (3) Identity tolerance, (4) Identity acceptance, (5) Identity pride, and (6) Identity synthesis (Cass, 1979, 1984b; Levine, 1997). In the first stage, identity confusion, the individual becomes aware of her or his homosexual feelings, but may or may not admit to them. In stage two, identity comparison, one begins to recognize she or he may be gay but may try to convince herself or himself that it is temporary. One moves next to stage three, identity tolerance, which is when thoughts are shifted from thinking one may be gay to an acknowledgment that one probably *is* gay (Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000). The individual seeks others who identify themselves as homosexuals to lessen the feelings of being alone. In stage four, identity acceptance, there is an increase in interaction with other homosexuals and acceptance of oneself. In stage five, identity pride, one further learns to accept the homosexual identity and acknowledges the societal divide between heterosexuals and homosexuals. During this stage, disclosing one's sexual identity is more common (Cass, 1984a). Stage six, the final stage in Cass's model is identity synthesis, in which the individual fully integrates sexual identity with other parts of her or his identity.

The Homosexual Identity Model is a comprehensive model because it combines both psychological and social components of identity development. It has, however, been criticized for being too rigid in its linear advancement, for it does not recognize moving backward through any stages (Akerlund & Cheung, 2000; Marszalek & Cashwell, 1999; Stevens, 2004). In the HIM, individuals can go through each individual stage or remain at one stage, identity foreclosure—meaning the individual no longer moves forward through the identity formation process (Cass, 1984b).

*Coleman (1982)*

Coleman's idea was similar to Cass's in that it proposed homosexuals process through stages as they develop, accept, and act out in a homosexual manner. According to Coleman (1982), individuals follow a five-stage process in coming out: (1) Pre-coming out (2) Coming out (3) Exploration, (4) First relationships, and (5) Integration. During the first stage, the individual struggles with the idea of being a homosexual. In stage two, the individual begins the process of disclosing her or his sexual identity to others. In stage three, the individual begins to explore sexual interests, which leads to stage four, the first relationships. In stage five, the final stage, integration, the individual begins to identify publically as a homosexual and often surrounds herself or himself with others in the homosexual community. Throughout all stages, the individual adapts and accepts her or his sexual identity and slowly integrates being homosexual as part of her or his true self (Bond, Hefner, & Drogos, 2009).

*Troiden (1989)*

Troiden further expanded Cass's 1979 model and reworked the model into a four-stage horizontal spiral, recognizing identity as a cognitive construct (Eliason, 1996) in which identity develops back and forth through the stages (Stevens, 2004). Troiden also acknowledged a

possible alternative path through the horizontal events for each individual. Troiden's model included (1) Sensitization, (2) Identity confusion, (3) Identity assumption, and (4) Commitment (Floyd & Stein, 2002). Troiden (as cited in Eliason, 1996) believed when "societal oppression and sexual stigma are high, homosexuality may become a master status" (p. 48). During the sensitization phase, an individual first begins to question her or his sexual preferences. This personal questioning leads to the second phase of identity confusion in which the individual begins to experiment with same-sex partners. After this experimentation, an individual often takes on a homosexual identity during identity assumption, by disclosing her or his sexual identity to others, which is then often followed by commitment of the homosexual identity with further disclosure to others. Troiden framed the coming out process as events rather than simply stages. He viewed coming out as "adopting an identity that is a radical departure from the person's previous socialization" (Eliason, 1996, p. 47).

*D'Augelli & Patterson (1995)*

D'Augelli and Patterson recognized the stages of homosexual identity in the Life Span Approach, which focused on the identity development of sexual orientation. D'Augelli and Patterson also recognized that this process could be different for each individual. This Life Span Approach has six areas of development (1) Exiting heterosexual identity (2) Developing a personal gay identity status (3) Developing a gay social identity, (4) Becoming a gay offspring, or disclosing gay identity to family, (5) Developing intimacy status, and (6) Entering a gay community (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; D'Augelli, 1999; Stevens, 2004; Troiden, 1988). Each stage of the Life Span Approach focuses on further disclosure of one's sexual identity to both oneself and others. From stage one of entertaining the idea that one may be homosexual through stage six when one is fully immersed in the homosexual community, the individual may combine

stages or develop in a different order. D'Augelli's theory of homosexual identity development is "one of the few theories that consider the relationship between societal power structures and the fluidity of identity formation" (Abes et al., 2007, p. 16).

#### *Fassinger & Miller (1997)*

Throughout the decades of research on homosexual identity, other researchers have studied the coming out process. The Homosexual Identity Model and D'Augelli's Life Span Approach informed the research conducted by Fassinger and Miller (1997). Although many of the models seem to focus on the same stages or phases, Fassinger and Miller's approach went through four stages (1) Awareness, (2) Exploration (3) Deepening/Commitment, and (4) Internalization/Synthesis (Fassinger & Miller, 1997; Stevens, 2004). According to Fassinger and Miller's approach, the individual first becomes aware of homosexual feelings and follows that with same-sex exploration. During the third stage, deepening and commitment, the individual forms relationships and friendships with other homosexuals. Finally, in stage four, internalization and synthesis, one begins to disclose one's sexual preference to others and begins to live more openly as a homosexual. Within this approach, it is more recognized that individuals develop uniquely and may not go through all the same stages or particular stages at all.

#### *Analysis of Models*

All five of these sexual identity models provide an outline of what a homosexual person may experience concerning owning her or his own sexual identity. A noteworthy exemption, however, is that all models exclude dimensions such as ethnic or racial differences which can influence aspects of one's sexual identity, more specifically how or when one decides to come out (Stevens, 2004). One's decision to disclose sexual identity is influenced by a variety of societal factors and feelings of fear, uncertainty, and is a lifelong cycle. (Chutter, 2007; Cooper,



2008; Cox, Dewaele, Van Houtte, & Vincke, 2010; Floyd & Stein, 2002; Klein, Holtby, Cook, & Travers, 2015; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

### *Gay Teacher Development*

While coming out of the closet is a very individualized event, or series of events, disclosing as a homosexual teacher is more so. For a teacher, there are many legal ramifications categorized under the term moral turpitude. With varying beliefs concerning homosexuality from the parents and the community, disclosing one's sexuality could be risking more than just a relationship; the teacher could be risking her or his employment. Jackson (2006; 2007a) suggests a non-linear continuum for lesbian and gay teachers. For Jackson, three stages were identified for homosexual teachers: (1) Pre-teaching, (2) Closeted teaching, and (3) Post-coming out. The pre-teaching stage occurs before they become a teacher. During this time, one is coming into one's own homosexual identity. During the closeted teaching stage, a teacher takes on the identity as a teacher but does not disclose sexual identity. Teachers in this stage may take risks by having conversations with other colleagues about their sexuality, but do not come out completely. Finally, the third post-coming out stage involves two phases: the gay poster child phase and the authentic teacher phase. In the gay poster child phase, the teacher may feel that parents and others believe she or he has a hidden agenda, whereas in the authentic teacher phase, there is more of a self-awareness and self-acceptance (Jackson, 2007b). In the authentic teacher phase, one strives to disclose completely, providing the opportunity to consistently be one's true self.

### **Disclosure**

Heterosexuality is and has always been the principal sexual identity in the American culture (Vann, 2012). Although generations today are becoming more tolerant and accepting, older generations still have a difficult time with homosexuality (Buchanan, Dzeleme, Harris, &

Hecker, 2001). Another factor that may influence an individual's decision to disclose her or his sexual identity is cultural identity. According to Peña-Talamantes (2013), cultural identity is one of the main variables in the decision to come out for homosexual Latina/os because of their traditional connections to their families. In another study, Rosario and colleagues (2004) compared the decision to come out for African Americans and Hispanics, also indicating the influence of strong family ties and traditional gender roles.

Disclosing one's sexual identity in the classroom or to students is different from disclosing in one's personal life due to the professional expectations that are thrust upon educators (Nielson & Alderson, 2014). One of the major challenges of a homosexual teacher is the struggle to determine how to negotiate one's sexual identity and to decide when or how to disclose to others (Heintz, 2012; Waldo & Kemp, 1997). An individual must consciously weigh the risks and benefits of coming out in each individual situation and environment (Eliason & Schope, 2007). There are a variety of factors considered in the decision for a homosexual teacher to disclose her or his sexual identity in the workplace (Day & Schoendrade, 1997; DeJean, 2007; Gorski, Davis, & Reiter, 2013; Gusmano, 2008). Numerous studies indicate that although most homosexual teachers desire to display their authentic self, the fear of disclosure leading to the possible loss of employment is too much of an obstacle (DeJean, 2004; Ferfolja, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Jennings, 1994; Mayo, 2007; Sumara, 2007).

Disclosing one's sexuality is a personal decision, unique to the LGBT community (Gray, 2013), and some researchers have proposed that it is easier now than ever to disclose one's sexual identity in the workplace (Heintz, 2012). The privileging of heterosexuality is commonly unbeknownst to those who display it, yet heterosexual privilege is unmistakable because heterosexual people do not have to disclose their sexual preferences (Allen, 1995). Homosexuals

do not come out just one time; they must come out repeatedly, in every environment, and in every social group in which they exist (Schneider, 1986). The decision to disclose one's sexual identity is sometimes negotiated on a day-to-day basis. Homosexuals are relentlessly evaluating the possible consequences of being out and negotiating the contextual terms that need to be in place in order to disclose their sexual identity (Cummings, 2009). Often, homosexuals feel pressure to conform to the heteronormative standards of society because some people believe that homosexuality is deviant behavior and any act of disclosure is seen as condoning behavior the heteronormative group finds immoral or abnormal. However, being open about one's sexual identity is simply being honest about a one's whole identity (Allen, 1995). Research indicates that remaining closeted can have detrimental effects on one's psyche and overall level of job satisfaction; both can lead to premature departure from the education profession (Eliason & Schope, 2007; Endo et al., 2010; Larson & Chastain, 1990; Meyer, 1995; Potoczniak, Aldea, & DeBlaere, 2007; Schmidt, Miles, & Welsh, 2011; Sullivan, 1993; Takatori & Ofuji, 2007; Yarhouse, 2001). Concealing one's sexual identity is particularly problematic during celebrations, vacations, and other events when an individual is uncomfortable sharing stories and experiences for the fear of accidental disclosure (Mayo, 2007; Potoczniak et al., 2007).

According to Clair and colleagues (2005), the reasons homosexuals disclose their sexual identity in the workplace can be grouped into four categories. First, they are motivated to maintain an authentic sense of self. Second, they may choose to disclose their sexuality in order to develop meaningful relationships. Third, they may choose to disclose to receive benefits at work, such as insurance or other benefits for their partner. Finally, a homosexual may choose to disclose her or his sexual identity at work in order to promote social change and acceptance (Creed & Scully, 2000). There are a variety of reasons why someone may choose not to disclose

one's sexual identity to others, whether it be a private factor such as age or ethnic background, or a professional factor like beliefs of employment management or other policies in the workplace (Rasmussen, 2004). Some believe disclosing one's homosexual identity can limit social interactions, be disruptive, and even prove to be distracting, especially within a social setting (Heintz, 2012). In fact, Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, and Williams (1994) explain that the process of coming out is more challenging for those who have been brought up in a religious home and background. In various religions such as conservative Christianity, homosexuality is viewed as immoral, as sinful, and as an attack on the family as a whole (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Beal, 1994; Brooke, 1993; Court & Whitehead, 1996; Wagner et al., 1994).

Research within the LGBT community regularly delineates that coming out to others may improve the quality of one's life (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001; Oswald, 1999; Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001). Being open with others about one's sexual identity has been linked to lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, in addition to higher levels of resiliency and overall positive mental health (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Oswald, 1999; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009). Although there is much literature surrounding the coming out process (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Hanley-Hackenbruck, 1988; Morris, 1997; Rust, 1993; Sophie, 1986), current literature within an educational setting presents limited information on the role of disclosing one's sexuality in a classroom setting (Allen, 1995; Cain, 1996; Endo et al., 2010; Funsani, 1994; Goldstein & Benassi, 1994). Often, homosexual educators are caught between feeding their need to belong and the intrapersonal conflict with their authentic self (Bosson, Weaver, & Prewitt-Freilino, 2012). Factors involved in a teacher's negotiation of sexual identity occur on both a person level and a public level (Berry, 2012). One must learn to integrate one's identity in various

environments and across different settings (Beals, Peplau, & Gable, 2009; Cain, 1991b; Major & Gramzow, 1999; Mock, Sedlovskaya, & Purdie-Vaughns, 2011; Pachankis, 2007; Smart & Wegner, 1999).

There are various levels of *outness* (Clair et al., 2005) and when a homosexual does not feel comfortable or able to disclose her or his sexual identity, she or he frequently develops coping tactics to manage this identity (Ward & Winstanley, 2005). Homosexuals have four specific methods to manage their identity in situations in which one does not feel she or he can disclose completely: (1) Passing, (2) Covering, (3) Being implicitly out, and (4) Affirming identity (Griffin, 1992a as cited in Croteau, 1996). Some homosexuals go along with other people's assumptions that she or he is heterosexual; this is referred to as *passing* (Endo et al., 2010; Flowers & Buston, 2001; King et al., 2008; Town, 1994; Wright, 1993). It is known as *covering* when a homosexual does not disclose information either way about sexual identity (Smart & Wegner, 1999). When a homosexual reveals her or his sexual identity completely, disclosing sexual identity to others, this is considered to be *implicitly out*. When a homosexual has relationships or connections with other homosexuals and encourages others to acknowledge her or him as gay, it is considered *affirming identity* and can help create a sense of belonging and encourage a higher level of self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). When an individual remains closeted, she or he sacrifices "self-integrity to remain invisible" (Griffin, 1992a, p. 195). Often the decision to remain closeted is shaped by previous experiences or beliefs of what society will think, say, or do (Heintz, 2012).

Disclosure is a significant component in coming out to others because "each time homosexuals deny their sexual orientation they hurt themselves slightly, which has a cumulative effect" (Wells & Kline, 1987, p. 192). For a homosexual teacher, disclosure brings two identities

together: being homosexual and being an educator. Research suggests that teachers who are able to disclose their sexual identity in the workplace feel empowered and have the ability and desire to not only be a resource for homosexual students, but also act as positive and professional role models to the students (Garrett, 2012; Jackson, 2006; Jennings, 1994; Vann, 2012).

### **Adolescent Years-Middle School**

The development of identity, including sexual identity, is a fundamental growth task of adolescence (Bond et al., 2009; Meeus, 2011). Adolescence is a time for exploration of the environment and of oneself (Russell et al., 2009) and with the heteronormative nature of American society, the environment can influence identity construction (Flowers & Buston, 2001). Youth frequently perceive a sense of individuality and identity through interactions with others and the environment (Bregman, Malik, Page, Makynen, & Lindahl, 2013). Challenges during this growth and development of identity include working towards a sense of self (Pasupathi & Weeks, 2011). Throughout adolescence, an individual must not only learn who she or he is—one's true self—but also how to negotiate within the social context (Fleischer, 2005). Discovering one's identity can be a confusing and overall life-changing event. There can be a sense of confusion around the topic of sexuality (Holt & Griffin, 2003; McIntyre, 2009). As an adolescent is exposed to various ideas, perspectives, and opinions, it is not uncommon for her or him to experiment with various roles and identities (Wickens & Wedwick, 2011).

The development of a sexual identity other than the norm of heterosexuality may cause an adolescent to feel rejected and shameful, and it ultimately results in a lower self-esteem (Travers & Paoletti, 1999). As with most developmental milestones in adolescence, the family influence is essential, yet homosexual adolescents face different challenges during this development of identity, often due to social stigma and marginalization (Mohr & Kendra, 2011).

Without the safety of an adult that the youth can confide in, she or he may suffer emotional consequences, turn to substance abuse, drop out of school, or even attempt suicide (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007). Research uncovered that having adults accessible and willing to be open for conversations and questions concerning identity development can support an adolescent in making connections between the experiences one encounters and the reality of oneself (Pasupathi & Weeks, 2011). Unfortunately, many of today's homosexual youth face rejection from their families, which continues to be one of the most challenging problems facing gay youth (Bregman, et al., 2013; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Russell & Fish, 2016; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Parental rejection makes it even more vital for homosexual youths to find support from other adults in their lives (Graybill & Proctor, 2016; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003). Although homosexual adolescent identity development has not been well represented in the literature, it has been suggested that this identity development can be stunted without adequate support from adults (Archer & Grey, 2009).

Identity integration, in which all aspects of one's identity are united, can be difficult for homosexual youth with limited support. Involvement with other homosexuals can lead to better adjustments for self-identified lesbian and gay youth (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010). Teachers can provide a critical influence that effects change for students (Shelton, 2015). Middle school educators have a hefty task of being responsible for the safety and welfare of young adolescence during this time of puberty when sexual awakenings and physiological development are at their peaks (Bailey, 2005). Often, teachers of middle school-aged youth choose this age group specifically due to the desire to influence a student's development (Jackson, 2006). A middle school teacher understands and is often more patient with students going through this identity development. Adolescents, especially during the middle school years seek an adult role model.

GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network) conducted a study in 2012 which indicated that one of the most significant factors for an LGBT student to feel safe in school is the openness of a teacher—one who is willing to advocate and stand up for equal rights (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). A study by Macgillivray (2008) provided evidence that having an open teacher did not do damage to the students; instead, having an open teacher contributed to the students' understanding and open-mindedness. For homosexual students finding their way, their individual identities can be even more problematic without a homosexual role model available to them (Bailey & Pharriss, 1996; Holt & Griffin, 2003). Jennings (1994) advocated:

A school with an openly lesbian or gay teacher is a better school. It is a school where truth prevails over lies; it is a school where isolated students at last have a place to turn for support: it is a school where our nation's rhetoric about equality moves one-step closer to being a reality. (p. 14)

## **Media**

In a technology-driven world, the internet is an ever-changing environment that plays a critical role in the growth and development of homosexual identities as it provides unlimited information at one's fingertips (Bond et al., 2009; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Youth today have an abundance of information readily available and are exposed to a variety of sexual styles via the internet, television, and other social media outlets (Eliason & Schope, 2007), even though the information online is "unfiltered" and not always reliable (Torres et al., 2009, p. 592). The internet provides opportunities to find answers to questions about health-related ailments, offers relationship advice, displays pictures, and videos, and can provide a cyber-environment to meet friends and even form relationships (Hillier, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2012). Attraction to the same



sex can lead to shaming by peers, family, and self, which then can lead to the youth withdrawing socially in an effort to avoid others' condemnation and rejection (Crosnoe, 2000; Troiden, 1989). Many youths find little to no positive representation of homosexuals in schools, and, in combination with religious or family beliefs, find themselves accepting society's negative views of the LGBT community.

The ease of access to the internet through virtually any type of electronic device can be both positive and negative. For homosexual youth whose environments can often be unreceptive and "are often denied important information that they need for their safety, the internet can be a welcome panacea that addresses questions about sexuality" (Hillier et al., 2012, p. 242). The internet can serve as an even more helpful and needed outlet for teens who do not grow up within a major metropolitan area. With the convenience and accessibility of information, research indicates a trend of youth identifying as homosexual at an earlier age than before (Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002), with evidence suggesting the current generation of homosexual youth are more accepting of their sexual identities than ever before (Adams, Cox, & Dunstan, 2004; Cronin & King, 2014; D'Augelli, 1999). On the contrary, the internet can also be a place of shaming and negativity. Within the assortment of social media outlets, humiliation by peers can merge into social settings, causing even more distress for teens. With the southeastern region of the United States dominated by conservatism and misguided religious beliefs, social media battles can lead to bullying and the inability of teachers to discuss LGBT content within the class curriculum (Shelton, 2015).

### **Chapter Summary**

The United States, in general, is a heteronormative society in which heterosexuality is regarded as the expected sexual identity (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003). Heterosexism is

prevalent, especially in the workplace. This discrimination frequently causes countless homosexuals to remain silent with relation to their sexual identity (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). Self-expression and the need for authenticity are the foundations of individualism and a strong identity (Triandis, 1989). For homosexuals, the coming out process is individual and does not happen in a singular event. There is constant evaluation of social contextual factors and the risks of disclosure are weighed against the benefits (Hu et al., 2014). Throughout the past few decades, researchers have been working towards the development of homosexual identity models. Cass (1979), Coleman (1982), Troiden (1989), D'Augelli and Patterson (1995), and Fassinger and Miller (1997) are all known for their work and expansion on homosexual identity stage models and events. Jackson (2006; 2007a, 2007b) focused on the identity development of gay teachers, focusing on three stages.

Countless homosexual teachers choose to stay in the closet due to lack of legal protection in the workplace regarding sexual disclosure and participate in either passing or covering, both are types of identity management strategies (Clair et al., 2005; Cummings, 2009). In passing, the individual goes along with the idea that she/he is heterosexual, whereas, in covering, the individual simply does not disclose information about one's sexual identity either way (Endo et al., 2010; Flowers & Buston, 2001; King et al., 2008; Town, 1994; Wright, 1993). Because teaching is a relational profession, teachers can be especially influential during the middle school years (Grace, 2006). Teachers can serve as role models, especially during youth development when youth regularly struggle in the development of their sexual identity (Archer & Grey, 2009).

Recent changes in societal attitudes and acceptance towards homosexuals have encouraged more people to come out of the closet and disclose their sexual identity (Adam et al., 2004; Crews & Crawford, 2015; D'Augelli, 1999). The combination of homophobia and

heterosexism within society, however, can make daily life for homosexual youth more of a challenge (Flowers & Buston, 2001). It is not unusual for homosexual youth to internalize homophobia, thereby simply accepting that heterosexuality is normal and that something is abnormal about themselves (Flowers & Buston, 2001). The literature suggests that teachers who are able to teach from an authentic, true self, are able to more freely and completely put their energies into quality teaching and positive student relationships (Newton & Risch, 1981; Vann, 2012). Teachers, as well as peers, play a vital role in the lives of developing adolescents and their identities. It is imperative to recognize schools as normative contexts that shape adolescents' well-being. An understanding of how schools "reinforce or deconstruct strongly embedded heteronormative patterns that marginalize individuals who deviate from hegemonic forms of sexuality" is imperative to developing identities in adolescents (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009, p. 542). Furthermore, having openly gay teachers may allow students to be more accepting and open-minded concerning the lives of homosexuals being able to form their own opinions. Numerous studies involving LGBT topics indicate that more exposure with homosexuals leads to a reduction of homo-negativity (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997, Cullen, Wright, & Allesandri, 2002; Plugge-Foust & Strickland, 2000). Additionally, research suggests that adolescents who identify as homosexuals can come to terms more safely and confidentially with their sexual identity if they have someone to compare themselves to or have homosexual role models (Bond et al., 2008).

## Chapter 3: Methodology

Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves.

—Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (2010, p. 12)

### Research Design

The study was guided by three research questions: (1) What are the experiences of lesbian and gay Georgia middle school teachers who do not disclose their sexual identity with their students? (2) How, if at all, do the experiences of nondisclosure inhibit their abilities as teachers? (3) How, if at all, do the experiences of nondisclosure affect their personal lives?

Qualitative research is grounded in a constructivist philosophical position. The constructivist paradigm is concerned with the complexities of the sociocultural world, which includes life experiences, and how they are interpreted and understood in a particular context and at a particular point in time (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Qualitative methodology implies an emphasis on discovery and description, generally using objectives focused on extracting and interpreting the meaning of experience. A qualitative approach was the most appropriate to elicit the rich data of the participants' experiences with negotiating dual identities necessary to address the proposed guiding research questions. Furthermore, since qualitative research focuses on naturally occurring experiences, the use of narratives with personal life stories was suitable for this particular study.

### Rationale for Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a “human-centered” approach to telling stories of one’s experiences, valuing personal descriptions (Shelton, 2015; Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 103). Narrative inquiry gives back through storying and is especially useful in the education field (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry is also used to “transfer knowledge,” moving from personal

stories to a broader topic (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p 22). Furthermore, one goal of qualitative research is to acknowledge and represent the experiences of people as they “encounter, engage, and live through situations” (Elliott et al., 1999, p. 216). Narrative inquiry serves to take a closer look at personal stories and share the experiences with the reader (Shelton, 2015; Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Our world is composed of narratives, and since teaching is a relational occupation (Grace, 2006), the life stories of the participants can be shared for insight and future learning of new teachers and other educators. The number of individuals in America who identify as homosexuals is increasing, which is producing a larger pool of potential teacher candidates who identify as lesbian or gay (Clair et al., 2005; Waldo, 1999). Reading of teacher narratives can assist other homosexual teachers in similar situations to feel supported and not alone during the often difficult task of negotiating one’s sexual identity in the classroom. The participant narratives can also shed light on heteronormative occurrences within the schools and help educators to promote and implement equitable practices.

Narrative inquiry is holistic, “uniting researchers and educators; teachers and academics; theory and practice; past, present and future; [and the] personal and professional” (Convery, 1999, p. 132). With the method of narrative inquiry, the reader is able to more fully understand how life experiences help shape the identity of a person. This understanding is significant, especially concerning marginalized populations such as the LGBT educator community, because as the number of individuals who identify as homosexual increases, so does the need for unbiased practices and understanding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Endo et al., 2010). There are various ways of knowing, and, within a narrative paradigm, the researcher seeks to understand the experience of the participant (Clandinin et al., 2007). Through narrative inquiry, participants

are able to share their experiences and perhaps personally reflect on how these shared experiences contribute to their lives in a holistic manner. Furthermore, participants are able to reflect whether the experience of not disclosing their sexual identity in the classroom influenced their teaching ability, personal life, or professional life. Personal narratives help to shape people as the storytelling process assists in sense-making concerning an experience (Mason-Schrock, 1996). Narratives speak of one's authentic self and can incorporate culture within the events. Authenticity in one's self occurs when a person is able to be her or his true self in every capacity of the word, in her or his private life and professional life (Clair et al., 2005). Narratives can be reflective and work towards exploring one's identity development while giving a voice to those who are often silenced (Taylor & Littleton, 2006).

### **The Research Sample**

A purposeful sampling procedure was chosen to recruit participants for this study. Purposeful sampling is a method that is typical of a narrative inquiry approach, in which the researcher is seeking specific information (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2011). Purposeful sampling is considered "information rich" and was selected to find participants with the experiences specific to the study (Patton, 2002, p. 20). The researcher sought to locate self-identified lesbian and gay Georgia middle school teachers with at least one year of teaching experience. The snowball sampling strategy, sometimes referred to as chain sampling, was utilized (Browne, 2005; Patton, 2002). Participants were asked to refer other individuals they knew who fit the criteria of this study.

Participants for this study were recruited based on meeting the research requirements and willingness to participate in the study. For purposes of recruitment within the LGBT community (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender), it was more pragmatic to seek lesbian and gay teachers'

versus teachers who identify as bisexual or transgender. Defining the bisexual and transgender population can be a challenge due to various definitions of who may be considered part of these sexual identities (Gates, 2011). With the societal scale leaning more towards the acceptance of lesbians versus gay men (Griffith & Hebl, 2002), the researcher sought to involve both lesbian women and gay men in this study to discover whether these societal beliefs actually influence a teacher's decision to stay closeted with their students. The researcher also sought to recruit participants of varying ethnic backgrounds to discover if or how cultural identity influences one's decision to stay in the teacher's closet.

The following were the criteria for selection of study participants:

- Participants self-identify as a lesbian or gay.
- Participants are employed full-time as Georgia middle school teachers, with at least one year of teaching experience.
- Participants have not disclosed their sexual identity to students, although they may have disclosed to administrators or other teachers and staff at their schools.

A period of at least one year of teaching was chosen by the researcher to ensure the participant had practical experience of being closeted with students. Purposeful sampling allowed for recruitment across various locations in the state of Georgia. The research sample included ten individuals. Although solicited from around the state of Georgia, the research participants comprised individuals from different school districts but were limited to the metro-Atlanta area. There were, however, variances among the participants in the subsequent factors: years of teaching experience, areas of teaching specialty, gender, age, and locations of schools.

## **Description of the Sample**

This narrative inquiry focused on ten lesbian and gay Georgia middle school teachers from various counties in the metro-Atlanta area. Three research questions guided the study in seeking to hear the stories of teachers who have not disclosed their sexual identities with their students.

### *Participants*

The ten lesbian and gay teachers included in this study ranged in age from thirty-four to fifty-five years of age. The teaching experience among participants ranged between two and twenty-seven years, with an average of ten years of teaching experience. Of the ten participants, eight identified as lesbian women and two identified as gay men. Seven of the participants categorized their ethnicity as Caucasian, two as Hispanic, and one as African American. Three of the participants considered themselves single, three were in a relationship, one was *partnered\**, and three were married. Two of the participants hold Bachelor's degrees; four hold master degrees, three hold educational specialist or Ed.S. degrees; one has a Juris Doctorate. Table 1 displays a summary of the participants' demographics and professional information.

## **Participant Recruitment**

Recruitment for this study was a challenge due to the specific requirements for the participants. The difficulty in recruiting participants may have been indicative of the heteronormative societal conditions and communal need to keep one's sexual identity concealed. Remaining closeted is particularly significant in the state of Georgia and other southern states in which there are no antidiscrimination protections in the workplace regarding sexual identity (Eckes & McCarthy, 2004; Mayo, 2007). Recruitment of participants occurred using the snowball or chain sampling method (Patton, 2002) with a variety of media tools. Participants



were identified through word of mouth and personal referrals of the researcher's professional networks. Solicitation for participants began with sharing the research topic with other lesbian and gay teachers the researcher knew and inviting them to participate. The solicitation letter appears as Appendix A. The researcher asked the potential participants to share the recruitment information with other individuals who might be interested and who met the research protocol. The researcher created postcards advertising the study and distributed them at the forty-fifth annual Atlanta Gay Pride Festival, which is the largest Pride event in the southeast, as well as the largest event in the country to coincide with National Coming Out Day (Atlanta Pride Committee, Inc., 2015). The postcard appears as Appendix B. The postcards were also posted around Piedmont Park, the venue in which the Pride events were held.

Next, the researcher posted a call for participants on various lesbian/gay and education-related social media outlets such as Facebook group pages, GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Education Network) Educator Forum, GLSEN Atlanta-GSA Advisers of Georgia, K-12 Gay Straight Alliance Advisor, Georgia Equality, Out and Equal Workplace, as well as on the researcher's personal Facebook and LinkedIn profiles. The researcher attempted to create a group on the Meetup app for lesbian and gay teachers; however, the group was not approved by the organizers of the app due to their strict policies of what type of groups can use the site. Furthermore, the researcher posted a classified ad for research participants in the eleven different major cities that offer Craigslist in the state of Georgia.

Continuing the search for participants, the researcher purchased an advertisement to run in both the Creative Loafing, an Atlanta paper that is the second-most broadly distributed newspaper in Georgia (Creative Loafing, 2015) and in the GA Voice, which is one of the top media sources for the LGBT community in Georgia (Georgia Voice, 2015). The newspaper

advertisement appears as Appendix C. Finally, the researcher created a free Weebly website that was passed along to all the contacts, which advertised and offered information as well as an opportunity for people to submit contact information if they were interested in participating in the research study (Keilwitz, 2015). Information was given in all advertisements and other recruiting materials that a fifty-dollar gift card was offered as compensation for participation at the conclusion of the study.

The struggle to find participants for this research was much more problematic than anticipated. This difficulty in locating willing participants promoted further reflection by the researcher as to the likely causes of homosexual middle school teachers not coming forward to participate in this study. Although no part of the data collection was advertised to take place at the participants' schools and procedures to protect anonymity were shared, the fear of disclosure may have been too strong and discouraged some homosexual teachers from coming forward to participate. Teachers who were out with their students might have been more likely to volunteer to participate; however, this study was not recruiting teachers who had already disclosed to their students.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The use of multiple data collection methods was critical in attempting to obtain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the participants. The data collection methods used in this study included demographic questionnaires, individual in-depth interviews, and a focus group interview.

#### *Phase 1: Demographic Questionnaire*

Participants who agreed to participate in this study were sent a demographic questionnaire via email and were asked to return the completed form via email attachment. The

questionnaire was designed to collect basic information, such as age, race, sexual identification, and relationship status. The demographic questionnaire also requested information about their teacher preparation, teaching experience, and level of disclosure at their present place of employment. The demographic questionnaire appears as Appendix E.

### *Phase 2: Individual In-Depth Interviews*

The individual in-depth interview is a fundamental tool in qualitative research and was selected as the primary method for data collection in this research (Patton, 2002). Creswell (2007) and Denzin and Lincoln (2013) state that a major benefit of collecting data through individual, in-depth interviews is the potential to capture a person's perspective of an event or experience. Qualitative research interviews attempt to understand life experiences from the participant's point of view. The researcher chose this data collection method as a way to interact with the participants and capture the individual meanings of their experiences. The interview method was considered to be one of the most useful methods due to its potential to elicit rich, thick description of experience from the study participants. Furthermore, use of an in-depth interview gave the researcher the opportunity to clarify statements and probe for additional information when needed.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Professional Matrix

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Sexual Identity	Relationship Status	Highest Degree	Years of teaching middle school in GA	Disclosure
<b>Sandy</b>	55	Caucasian	Lesbian	Partnered*	Masters	9	Some colleagues & administrators
<b>BK</b>	53	Caucasian	Lesbian	Single	Ed.S.	27	Not explicitly
<b>Daisy</b>	50	Hispanic	Lesbian	Single	Masters	10	Colleagues, administrators & a few parents
<b>Holly</b>	48	Caucasian	Lesbian	In relationship	Ed.S.	18	Colleagues, administrators & most parents
<b>Jackie</b>	40	African American	Lesbian	Married	Masters	6	Colleagues & administrators
<b>Frank</b>	39	Caucasian	Gay	Single	Juris Doctorate	2	All colleagues & administrators
<b>Bee</b>	36	Caucasian	Gay	Married	Masters	1	Colleagues & administrators
<b>Lisa</b>	35	Caucasian	Lesbian	In relationship	Bachelors	5	Most colleagues; no administrators
<b>Marsha</b>	35	Hispanic	Lesbian	In relationship	Bachelors	12	Few colleagues; no administrators
<b>Marie</b>	34	Caucasian	Lesbian	Married	Ed.S.	11	All colleagues, administrators & some parents

\*Partnered was defined by the participant as being in a long-term relationship, but not legally married, with no plans to wed in the future.

Although interviews have specific strengths, there are various limitations associated with interviewing. First, not all people can articulate an experience with such detail that allows for a joint understanding of an event (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Second, interviews require researcher skill, as interviewing is more than just asking a question and listening to the response. The researcher must know when and how to probe for more details and clarity, yet not push the interviewee into joint thinking (Patton, 2002). The researcher was careful to use follow-up statements such as “Tell me more” or “Can you explain?” and refrained from providing examples of personal experiences. Third, interviews are the result of the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, and a level of trust must be earned throughout the process (Turner, 2010). Allowing the interviewee to suggest a meeting location or have the option of interviewing over the telephone was one way the researcher attempted to establish trust with the interviewee.

#### *Interview Schedule and Process*

The researcher contacted participants both by telephone and via e-mail to request a convenient location, day, and time for an interview between October 2015 and January 2016. The participants were offered the choice of either a face-to-face interview or an interview over the telephone. Due to either geographical separation or request of the participant, nine of the ten participants chose to conduct the interview over the telephone. A series of open-ended questions was developed that enabled the researcher to allow new directions to emerge during the interview. The individual interview guide is included as Appendix F.

Before each interview, the interviewee was asked to review and sign a university consent form required for participation in this study. The consent form is included as Appendix D. All interviews lasted between 60- to 90-minutes and were audio-recorded in their entirety. For the

nine interviews completed over the telephone, the researcher conducted them in her home with the telephone in speaker mode in order for the dialogue to be captured by an audio recorder. The one face-to-face interview was completed at a coffee shop in Atlanta, at the request of the participant.

During each individual interview, the researcher took notes and at the conclusion of the interview, the researcher used a journaling technique, writing a brief summary of the events of the interview. Next, a memoing technique was used as a method to track researcher assumptions and personal biases. The memos included statements from the participants that evoked strong emotion from the researcher with the goal of exploring the possible reasons for the reaction. With the use of memos, the researcher was able to engage in the data and “explore the meanings that this data holds, maintain continuity and sustain momentum in the conduct of research” (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008, p. 69). Within one day of each interview, the researcher transcribed the audio recording verbatim into a Word document.

### *Phase 3: Focus Group*

A focus group is essentially a group discussion focused on a single theme. There are various uses for focus groups: (a) to elicit a range of feelings, opinions, and ideas, (b) to understand differences in perspectives, (c) to uncover and provide insight into specific factors that influence opinions, and (d) to seek ideas that emerge from a group (Mertens, 2010). The underlying assumption of focus groups is that, within a nonjudgmental environment that fosters a range of opinions, a more complete and revealing understanding of the issues will be obtained (Patton, 2002). The focus group allowed for flexibility in the direction of comments from the participants and ensured all participants had the opportunity to voice their opinion during each question asked. The focus group interview guide appears as Appendix G.

The purpose of the focus group within this study was twofold: first, to supplement the information obtained through the individual interviews and second, to provide additional data to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of data collected. The researcher conducted the focus group with the intention of creating a candid dialogue among study participants that addressed questions in-depth. The researcher contacted the ten participants via email, inviting each participant to join the focus group discussion that was allotted 60- to 90- minutes. Only two of the ten participants agreed to meet in person; the remaining eight participants agreed to participate only over the telephone. The researcher addressed this concern by agreeing to conduct the focus group over the telephone and asked participants to use their chosen pseudonyms during the dialogue. Due to scheduling conflicts with some participants, only six of the ten participants were able to participate. The participants were advised of the purpose of the focus group and were informed that the discussion would be audio-recorded. During the focus group conversation, participants simply began to speak after a question was presented. Participants chimed in during appropriate pauses in the dialogue to contribute to the discussion.

The focus group questions were developed to elicit the opinions of the participants regarding specific issues that were highlighted in the literature review. In the open-ended format of the focus group, the researcher asked the participants to explore issues that related to perceived risk and benefits to students in disclosing one's sexual identity, and opinions on social perceptions of any differences between lesbian women teachers versus gay men teachers. First, do the participants think there is more risk or benefit involved with coming out to the students? Second, do the participants think that students would benefit from having an openly gay teacher? Third, why do the participants think that there is a different level of acceptance for lesbians than

gay men? Finally, do the participants think there is a societal difference between lesbian women versus gay men coming out to students?

It must be acknowledged that focus groups, while serving a useful function, are not without disadvantages. Among these disadvantages is the fact that mutual disclosure is required with participation. Mutual disclosure may make some participants uneasy and they may withhold complete honesty during the focus group. This disclosure was discovered as an issue when the researcher did not receive enough interest in conducting the focus group in-person. Another disadvantage of using a focus group is that one or more participants can dominate the dialogue (Morgan & Spanish, 1984); therefore, it is imperative the facilitator encourage contribution from all the participants. Fortunately, the participants were respectful of each other during the focus group discussion and all participants contributed equally to the discussion.

### **Transcriptions and Narrative Summaries**

Each individual interview was transcribed verbatim by the researcher. A copy of the transcription was then provided to each participant for her or his review as a form of member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All participants individually responded in agreement to the contents of the transcriptions. No corrections or clarifications were requested. Upon approval from all participants, the transcripts were then set in narrative form with the researcher's questions removed. The narrative summaries were once again provided to each participant for review as an additional member check. All participants agreed that the individual narratives provided accurately depicted their voice.

### **Data Analysis and Synthesis**

The data gathered during the individual interviews and focus group discussion were analyzed by means of a thematic analysis, a narrative analytic approach and synthesizing strategy



used as part of the meaning-making process. Thematic analysis, a fairly straight-forward form of qualitative analysis, consists of six steps: familiarizing with the text, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis approach seeks to identify overarching themes, patterns or commonalities between participants (Patton, 2002). To aid in the thematic data analysis, the researcher prepared large poster-size charts that were taped on the wall of the researcher's office. Each poster contained the question posed and the responses that were provided by various participants. The emerging patterns that were discovered from the interview data collected were then separated into developed categories: (1) managing dual identities, (2) partaking in identity management strategies and, (3) desiring to serve as openly gay role models to their students.

Since narrative inquiry allows participants to share stories of experience, each participant's individual interview was first transcribed in its entirety, followed by sections being extracted in first-person as a way to honor the participant's voice of the experience. Presenting the reader with a first-person account of participants' experiences provides a connection between the reader and the text, as well as serving as a quality marker of believability (Polkinghorne, 2007). The researcher read the written narrative profiles for each participant multiple times, extracting the direct quotes that were most impactful and directed at the objective of the study.

The data collected during the focus group were treated similarly to the individual interview data in that the entire focus group dialogue was transcribed verbatim and then set into narrative form, with the researcher questions removed. The direct quotes were extracted from the narrative that focused directly on the research questions. Throughout all components of this study, the researcher sought to keep the participants involved by emailing drafts of individual profiles, providing updates on writing progress, and calling the participants for clarification or

questions when needed. The challenge throughout data collection and analysis was to make sense of large amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, and identify significant patterns related to factors that encouraged participants to remain closeted with their students, as well as patterns related to how this nondisclosure affected the study participants' professional and personal lives.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As with any research study, ethical issues relating to the protection of the participants are of utmost concern (Merriam, 1998). The researcher is responsible for both informing participants of and protecting them from harm and possible consequences related to participation in any given study. This study was submitted for review to the Lesley University Institutional Review Board and was granted approval prior to the beginning of data collection. Although no serious ethical threats were posed to any of the participants or their well-being during participation in this study, various safeguards were used to ensure the protection and the rights of the participants.

An ethical research process involves enlisting voluntary cooperation, and it is a basic premise that participants be informed about the study's purpose, rights, and protections prior to their agreement to participate in a study. Participation in this research was voluntary and confidential, and all comments and responses were used for research purposes only. There was a low risk for psychological discomfort, as participants could choose to decline to answer any questions, decline to participate in any activity, or ask to withdraw from the research at any time. Informed consent remained a priority throughout the study. Participants were given a consent form, outlining the research protocol and the requirements for participation, prior to the individual interview and asked to review and sign the document. Written consent to voluntarily

proceed with the study was received from each participant. Participants' rights and interests were considered of primary importance when choices were made regarding the reporting and dissemination of data. Participants' names were kept confidential, and the option to use a self-chosen pseudonym throughout data collection and reporting was offered to each participant. All participants chose a pseudonym, with the exception of one participant who simply used her initials. Finally, to protect anonymity, any potentially identifying information was changed; this included information about any persons the participant mentioned, the location of schools, and other identifying details in the course of the research study. Due to the nature of this topic with a marginalized population, it was significant to the researcher that locations of schools not be disclosed in the findings to alleviate any risk of disclosure of the participants. Caution was taken to secure the storage of research-related records and data, and no one, other than the researcher, had access to the password-protected files and data.

### **Trustworthiness Criteria**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness consists of any efforts by the researcher to address the more traditional quantitative issues of validity (the degree to which something measures what it purports to measure) and reliability (the consistency with which it measures it over time). In seeking to establish the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, Lincoln and Guba (1985) used the terms credibility, dependability, and transferability as markers by which rigor can be evaluated within a study. Potential researcher biases must be recognized and monitored throughout the study, and controlled in order to preserve the integrity of the data analysis. Last, trustworthiness involves accurately representing the study participants' experiences (Croteau, Talbot, Lance, & Evans, 2002). By using narrative inquiry, the participants' words as the voice of experience are represented in the findings of the research.

## **Qualitative Research Evaluation Markers**

### *Credibility*

The criterion of credibility indicates whether the findings are accurate and reliable from the standpoint of the researcher, the participants, and the reader (Krefting, 1991). To enhance the credibility of the study, the researcher gathered data from multiple participants in order to yield a fuller and richer picture of the experiences under review. Throughout data collection, the researcher used journaling as a method to summarize the interview data using the participant's voice and memoing as a way to monitor personal bias (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Furthermore, throughout the entire study, the researcher conducted member-checks with the participants to ensure an accurate depiction of their voice and experiences.

### *Dependability*

Dependability in the traditional sense refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated by other similar studies, following the steps provided (Golafshani, 2003). The researcher provided an "audit trail" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 113; Shenton, 2004, p.72) by thoroughly explaining the steps that were taking throughout each step of the research. Although not all data collected are provided within the findings, constant review of transcripts, memos, and member checking occurred throughout the research process.

### *Transferability*

Transferability refers to the extent that a particular phenomenon under a particular context can transfer to another context or in another setting (Elliott et al., 1999). Qualitative research is not often able to be generalized (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012); therefore, the researcher attempted to address the issue of transferability by means of using thick description using the participants' voices (Ponterotto, 2006). The steps used in this research were explained in detail to

provide the opportunity to transfer the results in a difference context. Additionally, detailed information was provided for each participant in order for the reader to share in the experience being presented.

### **Chapter Summary**

A qualitative approach using narrative inquiry was utilized to illustrate the experiences of lesbian and gay Georgia middle school teachers who remain closeted with their students. The intent of this study was to contribute to the understanding of the experiences of lesbian and gay educators. Narrative inquiry was chosen due to its “human-centered” approach (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 103) and its capability to produce authentic data on life experiences.

Purposeful sampling and the snowball strategy was used to solicit participants, along with various social media posts and advertisements. Requirements to participate in this research included: (a) self-identify as lesbian or gay, (b) employed full-time as a Georgia middle school teacher, with at least one year of experience, and (c) have not disclosed sexual identity with students. The participant sample was composed of ten purposefully-selected individuals, eight lesbian women, and two gay men. Three data collection methods were utilized, including a demographic questionnaire, individual interviews, and a focus group discussion. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The individual interviews were set in a narrative form, while the data collected for the focus group were analyzed using thematic analysis. Due to the sensitive nature of this research, all ethical concerns were addressed. Participants used self-chosen pseudonyms, names and locations were altered, and participants had the option to meet face-to-face or conduct all interviews via the telephone. The qualitative research evaluation markers were addressed, including credibility, dependability, and transferability.

## Chapter 4: The Findings

If identity and integrity are more fundamental to good teaching than technique—and if we want to grow as teachers- we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives—risky stuff in a profession that fears the personals and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract

—Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (2010, p. 12)

### Participant Profiles

A brief professional background is provided for each of the ten participants, along with a memorable coming out event, experiences related to management of one’s dual identity, examples of participation in nondisclosure strategies, one’s position as a role model for students, and views on future disclosure of one’s sexual identity with her or his students.

### Sandy

Sandy is a fifty-five-year-old Caucasian lesbian who considers herself in a partnered relationship (a long-term relationship with no plans to legally marry). She earned her undergraduate degree from a Georgia college and has been teaching middle school in the state for nine years. Sandy currently teaches health and physical education in a middle school in north-central Georgia with a student demographic population that is mostly Hispanic and Caucasian. She is out to some colleagues and administrators. Sandy states “because of very conservative mindsets and strong religious beliefs” her current school would not be accepting of her choice to come out to students.

#### *Coming Out Experience*

Sandy grew up as a Southern Baptist, in a conservative neighborhood in middle Georgia. Sandy was nineteen when her parents confronted her about being a lesbian.

I said 'No,' because at the time I was very confused about it. I always promised myself if my parents asked me again, I was not going to lie, I would tell the truth. Never again did they ask me until three Christmases ago...she [her mother] confronted me.

Although people today are becoming more tolerant and accepting, older generations still have a difficult time with homosexuality (Buchanan et al., 2001). Sandy shared that it took her over thirty years to finally come out to her mother:

She [her mother] just lives in her little white picket fence world and doesn't step out of the box and doesn't really know anything that doesn't follow the straight and narrow path. It's just that Southern conservatism...you just don't mention it...you just don't talk about it and it's not there.

Lack of acceptance for homosexual teachers provides a rationale for why many homosexual teachers refrain from disclosing their sexual identity or remain closeted at work (Ward & Winstanley, 2005). For Sandy, she was halfway through college when she began to identify as a lesbian and she worried that it would affect her being a teacher, especially in the state of Georgia.

My first year teaching I was actually coaching and teaching at the high school where I graduated from which was weird and I was very, very conscientious about being gay. I had a partner at the time that was living with me and it was in a very small town here in Georgia. Small town mentality, that's what I grew up with, small town mentality and was one of the main reasons why I moved away; I was in the same town as my parents, and my friends, and my brother and my sister. I didn't want to embarrass my family; you know how they talk.

## *Dual Identity*

Sandy has been teaching middle school in Georgia for nine years and explains that being a lesbian and being a teacher are simply just two components of her identity.

I think teacher comes first and gay teacher comes second. I don't think much about being gay. I know for a fact that probably most of my coworkers know. I work with three men and I'm the only female in the department. They are very conservative men too. Just recently, we started to talk outside of the school, but I've never wanted to share that I'm gay.

Sandy came out to her principal after being surprised when she inquired about the whereabouts of Sandy's partner while attending a school holiday party. She was taken aback by the question, as she had never spoken of her partner Janie to her administrator before.

I had no idea how she knew that [she had a partner] except we have an emergency form and I fill that out every year and Janie is always my contact. Other than that, I still to this day don't know how she knew because I've never ever talked to her about it. But now, if it's just her and I sitting and eating lunch or talking she'll say, 'So, how is she?' or 'How you doing?' and I'm like, 'Okay.'

Sandy has not disclosed her sexual identity to her colleagues at work. Although there are other homosexual teachers at her school, Sandy does not feel the need to disclose her sexual identity and assumes most people think she is a lesbian anyway.

There's a couple more gay teachers at my school, that we talk when I see them. I've not just come out and told people that I'm gay. I'm thinking most of them probably know either they are Facebook friends with me, which on Facebook, I am not out, but they see my partners name and picture from time to time. But I mean, let's face it I'm probably a



stereotypical gay teacher; I'm a PE teacher, a coach, short hair, I mean, you know, unfortunately, to me I think it's stereotypical, and I don't like it, but that's the way it is.

Sandy believes in keeping her personal life and professional life separate. She voiced that being closeted with her students does not affect her, it is simply just a choice that she has made for her life.

My identity at school is my identity at school; it's my professional identity. I don't think I would act any differently if my students knew I was gay. Once I walk into the school building, I'm a teacher, that's what I do. I think that, whether you are gay or not, I think that's a good idea, especially when there are kids involved.

### *Nondisclosure Strategies*

Although Sandy does not believe that remaining closeted affects her professional or personal life, Sandy did acknowledge to presenting herself differently inside her school for the first twenty years of her teaching career for fear that someone would *out* her. Sandy shared:

When I first started teaching, especially my first year teaching was here in Georgia, good Lord, every day I was trying to conform to what I should be and what people think about me. The older I got, the less concerned I become with putting on this mask; I can't act gay, I can't be gay, I can't make them think I am gay, because it really concerned me. Now I don't go and announce myself and I don't wear or carry a flag coming into school, but I am what I am. You know I'm fifty-five years old; I'm not going to change and I really don't care what people say.

Teaching is relational and about building relationships with students (Archer & Grey, 2009; Grace, 2006). One of the reasons why some teachers remain closeted is the concern that they will lose credibility or legitimacy as a teacher. Sandy stated:

If I were to come out to my students, I think some of them would see me differently. I think some of them would not. Like maybe the 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls that I coach, I don't know if they know I'm gay or not; I mean, they probably do, and their parents may also, but I don't think it matters to them, because they like me, and we have a great relationship as far as coaching goes, and teaching. But I would never on purpose come out to my students because I don't think that would be very professional. I try not to let my personal life get involved in my life at school. I guess I'm old school because of my age, I was taught be professional, be ethical and just teach and coach and keep your personal life out of it.

### *Role as Teacher*

Youths today have become desensitized to homosexuality because of its increased visibility on televisions, in movies, and on other social media (Eliason & Schope, 2007). Sandy believes that the occurrences of homosexual slurs have lessened in the past years and expressed:

Kids would say, 'That's gay' or 'You're gay,' but I think it has decreased now, it goes on sometimes, but I think that the kids have become a little more tolerant of adults being gay; or anyone being gay for that matter.

Evidence also suggests that the current generation of homosexual youth is more accepting of their sexual identities (Adams et al., 2004; D'Augelli, 1999). Although homosexuality is not discussed in most schools throughout the U.S., the availability of information on the internet and social media outlets may have encouraged this acceptance (Bond et al., 2009; Torres et al., 2009).

I had one girl, it was last year, and she was getting picked on. She says, 'The kids don't like me because I am asexual.' I'm like, 'How do you even know what that means?' She

says, 'I don't really like girls or guys, or maybe I like them both, I'm just not real sure and they are picking on me.' I said, 'Number one, you don't need to announce that you are that or that you like girls and guys.' I said, 'Some kids just don't understand that.' I think that it's [different sexual identities outside of heterosexuality] out there more now because the kids are starting to be desensitized to it a little bit more, but then you still have your families that are very conservative and very much against any of that.

Particularly in the southern region of the United States, there is a large population of people affiliated with denominations of organized religion that only support heterosexual marriage (Greenberg & Bystryn, 1982). When Sandy was asked if she believes religion plays a role in beliefs or opinions on homosexuality, she responded:

Religion definitely plays a role in kids accepting others. Religious beliefs was a large part of what I had to battle when I was nineteen. I was taught that if you drank, lied, you were gay, you stole, or whatever, you were going to go to hell. That is what I was brought up learning so of course when things started happening with me, I had a huge internal struggle with that. Finally, I came to terms with being gay on my own. I'm sure that is what my mother was worried about, that's probably the number one thing she's worried about is I'm going to hell because I'm gay; because that's what I grew up learning. So, religion here in the South, it's huge when you talk about being gay, absolutely...still. I mean there is a lot more people that are a lot more forgiving now and understanding, but there are still some, that as soon as you say you are gay, yep, you're going to hell, you're doomed.

### *Future Disclosure*

Generations today seem to be more accepting of various sexual identities other than heterosexuality, yet the older generations still have a difficult time being open to homosexuality (Buchanan et al., 2001). Sandy spoke of the generation gap that creates a difference of opinion concerning disclosure of sexual identity.

My partner is sixty and I'm fifty-five, we both grew up in that age of hiding our sexual identity. If we are around our friends, certainly we show affection, but if we are out in public, if we are at the mall, and I see students, whether I see students or not, I'm not going to hold her hand, or show her affection, especially if you're in a small community. It could wreck your career, it really could. Georgia is in the Bible Belt, and I think it's because people see things through a religious lens.

Sandy has concerns about the possible things that her students learn about homosexuals from their parents, and from their churches. The fear of rejection from her students and parents has made coming out to her students, not a priority.

Even if I could come out, I just don't know if I would be comfortable with that at all. It does concern me about what the kids think about me, and I want them to think of me as a professional teacher and a good coach. You just don't know what they have been taught at home. I've got five more years before I probably retire and I don't know if I will ever come out at school because I've always made it such a separation between my professional and personal life, and I'm okay with that. When I leave the school building and come home, I am me here and I'm a teacher there. I mean, I'm okay with that, I really am.

## **BK**

BK is a single, fifty-three-year-old Caucasian lesbian. She earned her teaching degree from Columbus State University and has spent twenty-seven years teaching middle school in Georgia. BK currently teaches orchestra in a middle school in a suburb of Atlanta, with a student population consisting of a majority of African Americans with low income. She has not explicitly disclosed her sexual identity to others and is, therefore, out to some colleagues and administrators only through their assumptions. BK believes that her school would not completely support her decision to come out to her students because “there are still a lot of closed-minded parents and they think if you are gay, you will influence their child.”

### *Coming Out Experience*

BK was rather quiet about her coming out experience as a teenager. She had no desire to make a big announcement that she was a lesbian, but decided that she should tell her parents.

I don't know if me coming out was a big glorious event, you know, it was pretty much like, if you haven't figured it out by this point, you know what I am saying. I didn't really have a coming out experience with my parents, my dad mainly. It was something that just came to be an understanding. I said it [that she was a lesbian] and it was done.

Teaching in a middle school setting is a challenge for BK and even more so when religious views concerning homosexuality are incorporated. BK wants to fit in and be accepted at her school, but that remains a challenge for her.

When I first got to my middle school, I felt there was resistance, and I know that a lot of reasons are religious reasons. Usually, if someone is resistant to accepting you, just for who you are, not anything else, it's usually religious reasons. Quite a few people don't

even talk to me about anything. I do feel some negativity occasionally, part of it is from being gay.

### *Dual Identity*

BK speaks of herself as the stereotypical *butch* lesbian, a lesbian who portrays masculine mannerisms and dress (Walker, Golub, Bimbi, & Parsons, 2012). Over her twenty-seven years of teaching, she has slowly been more accepting of what it takes to make her comfortable in her own skin.

Every day, I have to present myself differently in school than how I do outside of school. I think my professional life and personal life they merge. Over the years, I have changed the way I dress. I dress the way that I want to now, I didn't use to do that.

Teaching can be an isolating career, and forming relationships within the teacher community is important for the development of a teacher (Heintz, 2012). BK is aware of the heteronormative behavior at her school, especially when it comes to fraternizing with other teachers.

I think about the fact that I can't just walk up to a group of teachers and say, 'Hey how's it going, yeah, me and my girlfriend are gonna do this, that and the other.' Straight teachers do all the time, you know, they will go on about what they are going to do this weekend.

Being closeted affects individuals differently. For some, nondisclosure can lead to depression and anxiety, and withdrawing from others (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Oswald, 1999; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009).

I don't know if being closeted with my students affects my professional life, but I think that being closeted with my students affects my personal life. Hell, just being a teacher affects my personal life, the stress that comes with that.

### *Nondisclosure Strategies*

BK has not thought deeply about coming out at her school because she is near retirement and does not want to create potential complications at the end of her tenure. BK believes being judgmental is a learned, conditioned behavior or what Wright (1993) identifies as a "learned process" (p. 29).

We are not born racist. We are not born discriminatory, we are taught that. If the child was having questions in their mind about what it means to be gay, by the time they got home...that's the parent's influence, you know.

### *Role as Teacher*

Teachers often serve as role models to youth (Archer & Grey, 2009). A frustration BK has with teaching in Georgia is her inability to be open with students who need someone to talk to about their sexuality.

The inability I have to go to a student and say, you are going to be okay. It's okay. I can't even say those two words, and so that's the hardest, most trying aspect of being a lesbian teacher in Georgia.

### *Future Disclosure*

Antidiscrimination laws in the workplace have been implemented in other states, but not in Georgia (Eckes & McCarthy, 2004). If Georgia did have a written antidiscrimination policy in effect in the school district she works in, BK would come out to her students.

Even though on the main website for my school district, it says they don't discriminate for this, that, and the other, it doesn't say anything for sexual orientation. To see that non-discrimination policy in writing and to know that my job was secure, that is the primary thing, then I wouldn't care; I would come out.

## **Daisy**

Daisy is a fifty-year-old Hispanic lesbian in a relationship. She earned her teaching degree from Florida Atlantic University and has spent the last ten years teaching middle school in Georgia. Daisy currently teaches ELL (English Language Learners) at a middle school in north central Georgia with a majority Caucasian student population. She is out to colleagues and administration, and even a few parents. Daisy believes if a situation presented itself that it was necessary to come out for the benefit of a student, then the school would be supportive of the decision.

### *Coming Out Experience*

Daisy's coming out was an unplanned event as a teenager. She has a sister with the same first name, but different middle name than her, which made it a challenge when friends would call the house.

It was my senior year and this girl called the house for me, but it was my sister who answered. This girl proceeded to tell my sister all these revealing things, and how she felt about me, and my sister, of course, was eating it up. When I got home that evening and headed into the bedroom there was nobody home, but then I opened the bedroom door and there was my mother and two sisters. They confronted me with all of this [things that were said on the phone]. It was extremely uncomfortable because I wasn't ready to come out.



Coming from a Hispanic family, Daisy's mother was very religious. Parallel with the literature, the process of coming out is often more challenging for those who have been brought up in a religious home and background (Wagner et al., 1994). Most of Daisy's immediate family members did not like to discuss the fact that she was a lesbian; however, it was different for younger family members.

Coming out, I feel that it changed the relationship with my older sister and my mom, but not as much with my little sister, we have always been the closest. My sister didn't have an issue with it; she was just not believing it. It was totally different with my nephews and my little sister.

The development of one's authentic identity is linked to an individual's self-esteem (Fleischer, 2005). Daisy's coming out as a lesbian encouraged others in her family to be authentic and disclose their sexual identity as well.

It became then [after she disclosed] that I was the gay one in the family, and after me, four more of my family members have come out. It was nice to be the one; I guess the one who opened the door for the other ones, to help them feel that they could come out.

As a child, Daisy thought of school as her sanctuary. Because her parents were busy working to support the family, there was not a lot of academic support. Daisy had a severe case of ADHD (Attention Deficit, Hyperactivity Disorder), but at that time, disabilities such as ADHD were not discussed. This combination of the lack of support from her family and the accommodations she needed due to her ADHD allowed her to recognize how instrumental her teachers were in her learning and in her life.

I realized as I got older, how many teachers helped me and worked with me, and I just thought it was pretty brilliant. When I thought back on all the coping mechanisms that

they taught me or all the ways they were addressing my ADHD without me realizing it, and how much I flourished because of that, I realized the importance of teachers. I realized the power of teachers and putting it all together, I mean I wanted to have that effect on others.

On Daisy's journey to become a teacher, she did not think much about how being a lesbian might affect her as a teacher. Her main objective was to make a difference for what she called "minorities."

The need to be a role model for kids, especially to minorities, more specifically, those who are immigrants, or anyone that isn't American in a traditional sense. Even though I am a Cuban-American citizen, and became a citizen at a young age, I just felt the need to do that and to be there for what we call the latch-key kids. I felt being a role model was more important than my sexuality and that I needed to do this to give back.

### *Dual Identity*

It was difficult for Daisy to know her place in society after disclosing she was a lesbian. At times, she found herself withdrawn from others at work. Daisy credits her ex-girlfriend who encouraged her to be more open and honest about her true identity at work.

It's interesting that she [her ex-girlfriend] influenced me because I was her first gay relationship and she was more out and more open than I ever was. She absolutely thought nothing was wrong with being gay. She would be like, 'Why are YOU so freakin' homophobic about us holding hands in public?' I was like, 'Wow, I didn't realize that I was,' but I was.

Daisy expressed that being authentic and honest right from the start, during her job search and interviews was significant to her. Honesty was important to Daisy because she recognized

that being authentic in the classroom can lead to teacher longevity and higher student achievement (Mason-Schrock, 1996; Ragins, 2004).

I told the principal from the very beginning, even at the interview, that I was gay. I felt like I needed her to know that because I wasn't going to lie about it if somebody asked.

Daisy has spent ten of her twenty-four years teaching in Georgia. Although Daisy has not been aware of blatant discrimination per se, she acknowledges that it does exist.

I'm sure I get certain looks, and you're like that parent knows [she is a lesbian] and obviously does not approve, but the parents haven't verbally said anything, approached me, or haven't pulled their kid out of my class.

Daisy is fortunate that her current school is a supportive environment in which to disclose her sexual identity. Along with being out to other teachers and administrators at her school, she shared that she has had conversations with some parents too.

I am out to administration and every teacher in that building knows that I am gay whether they have asked me or they just know automatically from another teacher or whatever.

There are definitely parents in the community that know that I am gay and some that I've openly talked to about my relationship, but it's because we have a relationship, outside of school as well.

Daisy credits her nature, personality, and overall character in being an LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) advocate at her school. She stands up for kids who are being bullied and attempts to educate those who make ignorant comments.

I would stand up for and I would stop someone from saying something like 'Oh, that's so gay.' I don't think it's just a gay thing; being a minority it's anything along those lines. I would react the exact same way towards them but yes, I think because of the fact that

there are teens that will suffer because of being gay and be bullied by it, I would say something.

### *Nondisclosure Strategies*

Daisy does not practice identity management strategies such as passing or covering (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014; Smart & Wegner, 1999), but she does admit that she does not display pictures of her significant other on her desk.

I don't ever pretend I'm straight, or say I have a husband, I don't put a picture up, but I don't have a picture of anything. Even when I had the kids [her ex-partner's kids], I didn't have a picture of the kids, that's just my preference, not because I was hiding anything.

Some teachers are not so lucky in being confident in who they are. Occasionally, the development of a sexual identity other than the norm of heterosexuality, in addition to living a double life can have a negative impact on one's psyche in terms of self-worth and self-esteem (Travers & Paoletti, 1999). This can cause a person to feel rejected, shameful, and ultimately can lower one's self-esteem (Diamond, 2005; King et al., 2008; Town, 1994; Ward & Winstanley, 2005).

I've been in a teacher's classroom when I taught in Florida, who literally had a picture, that I think came with the frame. I swear it was like 'That's my husband,' who just happens to be in the armed forces or something and they are never around. It's like why would you even have to go through that? They felt the pressures since usually heterosexuals put pictures all over their classrooms of their kids and they felt by not doing so they were going to be asked questions.

### *Role as Teacher*

There are many negative stereotypes about homosexuals, such as the misconception that homosexuals are pedophiles, or that they will recruit children into homosexuality (Allen, 2011; Blount, 2003; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Khayatt, 1997; Nielson & Alderson, 2014; Rofes, 1989; Vann, 2012; Woods & Harbeck, 1992). Daisy would like to help others by educating them about the LGBT population. She shared that she would talk to others if they genuinely had questions about homosexuality.

My first reaction is, no, I'm not going to talk your kid into being gay, and no I'm not going to tell them that being gay is the lifestyle to have, I'm their teacher. I'm going to teach them content, and within that, this is who I am.

Religion, particularly in the South, plays an integral part in societal beliefs concerning homosexuality (Greenberg & Bystry, 1982). Daisy actually praises the mega-church in the area of her school because although the preachers have not come out and blatantly stated that gays are accepted in the church, they have preached "the message of Jesus."

We are to love everyone and that message has gone into that congregation, and a lot of the parents do go to that church and the kids. I see that openness in our kids in our school, we have quite a bit of students, *bless their hearts*, that are gay. The kids see, they are experiencing, and they have no idea they are gay but I know, and I'm sure their parents know. I feel that message [we are to love everyone] has played a role in the openness and actually, a lot of people are like, wow, a church has brought that?

With teaching being such an interpersonal profession, educators influence students' lives and daily learning (Grace, 2006). Daisy stresses the importance of relationships with students

and parents as the key to success for a teacher who decides to come out and disclose her or his sexual identity.

I have built relationships with my students. It is a relationship that I really don't think that me revealing that I am gay would affect. Would some of the parents have any kind of influence on the kids, I don't know. But from the relationship I have with the kids, I really do not think that they would view or see me differently, or would it affect my teaching at all.

With Daisy's tenure in education has come the desire to be open with her students. Daisy expressed that the day she reveals her sexual identity to her students may be coming sooner rather than later.

I think one day it [her homosexuality] will present itself and I am ready for it; I really am ready. If my sexuality got addressed in the classroom and somebody said, 'I hear you are gay,' I would say, 'Wow, you know what, I guess we can have this conversation.' I think if it got addressed publically in a classroom, I think I have a right to publically address it back.

### *Future Disclosure*

Daisy shared that if disclosing her sexual identity added some validity to an issue or if she needed to set some sort of example, then she would come out to her students.

If something was ignorantly stated or that I felt wasn't coming from any basis other than a prejudice or someone's misguidedness, then I would feel it came down to having to say 'You know why, because I am gay.'

Daisy stated that she is coming to the end of her career as a teacher. She explained further that her decision to step down as a teacher is not associated with her being a lesbian, but rather the fact that she does not believe in the educational politics.

I don't believe in how we [teachers] are measured. I don't believe in the effectiveness in how we are reaching the kids. I don't believe so much and so many things, but I still believe in the relationship part. It will always be about the children. I still feel like the relationship with the kids has to be an integral part of the passion for teaching.

### **Holly**

Holly is a forty-eight-year-old Caucasian lesbian in a relationship. She earned her teaching degree from Carson-Newman College (now University) and has been teaching middle school in Georgia for the last eighteen years. Holly currently teaches language arts and physical science at a middle school in north central Georgia with a student population that is majority Caucasian. She is out to colleagues, the administration, and even most of the parents. Holly believes that her school would support her choice to come out to her students, but she does not feel that it is necessary nor appropriate to do so.

#### *Coming Out Experience*

Holly dated men in high school but realized early into her college experience that she might be a lesbian. She struggled with the realization that she may be a homosexual because of her strong religious background and family beliefs concerning homosexuality. This correlates to what Wagner and colleagues (1994) discovered in how coming out can be more of a challenge for those who have been brought up in a religious home.

I felt like I was bisexual because it's not like I didn't like the guys. It was more like I didn't trust guys, I felt like they were after only one thing, you know? So here I am at this

Christian school and I'm like, I'm going against this belief that everyone at this school has including myself maybe, I'm not sure.

Holly's mother died of cancer before she had the opportunity to come out to her. She was very close to her mother, and although the two of them never spoke about her sexual identity, Holly believes that her mother knew that she was a lesbian.

I just don't know why I never came out to her. I guess I felt like she always knew and it didn't make a difference, like she told my brother when he came out to her, I always knew and it didn't make a difference. That's how it felt for me because she did everything with whatever partner I was with at the time, all of them.

### *Dual Identity*

Holly wondered how being a lesbian may interfere with her dream of coaching public school sports, but luckily, she was placed at a school where another homosexual teacher had already paved the way for her.

At my work, there are a few gay teachers, and one lady had already talked about her marriage, and they are having their second child. I knew that my administration was really on board with it or okay with being gay because this teacher will say things in faculty meetings and we all cheered for her just like we would cheer for anybody in great times. This teacher is just really open and so she kind of opened the door for others to disclose.

Holly began her education career teaching health and physical education. With the common misconceptions that homosexuals are hypersexual and are more likely to molest children (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013), this teaching assignment added an extra layer of anxiety with the matter of what to do in the locker room.



When I started coaching, I felt like I didn't want to come out to the students and it's not because I didn't accept who I was, I was more about how are they going to view me as a coach in a locker room full of girls. I always had the door opened to the locker room, or always had somebody else in there with me. You just kind of protect yourself so nothing can ever be said, so if they did find out that I was gay, or it came out in the community or whatever, I would be protected.

The literature supports the benefits of living authentically (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Oswald, 1999; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009), especially as a teacher, because disclosing one's sexual identity provides the opportunity to teach authentically, which ultimately offers the best learning environment for both the students and the teacher (Vann, 2012). For Holly, being authentic and being able to be herself around her administrators and other teachers is a relief.

It feels great because this is the first school that I disclosed to my principal and I'm in year twenty-five of teaching. This is the first school that I have gone to an administrator and said this is my life and this is who I am. It feels fabulous.

Holly does not think being a lesbian teacher in the state of Georgia would be an issue with the students, but it does concern her how parents may perceive her if she were to come out to the students.

I think it's because of my personality and I think the kids see me more as a coach, and it wouldn't have mattered, if it would have been, girl, boy, purple, you know what I mean. I think they just see me as a coach, someone that is on their side, and I try to lift them up and try to get them out of whatever got them here. The only issue about me being gay is maybe how the parents are going to receive me if I am in a locker room with their girls; you don't know how anybody thinks about that.

Holly does not believe being closeted with her students affects her personal life in the least. She strongly believes there should be a separation between one's personal life and one's professional life, regardless of sexual identity.

I like to have my personal life separate from my professional life. That's just who I am and not because I'm with a woman. My partner understands how I feel. I mean, it's a fine line; it's not one that I'm not willing to cross, for anybody and at any time.

Holly expressed one way that being a closeted lesbian affects her professional life is not being able to be completely open with others. She provided the example of placing a family picture in the classroom and how for heterosexuals, putting up a picture is not given a second thought. Kitzinger (2005) refers to this type of behavior as "a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted" action by heterosexuals (p. 478).

I mean, I so want to put a picture on my desk of my partner; I mean, I'm just like, why am I hiding that one more piece? If you were married to a guy and had fourteen kids, you would have a picture out on the desk, every picture of every kid. The dog is our kid; he is four-legged, but he is our child. I am to the point where I think I should just put the picture up there.

### *Nondisclosure Strategies*

Holly was not out to anyone at her school for many years simply because she did not know how to go about coming out to others. During that time, she used identity management strategies and was always aware of her actions and words around others (Clair et al., 2005; Orne, 2011; Palkki, 2015; Rudoe, 2010).

I have been at this school nine years and not out, not even out to teachers, three, four, five years into it, until that other teacher came out and just started saying 'Hey, my partner

and I...' I would kind of just sit back and kind of watch how everybody reacted. What I also noticed is and what I liked about this is when I did come out to the teachers, I had four or five years with them, and so they knew me.

Holly further explains how she deliberately covers at times in order to protect her identity. It is known as covering when one does not disclose information either way about sexual identity (Smart & Wegner, 1999):

There are sometimes I intentionally do say *we* when I could say, *my partner and I*, and not to throw them off, but also not to bring it to their attention. It's probably embedded in there, but listening to my own conversations with people who are married in the traditional ways, unless they just don't say their name, and just say, "my family,"...it's kind of weird.

Holly, much like the other participants in this study, does not have a picture of her partner on her desk. She shared that she is unsure what to say if a student questioned her about the picture and so to avoid that possible scenario, she simply refrains from displaying a photo.

I would definitely love to have a picture of my partner, I've got a picture of her and our dog, and I want it there, and I struggle with, do I put it there? But then, what do I do when the students ask me 'Well, who is that?'

Reflecting back, Holly acknowledges that the passing of her mother encouraged her to be more open and come out to people at work. This openness has allowed her to start living more authentically.

I mean we are all here for such a short period of time and I'm like I want to be who I am and I am going to be who I am, now. My whole personality, my whole way of thinking

has changed since my mother's passing. It's not about anybody else and what they think. They can judge me all day long; I'm right with God about being gay.

Holly's belief that she is "right with God about being gay" has also contributed to her living within her true identity. Growing up with a strong religious background, Holly now trusts that her God is sending her on the right path for her life.

I felt like God actually gave me my partner who I'm with now. We have known each other thirty-two years; I've known her since middle school. I feel very blessed, unlike being in college, when I was like I don't want to go against God, but this feels kind of right.

#### *Role as Teacher*

Holly believes that if she was able to disclose her sexual identity to her students that there would be more questions than rejections.

I think there would be a few who would have a lot of questions and would want to sit down and pick at it a little bit. I don't think they would have a problem with me being gay because they know me, just like the other teachers who have known me over the years.

Holly believes that things have changed a lot for teenagers who question their sexuality. When Holly was growing up, one's sexual identity was not something that was spoken about, questioned, or discussed with others. Now, in 2016, it is not uncommon for youth to publically display their affection for their same-sex partners (Adams et al., 2004; Cronin & King, 2014; D'Augelli, 1999).

Two years ago, we had one girl who walked another girl to class. They were an item; they didn't have a problem whatsoever with it, not who they were and they were eighth

graders. I think kids today may be different. My experience was that I had to be in the closet, I don't think they think they have to be in the closet. They are just going to express themselves, and those two did.

Holly validates that youth nowadays would benefit from having openly gay teachers in the schools, which is also supported in the literature (Garrett, 2012; Jackson, 2006; Jennings, 1994; Vann, 2012).

There are kids out there who need answers and somebody to go to and who are they going to go to? I know the confusion for myself. You can give me any title you want all day long but, that's who I am, that's who I am with, and that's how it is. I would want them to come to me, give me a chance to talk about what's important in my life.

#### *Future Disclosure*

Holly does not believe that sexual identity has any relevance in the workplace, straight or gay. She is a proponent of going to work to teach and thinks that her personal relationships should not be up for discussion or debate. However, Holly thought maybe if she worked at a high school, she would consider disclosing her sexual identity.

If I were in a high school, the older the kids, the older the students, the better. However, with eighth graders, as opposed to the sixth graders I teach, if I've got any type of rapport with them, and they are genuine, and trying to find an answer for themselves, I want them to know it's okay to love, to love whoever you love. It's not deviant or devious, or whatever.

#### **Jackie**

Jackie is a forty-year-old African American married lesbian. She earned her undergraduate degree from Alabama State University and has spent the last six years teaching

middle school in Georgia. Jackie currently teaches health and physical education in a low-income middle school in a suburb of Atlanta with a student population of majority African Americans. She is out to colleagues at her school and the administration. Jackie does not believe her school would support her choice to disclose her sexual identity to her students because “they would be afraid of parental backlash.”

### *Coming Out Experience*

Jackie married right out of high school to a man, her high school sweetheart, but had a short, very tumultuous marriage. It was after her marriage ended that she began to question her true sexual identity.

It [her marriage] was abusive and a lot of other things. I was able to get out of that marriage, and I went home and became in my mind a functioning alcoholic. In my whole life, I’ve been with about five guys, and I slept with this last guy and I laid in his bed and I was just laughing. I was like, man, who am I doing all this for? Remind you, I had just got out of this really rough marriage. Here I was, I’m twenty-one years old, I’m back at home, I had a career in the military, I got hurt, they put me out, I was just at rock bottom. Hitting rock bottom for Jackie led her to live more deeply for her God. She decided to be abstinent from sex for almost a year and spend time trying to find herself again.

I was in Montgomery [Alabama] still and we had different gay communities. We had gay clubs where people not only was in the alternative lifestyle and did entertainment, but I got to see people who were teachers, coaches, they had professions, they had jobs.

Subconsciously that told me that you could have both.

Jackie decided it was time to live in her truth. She went to her mother first to tell her that she was a lesbian. She knew that if anyone would understand and accept the truth, it would be her mother.

I just told her [her mother] I was gay and she was like, ‘Umm, why?’ At the time, I couldn’t necessarily put it into words that I had really always felt that way. The experiences I saw her with men, I just didn’t want to emulate those in my life. It really confirmed that I wanted to be with women.

After Jackie came out to her mother, disclosing her sexual identity to other people was easier. It was her faith in God that helped her through this turbulent time and gave her the strength to be true to herself.

I’m from Montgomery, Alabama, the Bible Belt, so when she [her mother] tried to come at me with the theology of being gay, I was able to answer those questions and say, ‘Nah, that’s not really what they talked about in the Bible.’ I was armed in truth and confident in some knowledge that 95% of the time I was okay with who I was and I could tell everybody and that little small 5%, I dealt with on my own.

### *Dual Identity*

The topic of sexuality can be taboo to some, and with homosexuality often comes shame and confusion (Holt & Griffin, 2003; McIntyre, 2009). Jackie is out to other teachers and administrators at her school, but definitely not out to the parents. In fact, Jackie found herself lying when confronted about being a lesbian.

I think some of the parents knew I was gay. I would deny if they asked me, but you know everything comes at full circle. Those same kids I taught in middle school know I’m gay

now, hang out with me and my wife; we go and do lunch and they invite me to things they are having in college, and things of that nature.

Along with Jackie's strong faith, she believed that living authentically and being true to herself was critical to her well-being. The more Jackie reflected and prayed about being a homosexual, the more she could no longer pretend to be anything else but herself.

I was able to walk in my true soul, it kind of intimidated people in a way that I didn't even intend for it to. I had to be true and strong in my identity, if not, I was going to lose my mind. I could not cower; I had to be strong, I had to stand in my truth, and like I said I didn't know I wasn't supposed to tell people I was gay.

Middle school is a time that one must not only learn who she or he is—one's true self—but also how to negotiate within the social context (Fleischer, 2005). According to Jackie, the grade level of students does matter concerning disclosing one's sexual identity.

When I taught elementary school, it wasn't a big deal about my sexuality. When I got to middle school, they noticed things. I still had to arm myself and walk in my truth and still be responsible for the molding of young people, and still be respectful of the parents' values and morals. Just because I don't think anything is wrong with being gay, I had to be respectful of other people's values and opinions in dealing with their kids.

Administrators have the hefty task of setting the climate within a school (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Jackie agreed that the type of leadership present within a school can truly create a welcoming atmosphere for everyone, or have the opposite effect.

Some schools are a little more accepting and it was the leadership that made it that way.

The administrators made it more about doing your job. I just felt more comfortable; it really didn't even phase me.



### *Nondisclosure Strategies*

Jackie knew that being a lesbian teacher would be a challenge, especially growing up in the Bible Belt herself. In an effort to guard her sexual identity, Jackie changed her physical appearance in an attempt not to “look gay.”

I grew locks. I really wanted a short hairstyle and I had to compromise, I had to just grow some hair. I felt the need to sometimes dress differently than how I kind of wanted to dress to be quite honest. For some people, they might have still been like, oh wow, but they just didn’t know that I was really toning it down [laughter].

Jackie had to present herself differently at work all the time, which is an identity management strategy found in the research (Leary, 1999; Major & Gramzow, 1999; Wood et al., 2008). Although she decided not to have the hair she desired for fear she would be stereotyped as a lesbian, teaching PE came with the benefits of being able to wear athletic clothing which made her feel more comfortable.

When I had basketball games, I would prefer to wear loafers and some khakis. I have this picture here when we took a basketball team picture and I had on some heels and a little blouse. There’s nothing wrong with that, but that’s just not how I present myself.

As with other educators who teach physical education, the locker room served as a potential hazard for Jackie, and she was hypersensitive to the possible risks associated with being in the locker room with her students, but she did not avoid it.

I still went into the locker room because I knew my truth. I knew that I was a lesbian. I wasn’t a pedophile. I just kept it like it was; you know what, I know my intentions, so I’m not going to allow you to beat me over the barrel.

### *Role as Teacher*

Jackie shared a story about how one of her middle school students came out to her and the parents blamed her for it. Parental blame is not uncommon with numerous studies indicating that parents often accuse others as homosexual influences who cause children to become homosexual (Allen, 2011; Blount, 2003; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Khayatt, 1997; Nielson & Alderson, 2014; Rofes, 1989; Vann, 2012; Woods & Harbeck, 1992).

I had one parent tell me, ‘My child wasn’t like this until she started hanging around you.’

I was like, ‘Oh, you think I have that much power, really?’ I didn’t lash out; that was a mother experiencing what she needed to experience.

Jackie experienced firsthand the parental belief of the *gay agenda*. The gay agenda involves an unfounded fear that a homosexual person will “recruit” or persuade a child into becoming a homosexual (Allen, 2011; Blount, 2003; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Khayatt, 1997; Nielson & Alderson, 2014; Rofes, 1989; Vann, 2012; Woods & Harbeck, 1992).

When I was coaching in middle school, I would instill in my girls, listen, you *want* to have a boyfriend, you don’t *need* a boyfriend. But for some reason, I felt like some of the parents felt some kind of way because they did know that I was gay, and they thought I was trying to influence their child not to have a relationship.

Jackie believes that youth today are beginning to identify their sexuality earlier than they did when she was growing up. With the availability of information on the internet, research has indicated a trend of youths identifying as homosexual at an earlier age than before (Troiden, 1988). Furthermore, evidence suggests that the current generation of homosexual youth is more accepting of their sexual identities (Adams et al., 2004; D’Augelli, 1999).

In my day and age, you didn't come out in seventh or eighth grade, or in high school. You waited until you was thirty and you said it and you ran [laughter]. These kids now walking down the halls in middle school holding their girlfriend's hand. Kids are more compassionate, but the parent, the adults teach the different -isms. Kids could care less, they could really care less, they could really care less.

Jackie described being a lesbian middle school teacher in Georgia as lonely. With the Southern culture of conservative beliefs, Jackie always felt she had to be better than everyone else, more dedicated to everything, in order to compensate for being a lesbian living in a heteronormative world.

I had been called into the office as a middle school teacher and told by my principal that I intimidated other teachers. I felt like, why was I called into the office and told that I intimidated other teachers? Was it because I was gay? I don't know.

Teachers inspire students every day, some without recognizing that they have that influence. Jackie shares the importance of demonstrating authentic living to others, both to teachers and to students. Jackie believes, just as presented in the literature, that living a lie leads to depression (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Oswald, 1999; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009).

I knew there were other gay teachers at my school. I wouldn't out them or make them feel differently, but I would just kind of look at them like, why are you acting some way when you are not that way. I had to understand too, that if not me, then who; because how many kids did I inspire, not just to be gay, but to be their authentic self; just to be whoever they wanted to be. It affected my work; it affected sometimes me coming to work on-time. I was just depressed really dealing with a lot of...It was depressing.

Middle school students are notorious for bullying each other, especially when it concerns one's sexual identity (Shelton, 2015). Jackie found herself protecting others from gay slang, even if that meant more hardship for her.

The kids would say, 'You're so gay' or something trivial or 'He said he like him.' I would be like, 'Okay, I like everybody, what's the harm in that?' I would put it back on me. Some of the kids would look at me crazy but, I really didn't care, I would rather them bully me then to bully each other. Then you have these kids that may not really be gay but have feminine or masculine qualities that are not okay for the societal norm. You got your very athletic girls; 'Oh, they gay'...and they kind of diminish their athletic ability because they want to be socially accepted.

Jackie believes that for her students, being gay is not a punishable offense, regardless of what their parents are instilling in them. Although religious beliefs influence parental attitudes towards homosexuality, youth are generally more accepting of others.

If I were to come out to the kids, I think they would have said, 'Okay.' It would have just been like my cred [credibility] wouldn't have just gone down, like me being gay is not important to them. So that's how they would look at me, they would be like, 'Coach, ain't nobody care you're gay.' Kids are smart, they know, but kids don't care about stuff like that, they just want to know how much you care about them. Are you consistent; and are you fair? You don't even have to be nice; they just want to know are you consistent and are you fair.

### *Future Disclosure*

Jackie would come out to her students if there were an explicitly stated policy in the teacher contract about same-sex partners. Jackie believes that the educational system should address the different types of sexualities instead of allowing social media to educate the students.

I think that sexuality should be a subject taught in middle school, because we do teach abstinence, but I think due to the culture some type of sexuality class needs to be taught.

The different types of sexualities, in an appropriate middle school context, and our libraries should, starting in the elementary school level, have more books depicting same-sex couples, and little kids who are different, not just different because of their sexuality, but different because of disabilities as well. This comes down to the core of a lot of the dysfunction we have in our adults. The underlining sexuality because if we were taught, hey, love who you love, and be respectful and love yourself, people would be happy.

### **Frank**

Frank is a thirty-nine-year-old single, Caucasian, gay man. He earned his teaching degree from Emory University and has spent the last two years teaching middle school in Georgia.

Frank currently teaches special education math and science in a middle school right outside the city of Atlanta with a mixture of African American and Hispanic students. He is out to all colleagues and administrators at his school. Frank knows that his school would not be supportive, nor allow him to come out to his students due to the “nature of” his school.

### *Coming Out Experience*

Frank is originally from Pennsylvania and shared that he knew early in life, around fifth grade, that he was gay, but he waited until 1994 before moving to Georgia to attend Emory University for his undergraduate degree to actually come out.

I was working with this woman at the time and she could see how I was sort of struggling to figure some things out and to figure out my sexual identity. We were just talking and she really took it upon herself to just encourage me to go meet with the LGBT life office that Emory campus had. She was pretty instrumental in helping me meet a lot of openly gay people.

### *Dual Identity*

Education has been a female dominated profession for decades (Simpson, 2004). As Frank was pursuing his teaching degree, he wondered if being a gay man would be even more difficult as a teacher.

I was very aware that my sexual identity would play a part in teaching; in fact, I took out like a million dollars in liability insurance because I was very concerned about being out. I was a swim coach; so I was very worried about being around especially male students, like what could possibly happen, because I had heard pretty significant horror stories, accusations, and I didn't want any of that to happen.

Teaching middle school can be difficult enough in a regular school setting, but Frank works for a charter school in a psychiatric hospital. He teaches in a traditional classroom, however, and the students go through the school day rotating to different classrooms just as they would in a regular school environment.

I have to be ultra-conscious of being very, like, not blurring that line, and not talking about my sexuality identity. Because when I first got there, actually, there were instances of kids self-reporting masturbating about me and having fantasies about me. It was like my first week on the job, and I was like *what?*

For some homosexuals, being explicitly out about one's sexual identity during a job interview can be intimidating. For Frank, being open on his resume concerning his sexuality was not negotiable.

There would have been gaps in my resume that were pretty significant had I not been out. There are organizations that I belong to like, professionally, that would all be off my resume had I not self-disclosed, so that's one reason. The second reason, from an administrator perspective: I am not comfortable working somewhere that, I mean, if they don't like that I'm gay, I would rather know it up front and have them not hire me, than have to go through that afterward.

### *Nondisclosure Strategies*

The way an individual seeks to manage how and when personal information is disclosed or concealed may be referred to as an identity management strategy or identity negotiation (Orne, 2011; Palkki, 2015; Rudoe, 2010). Although Frank is out in most facets of his life, he does participate in identity management strategies to keep his sexual identity hidden from his students (Clair et al., 2005; Cummings, 2009).

I don't create stories, but I have to guard what I say. So if someone were to say to me like 'Do you have a girlfriend or a boyfriend?' I would be very much like, you know, 'Hey, I don't talk about my personal life at all.' I've never created like a girlfriend or like a story like that with them.

Frank uses covering as an identity management strategy. Frank shared that there are many times that he must present himself differently at school.

I have my kids journal. It's a personal dialogue journal, so I tell my kids they can ask me personal questions like what is your favorite music and things like that, to try to create a

personal relationship. A lot of the kids who have emotional issues relate more to teachers that address them on a personal level. So, I've had a lot of personal questions that I've had to sort of dodge and just circumvent because of my being in the closet at school.

### *Role as Teacher*

Frank desires an opportunity be open with his students about his sexuality. He believes that students would benefit from having gay role models in the schools, which the literature supports (Heintz, 2012; Wright, 1993).

We had a student who was gay who tried to commit suicide and so I was very, very, very much concerned about him and wanting to say to him, 'Hey, it's really going to be okay.' I do find it a little bit hard; I don't feel like I am being disingenuous with my kids, but I do feel like there is a whole part of my life that in any other setting I would talk about.

Frank believes that if he were to come out to his students, he would lose credibility with some of them simply because of teaching in the South and the religious beliefs held by the majority of the population. In the southern states of the U.S., many individuals are affiliated with some type of organized religion that supports heterosexual marriage and the traditional family unit of a man and woman (Greenberg & Bystry, 1982; Lugg, 1998).

There are a lot of kids that I think, come from Christian backgrounds that don't support homosexuality, and I'm not saying that Christians don't; I'm saying that, what I'm hearing from the kids, their particular religious beliefs, they don't accept homosexuality; so I do think I would lose credibility with some of the kids.

A societal shift has been occurring for the last few decades leading to more attention on equality for the LGBT community (Buchanan et al., 2001). Frank has seen this shift between how being gay was accepted when he was growing up, versus how it is accepted now.



Nowadays it seems like it's cool to be gay. I don't know, when I grew up, it certainly was not cool to be gay in high school or middle school or elementary school. The number of kids that are coming into the program, who are like self-identified openly, I mean I have two kids who want to transition. I mean it's just like to me, the world we live in is so different.

Although Frank wishes to communicate more openly with his students with the intention of building relationships with them, he believes that on some level, a personal life for a teacher should not be discussed at school.

I think you should be honest with your kids, but on some level, I do like the professionalism, mostly because, like I said when I walked in and found out like that my kids were like fantasizing about me, I was like I am so open, that I can sometimes forget these are still young kids.

However, contradictory, Frank believes that in remaining closeted with his students, there are missed opportunities to talk with his students about homosexuality and lessen the negative stigma that is often attached to homosexuality.

There are, I think, teachable moments that I do lose, like, I think if I were able to be open to that student in a classroom setting, to say you never have to try and kill yourself because you are gay, those are some professional moments that I do lose.

Although Frank lives openly gay in nearly every other area of his life, he shared that regardless of the type of school he was employed with, he probably would still be in the closet.

I think, I might [be in the closet], which is kind of weird for me to say. So, there are a couple of things it would take for me not to want to be in the closet. One is I would have to be entirely sure that it wouldn't affect the credibility I have as a teacher. For me, I

don't put gay at the top of the list as who I am as a person. It's there, and it's something I cherish and value, but it doesn't define me.

### *Future Disclosure*

Teaching, in general, has its challenges, but being a gay teacher teaching in the South has even more challenges. Being a homosexual can be difficult in any profession and Frank has experienced discrimination because of it.

Being out in the Bible Belt it is a big deal. Even for me when I was a lawyer, it was a big deal to decide whether to be out, believe it or not, because law firms were at the time, and still are, super conservative. That meant I wasn't going to get a job offer at a law firm, which I mean, coming out with a \$100,000 in debt, I was like, okay well, you have a choice to make, you either be out and probably lose 60-70% of the job offers or be in the closet.

Teaching middle school is different from working with elementary or high school students. In middle school, they are growing into their own identity and learning about their emotions (Bond et al., 2009; Meeus, 2011; Russell et al., 2009).

You know I never expected middle school to be as hard as it is to teach. Emotionally the kids are going through so much, and also cognitively and developmentally, they are so different. They are very different thinkers than elementary, but they're not yet high school level with critical thinking, so it's just a weird place for them.

### **Bee**

Bee is a thirty-six-year-old Caucasian gay man who was recently married to his partner. He earned his teaching degree from Georgia State University and is in his second year of teaching middle school in Georgia. Bee currently teaches special education, focusing mostly on

behavioral disorders in a middle school in a suburb of Atlanta with a majority population of Hispanic students. He is out to colleagues and administrators at his school but not out to any parents. Bee believes that his colleagues and the administration would be supportive of him coming out to his students; however, the community as a whole would not be because they are “overwhelmingly Catholic.”

### *Coming Out Experience*

Bee grew up in a small town in southern Georgia and came out to some friends around the age of fifteen. The next year, he attended a summer arts camp and decided to come out to his parents.

I sent a letter home to my family and that did not go well. My parents were very upset.

We kind of talked about it [being gay] two times and then it turned into one of those things that we were just gonna pretend it never happened.

Time heals all wounds according to Bee, and his parents came around so much so as to help him plan his wedding to his partner last year.

Things evolved over the years, but being a small town in south Georgia, my parents reflecting back on it, they basically say we just weren't prepared to deal with that. It was not something that we even, being our age, they are both from small towns, it wasn't even something they would have even considered a possibility. We kind of grew together on that issue I guess.

### *Dual Identity*

Bee was worried about his sexual identity being compromised in the teaching profession, as are many other homosexual educators in the United States School systems (Clair et al., 2005; Cummings, 2009).

It [societal judgment concerning homosexuality] wasn't going to stop me, but I went into it [teaching] assuming that I could never be open about my personal life with anyone. It [being open] has evolved over time, but it's still a somewhat uncertain area for me.

During Bee's student teaching he was fortunate to have a lesbian mentor teacher who helped him feel more confident, not only as a teacher but also as a gay teacher.

She introduced me to several other teachers who were gay or lesbian. In my second student teaching experience, there were two administrators who were clearly gay. That kind of helped me feel more, you know being in Georgia it's still a tricky issue, but it did make me understand that no, there's a place here and I can do this.

Bee believes that being closeted affects his professional life when students ask him personal questions he cannot answer, or at the beginning of the year when teachers traditionally share little tidbits about themselves and show pictures of their family; he cannot do that.

It makes that part complicated and the one thing that kind of bothers me sometimes, is that I feel that my students know that I'm not telling them things, or they wonder why I'm not telling them things. When they ask repeatedly about who I live with, am I married, and all this, and I deflect those questions, I sometimes think that they don't understand why I'm not sharing with them.

### *Nondisclosure Strategies*

Although there is now marriage equality across the United States (Liebelson & Terkel, 2015; Liptak, 2015), Georgia remains slow in demonstrating more tolerance for homosexuals. For Bee, this lack of tolerance, and the inability to be open with his students, makes being a gay educator even more difficult.

The only times it becomes somewhat awkward is, of course, they [the students] want to know all about your personal life, who's your girlfriend, are you married, do you have children. Earlier in my career it was just very easy to say 'No, I don't have a wife, no I don't have kids, I'm not married.' Now that I'm married, it's a little odd, because I feel I'm being a little dishonest with them.

Religion plays heavily on the beliefs of many in Georgia, but for others, cultural beliefs can be more pronounced than others (Abes, 2012; Mohr & Kendra, 2011).

I work in a school that is about 93% Mexican, so my school is almost entirely ESOL. So that also means that they are a heavily Catholic community. The Catholic Church is extremely important to them. I've also just been very careful to not to disclose.

Bee believes that being out as a gay teacher would be an advantage to his students (Hu et al., 2014), as he would be able to educate others about what it means to be gay.

It's frustrating at times when I think it could be really beneficial for their experiences because my students will often talk about the word gay or what it means. Some of them know what it means and some of them don't. I think that if I could be more honest with them, I could really help them understand that [being gay] better and so that's sometimes frustrating to me.

The climate of the school and the norms set by the leaders can set the tone for acceptance of others (Cohen, 2009; Schneider, Salvaggio, & Subirats, 2002). For Bee, developing relationships with colleagues helps to create a welcoming environment for gay teachers.

The teachers that are at my school are a very close-knit community. I found out very quickly that I could trust these people. I also have several gay colleagues at work. There are two lesbian teachers, two gay administrators, and one other gay teacher.

### *Role as Teacher*

Some popular sayings in middle school according to Bee are, “That’s so gay” or “You are a homo.” Some teachers decide to do nothing about it, while others advocate for the LGBT community (Kosciw et al., 2012). For Bee, he goes a step beyond addressing it and uses it as a teachable moment.

Usually, I try to stop it [gay slang]; I actually will try and stop and unpack the word, what does it mean, is that bad? One of my problems with how the word gay is handled in education is that typically teachers will say, ‘It’s not good to call someone names.’ or ‘We need to treat people with respect.’ They never pause to actually examine the word. I think that when you do that, it creates that connotation that the word gay is intrinsically bad.

Educating students about different sexualities is not present in public schools in Georgia. However, according to Bee, when the time arises to have a teachable moment concerning homosexuality, teachers should take it.

With older students, I do think you have that moment where you can have a conversation with students about being gay, ‘cause you could have that conversation where it’s not about me, it’s not about them, but it’s about what does that word mean, and how is that disrespectful. For example, if I have a boy who calls another boy a girl, like, ‘You throw like a girl.’ I stop and say, ‘Okay, do you realize what you are doing here? You are trying to insult him, but really, you are insulting all the girls in the room. Because you’re saying to throw badly is to throw like a girl, therefore, being a girl is bad.’

In Bee’s opinion, over time, thoughts and beliefs towards and about homosexuals have progressed and students are becoming more aware of the diversity present in sexual identities.

I feel over time it's [homosexuality] coming up differently in a class 'cause I feel like when I first started six years ago it was mainly a bad word. I recently had in my reading class, like a student was reading a book and it was about a horse and sheep going to a party. The kid misread the sentence and said the horse went to the party with his boyfriend. I was like, 'Let's look at this word, what's this word,' and he says, 'Sheep.' But he's like, 'But he wants to go with his boyfriend. The sheep is his boyfriend.' I thought it was interesting because I really didn't think the student was doing that in a derogatory way.

Bee is careful not to mention anything about his husband during casual conversations or when students ask him personal questions. He trusts that because of his great rapport with his students, if he were to come out, most of them would not view him differently.

I feel like for most of them [the students] it would be sort of that adjustment in how they see things 'cause they would say, 'Oh, okay,' well then maybe, I think it would be more educational for them than them feeling differently about me. I think it would help them to understand being gay better. Because one thing that kind of happens at my job, is I work with the kids with behavior disabilities, like the extreme behavior, and so with a lot of my students, I just have very close relationships with, so I don't think that would cause them to judge me at all.

Latino cultures strongly believe in the concept of the family structure (Akerlund & Cheung, 2000). Bee shared a story about a student who was concerned for him because he was "alone."

I remember one student; she was one of my closest students. She said, 'Mr., do you have a wife' and I'm like 'No, no, I don't have a wife.' She says, 'Mr., do you have any

children?’ I’m like, ‘No, no, I don’t have any children yet.’ And she threw her head on the table and said, ‘Aye, Mister, you have nothing in this life. It’s so sad for you.’ Of course, in their culture what they see is that family is the key to everything. People there [Latin countries] get married very early and have many, many children. I don’t know if they actually see many examples of single adults.

Bee believes, as do most teachers, that being out with his students could positively influence them, especially the ones who are questioning their own sexual identity.

The other thing that I do worry about, especially when I’m working with older kids, because I’ve had a couple of kids, not to stereotype anybody, but you get sort of that feeling is this child going to grow up to be gay? Either you start seeing the signs, or, and I feel like I can say that from experience because I’ve been through that. It’s unfortunate that I’m not open with them because I could give them some sense of normalcy about it. Like if I had a student who was starting to think, he or she might be gay and they knew they had a gay teacher that could really help them feel differently than if they thought they were all alone.

### *Future Disclosure*

Bee shared that there is usually a big split between work life and personal life, so being closeted does not necessarily affect his professional or personal life. Bee would eventually like to come out at his school, but has not identified the factors that would need to be in place for that to happen.

The core question I wrestle with is why am I at the school; I’m at that school to serve children with disabilities. I teach reading and math and that’s really important to me. I’ve



always made the call of the benefits of it is outweighed by the damage it could do at this point. I feel like in this state, politically and culturally being gay is just not supported.

Bee thought that maybe if he worked in a different school district or with older students, it might influence his decision to come out to his students.

I'm just not that daring. I would think that if I had, even if I worked in the city of Atlanta I might even feel differently. I think that if I worked with older students it might be different. I feel like there's a big difference between an out teacher in a high school and an out teacher in an elementary school and that the parents may view that differently; just simply because you can speak about things with high-schoolers that you can't speak to about with elementary kids. I do think that if I were working in high school, I would make a different call.

The reassurance of a school district, an antidiscrimination policy would have to be in effect for Bee to consider disclosing his sexual identity in the classroom.

Just being in Georgia and being with the way parents are I don't think that my county has made that clear. I don't know, I just don't feel that that statement is supported there. I feel like if I lived in a state that had those things because I know there are states that do have them, like California, I would have no problem with it.

### **Lisa**

Lisa is a thirty-five-year-old Caucasian lesbian in a relationship. She earned her teaching degree from a university in Australia and has spent the last five years on a work visa in the United States teaching middle school in Georgia. Lisa currently teaches language arts in a middle school in north central Georgia with a majority African American student population. She is out to most of her colleagues but not out to the administration. Lisa does not believe that her school

would support her decision to come out to her students. She says, “I constantly feel like I have to look over my shoulder and be mindful of what comes out of my mouth just in case it could be misconstrued.”

### *Coming Out Experience*

Lisa grew up surrounded by religious beliefs and was nervous to tell her mother that she was a lesbian. Lisa explained her coming out experience with her mother was not a pleasant one.

It was really a horrible experience. She is very religious, and you know, she said things like, ‘I always knew this was going to happen’ and ‘This is horrible’ and you know, and then she wanted to pray for me.

Her experience as a lesbian middle school teacher in Georgia is what Lisa refers to as a *don’t ask, don’t tell* condition. Don’t ask, don’t tell was legislation for military personnel that stated that gays who disclosed their homosexual identities in the military would be discharged (Leary, 1999; Major & Gramzow, 1999; Wood et al., 2008).

It is riveting. I never feel, not one time, discriminated against. I never feel judged. I never feel any obvious discrimination, but I also never ever feel like I could or I would ever be able to come out and say that I am gay. I never feel like I could say anything, but I also never feel like it is an issue. So clearly it *is* an issue, it is just a don’t ask, don’t tell situation.

### *Dual Identity*

Lisa is not out with her administrators and shares that she avoids any kind of communication with them at all costs. She did decide to come out to another gay teacher at the school shortly after starting work at her school.

It was like a comradery thing. When I saw her I sort of automatically thought, there is another gay in the village, you're not the only gay in the village. Then you don't feel so, I don't know, you don't feel so alienated, you don't feel so isolated. I guess the big thing, in order to make those connections with people, you have to be vulnerable with the first instance and kind of be honest.

Religion combined with conservative beliefs often clouds the judgment of others. There are many stereotypes about homosexuals: some believe gay people work to *recruit* others into homosexuality, while some believe that all gay men are pedophiles (D'Emilio, 1983; Frable, 1993; Legate et al., 2012; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). Lisa shared one of the most common stereotypes.

You know, if I had said to the kids, what if God doesn't exist, that's like not even, you can't even entertain that thought, how can you even suggest that God wouldn't exist, and then how could you not suggest that God wouldn't punish gays, you know what I mean? Probably the children themselves wouldn't necessarily go, 'Oh she's not a good teacher now because she's gay' but, they would go home and they would say to their parent, oh my teacher at school today told us that she was gay. Then the parent would say to the kid, 'Well, she's clearly not a good teacher. She's clearly a pedophile.'

As a lesbian teacher who does not disclose her sexuality with her students, Lisa claims it definitely affects her professional life.

I think you have a massive chip on your shoulder. Like, I think that is the number one problem with the way that gay people function in society, is that we all get about with this massive chip on our shoulder. Like either people owe us something; it's like you are always watching your back, you're always waiting for someone to tap you on the

shoulder, and be like, 'You are not enough,' you know. It flowed into every aspect of my life, my private life, my professional life. If you weren't watching your back, you could put more time and energy into your practice.

For Lisa, being a lesbian and being a teacher are two separate identities or, as the literature states, dual identities (Clarke, 1996; Eliason & Schope, 2007). For some, living with dual identities can be depressing, but for Lisa, it was something she learned to live with.

I sort of think to myself what goes on in my private life, really has nothing to do with the fact that I am a teacher. Being gay doesn't make me a good or a bad teacher, it's just who I am. So, I really don't feel it has anything to do with my practice, but at the same time, I think, as a human, if I wasn't constantly coming at life from a place of scarcity, I would definitely be better at my job.

Just as Lisa shared that being closeted with her students affects her professional life, it affects her personal life as well.

Being closeted affects your personal life because you come at everything from a place of scarcity but those two things [personal life and professional life] in theory should be very separate from each other. Like whether my children know that I have a partner and three kids or not, it is irrelevant to me. I'm there to teach them how to write a sonnet, that's my job; that doesn't involve, like, you know, recruiting [laughter].

### *Nondisclosure Strategies*

Lisa has had to present herself differently at every single job interview she has ever been to out of concern that employers would pass her by for employment due to her sexuality.

However, more recently, Lisa has felt she could start to be her true self.

It's only been maybe the last couple of job interviews that I've been for that I have finally thought to myself, you know what, if they don't like how I present myself, then I probably don't want to be working at this place. But it, it seriously has taken me until thirty-five to work that out. Then I think anytime there is a parent-teacher night or anytime that you have to do anything where parents come, there is this idea that you know you better frock up; you better put some make-up on, you know, you better not wear that leather band that you wear around your wrist because it looks a bit butch.

Lisa shared that if she were to come out to her students there would be a loss of credibility from some students because of what is being taught in the home, but not for all.

I'd say for the majority of children, there isn't a whole lot of independent thought going on there when it comes to like, religion or acceptance, in the South. Kids these days, I say these days, because my experience you know today is slightly different because kids now use the Instagrams and Facebooks, and send all this pro-pride stuff.

### *Role as Teacher*

In middle school, children often call each other gay or reference being gay in some negative fashion. It is the responsibility of a teacher to respond accordingly to a gay slur or inappropriate reference (Shelton, 2015). Educators have a responsibility to inform and enlighten students by challenging the use of homophobic language (Hardie & Bowers, 2012).

I think the worst situation that you can find yourself in, in a classroom situation as a gay teacher, is when you have kids that make fun of another child in a room by calling them gay, you know. I've had kids come out to me or kids who say they are gay, but they are not really gay. The kid says they are gay, and want to talk to you about it, probably to find out probably whether you're gay.

Students often find themselves looking at teachers as role models (Bond et al., 2009), but for Lisa, she was more content “flying under the radar” and was not interested in being a part of the Gay-Straight Alliance club at her school.

I was in situations in which students asked me to be the head of their, like, GLBTQI, Fifty Shades of Gray club, you know [laughter]. And, and there was just absolutely no way that I was going to be the big, fat dyke that led their gay club, so... You know, they wanted, like me, attaching myself to the gay teacher on the first day of work at my middle school. They just wanted, you know, to attach themselves to the big, gay authority figure in the room, you know. Be the big gay teacher, and start the LBTQI club. No, I don't think so [laughter].

#### *Future Disclosure*

Lisa would come out to her students if the overall consensus were acceptance. Lisa expressed an ideal scenario for her to disclose at her school.

The principal stands up on the first day of school and says, ‘Okay, our school is committed to stamping out discrimination, racial discrimination, you know, gender discrimination, and, we don't want any of that kind of language going on, so you know. So everybody pick up your socks, and if you hear kids saying ‘That's so gay’ in this school, you are going to shut that shit down, and I want everybody to know that you know, we're a community and we accept diversity in that community.’

#### **Marsha**

Marsha is a thirty-five-year-old Hispanic lesbian in a relationship. She earned her teaching degree from LaGrange College and has spent the last twelve years teaching middle school in Georgia. Marsha currently teaches gifted math in a middle school just south of Atlanta

with a student population of majority low-income African Americans. She is out to only a few colleagues and is not out to any administrators or parents. Marsha does not believe that her school would be accepting of her decision to come out to her students. She says, “Although I do feel it is becoming much more accepting to be gay, the school atmosphere with pre-teens is not the place to share this information.”

### *Coming Out Experience*

Marsha was away at college when she discovered that she was a lesbian. She lived in the dorms on campus and decided to come out to her sorority sisters before anyone else.

I was in college, twenty years old; the first time I ever said the word out loud, that I was gay. I had joined the sorority Kappa Delta and you know, I wanted to be able to join and not have some of the girls be weird about that. It had come to a point where I wasn't even happy walking around campus; I was just miserable.

While often nerve-wracking, the coming out experience can be extremely liberating for some homosexuals (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Morris et al., 2001; Oswald, 1999; Rosario et al., 2001). For Marsha, it was liberating and finally an opportunity to be true to herself.

The day after [coming out] it was not weird, any day after that either and honestly, I was the most comfortable and the happiest when I was with my sisters because they were the only people that knew I was gay. It was like the greatest feeling and it sounds so cheesy, but once you let it out, you are so much happier.

For Marsha, coming out to her parents was a challenge because they were older and had a different cultural upbringing. Both generational and cultural upbringings are prevalent in the

literature as it may influence a decision to disclose one's sexual identity and cultural identity. (Adams et al., 2004; D'Augelli, 1999; Peña-Talamantes, 2013).

My parents are older, from an older generation and from a completely different country. In El Salvador, even now in 2016, being gay is not even acceptable, so to speak. It's not like it is here in the States. Once I told my parents, they were actually not surprised at all. I wish I would have done it sooner.

### *Dual Identity*

When Marsha decided to pursue teaching, she did not think about how being a lesbian might impact her ability to get a job but instead thought about what would happen if the parents did not want their child in her class because of something that they thought about gays.

Students and parents don't know I'm gay because I don't ever confirm it. I knew that really there was nothing that protected me, like, I could totally get fired for being gay. There's nothing that says that I am protected. You can't discriminate against me by my race or my gender, but nowhere in there [teaching contract] does it say sexual orientation.

There are people at Marsha's work that know she is a lesbian. For her, it is all about the relationships and the trust that is developed whether or not she will disclose her sexuality to someone. Trust is an especially important factor for homosexuals who have not fully disclosed their sexual identity (Galman, 2009; Wilkins et al., 2012).

I don't tell them [people at work] if it's the first introduction. If I become comfortable around them, if we had established that kind of relationship in which I know things about your life, like maybe, they were talking about their partner, or like their husband, or boyfriend, or kids, like if it was to where we were sharing stories; I think I would feel a little more comfortable, coming out.



Marsha keeps her professional life and her private life completely separate. She has a small group of teachers that she will share personal information with, but for the most part her professional life and personal life remain separate.

Unless I'm with my little group of teachers that I'm the most comfortable with, you know basically my teammates, I just talk about things that are related to work. Even if it is a teacher that knows I'm gay, I still don't talk about that with them.

### *Nondisclosure Strategies*

The physical appearance of lesbians can vary greatly. Some lesbians are more masculine, while others carry more feminine traits and qualities (Rosario et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2012). For Marsha, the outside appearance is an issue.

Some teachers can just kind of hide the fact that they are gay, but I look very obviously not straight. I thought about things like meeting parents, like them looking at me and being like, this is who is going to teach my child and she's obviously gay, like, it bothered me. Even if they weren't thinking that, I was like they're thinking in their head that that teacher is totally gay. I just can't hide it as well as others.

Marsha lives only a few miles from the school that she teaches at, and she admits that she goes out of her way to avoid going places that she knows her students may go.

I won't go to the mall and I hate that because it's so close to my house. I don't avoid the mall because I may be walking with my girlfriend or holding her hand or making out with her, it's not that. It's because when I'm not at work I'm not in my work clothes; I'm in my regular clothes, I'm wearing boys' clothes. I don't want my students to see me and maybe I don't want them to see who I'm with, like, you know, she's walking with a girl.

### *Role as Teacher*

It varies depending on the teacher what the response will be in reply to hearing a homosexual slur, but according to a study from GLSEN, only sixteen percent of students said that teachers or other staff members always intervene (McGarry, 2011). Some teachers correct the behavior, while others, like Marsha, just disregard the comments.

When kids say 'That's so gay' or 'You're gay, don't touch me,' 'That's gay,' I would kind of let go, like, I hear it and I'm just like whatever, I'm not even going to get involved in that. I will ignore it and stuff if I hear it in passing like in the hallway. I don't intervene with the kids because honestly, these kids are probably 100% sure that they know that their teacher is gay. And if I say something, I don't know, it's so weird but, I don't want to give them confirmation like, oh yeah, I told you she was gay because she just told me not to say that.

Youth today have a wealth of information about homosexuality available to them through the internet, television, and other social media outlets (Eliason & Schope, 2007), but Marsha does believe that having an openly gay teacher is important for youth to be exposed to.

I did have one kid, one little girl a couple of years back, who straight up literally asked me and she said the wrong thing but, I knew what she meant. She didn't ask me if I was gay, she asked me if I had had a transplant...true story. Obviously, she meant, was I Trans, was I born a boy. I was like, 'What are you talking about?' She's like, 'You know were you, were you a man?' I said, 'Go to class.' I didn't even entertain it. That was the first time where, like I'm sure a lot of my kids have thought, I mean, not that I look manly, but you know I wear my hair in a ponytail every day; like, I don't...I wear khakis.

Overall, Marsha does not believe that being closeted with her students affects the way she teaches, but she does wish she could be open with her students in the event they needed someone to talk with.

I do wish I could talk with the kids. I had a student who the counselors had messaged me or emailed me about, who wanted to talk to me because I would be ‘the only one that would understand,’ is what she was saying. I knew exactly what she was referring to and I told the counselor, ‘I’m not comfortable talking to her about that,’ like I’m not, like, that’s just not going to happen. I didn’t feel like I could talk to this student because if I had shared my own personal experiences with the whole figuring it [being a lesbian] out, I mean, even when I knew that I was gay, it was scary and I didn’t...I guess I just didn’t want them to know. I don’t want them to know that I’m gay.

Marsha thinks that how youths view homosexuals has changed since she was growing up, and that may influence how students would react if she disclosed her sexuality to her students.

Nowadays the kids think it’s so cool to be gay. I feel maybe the girls would be a little more afraid than the boys. I think they would be a little more afraid of me, if I was to come out and be like, ‘Hey, I’m gay.’ I guess I’m not really worried so much about all of the kids, I think I’d be more worried about their parents.

Marsha realizes that teachers are role models, especially during the middle school years in which preteens are discovering more of who they are. Marsha believes that if she was able to disclose to her students, she could be of help if they were struggling to come out themselves. The need for openly gay teachers would benefit students who are struggling with their sexual identity (Heintz, 2012; Waldo & Kemp, 1997).

If I came out to my students, I would feel comfortable talking to students who were questioning their identity. They don't want to tell their parents, you know I was twenty years old and I didn't want to tell my parents. These kids are ten, or eleven, twelve, thirteen years old, who want to talk to a teacher about it, and they should be able to. I wish I could have helped that one child, but you know I had to think about me.

### *Future Disclosure*

Even with the Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriages in 2015 and other rulings in favor of more rights for homosexuals, being a homosexual in the South is still not widely accepted (Liebelson & Terkel, 2015; Liptak, 2015). Marsha shared her candid opinion of being homosexual in the South:

Let's be honest, being gay is not something that is completely accepted. And then it's like if it came out that I was gay and then her [a student] parents found out, they would be like, oh, it's my influence, 'It's 'cause her teacher, who she's with all the time is gay so she's influenced my daughter to be that way.' That thought is in the back of my mind, especially with girls. I wish that, with some of these kids, I could have that connection, that I could help them dealing with their sexual identity.

Marsha would come out to her students if there were explicit, documented laws or policies that protected her in the event she had to deal with a parent who was disgruntled because she was a lesbian.

If there were some type of law or rule, then I would come out to my students. I don't know if it would be something I would share per se but, if they asked, I would be more open to talk about it. I would have a picture on my desk of my girlfriend, maybe a little pride thing, or talk about all the stuff that's going on, like with the whole gay marriage

passing. Those are the things I wish I could share, you know, it's part of me and it's a big deal.

## **Marie**

Marie is a thirty-four-year-old Caucasian lesbian who is married to her partner with one child and is pregnant with their second. She earned her teaching degree from Lock Haven University in Pennsylvania and has spent the last eleven years teaching middle school in Georgia. Marie currently teaches science and literacy at a middle school north of Atlanta with a population of mostly Caucasian students. She is out to all the colleagues and administrators at her school, and even out to some of the parents. Marie believes that even though a "small portion of the community of students and parents would not approve," the administration and the staff would be supportive of her decision to come out to her students.

### *Coming Out Experience*

Marie is originally from a small town in Pennsylvania and, like many lesbians, had a boyfriend in high school for several years. Through self-discovery, Marie came out in college.

I played softball, and so half the team was lesbians, and it was at that point where I'm like, you know what, this whole boyfriend thing is not working. I had talked to some of my friends first and they didn't really care; it wasn't a big deal. After a while, it felt like, my mom already knew, it was just a matter of actually telling her. I was in college and probably like twenty-one or twenty-two years old when I finally came out to my mom.

Marie originally went to college for athletic training, but after realizing the work schedule was not family-friendly, she decided to pursue education instead. Marie did not think about how being a lesbian would influence her teaching career.

I am not the kind of person that worries about stuff very much, and I'm not the kind of person who really cares a lot about what other people think; their perceptions of me. Even once I graduated and moved down to Georgia and got a teaching job, being a lesbian teacher was just something that I knew I would kind of have to figure out as I went.

### *Dual Identity*

Marie's first teaching job was in physical education. She made friends with another lesbian teacher right away, which helped her through the struggles of being a new teacher. After a few years, Marie moved to a different school district.

I was concerned about being a lesbian educator because of how conservative the views were, but I was at that point, I was comfortable enough to be out. I don't even remember how my principal found out, but she did and she didn't mind, so that gave me some peace of mind, knowing that at least she knew and she didn't hold that against me or anything. I have been fortunate to work with her ever since then, so it has been really nice. My biggest fear has always been the religious part of it, with parents and students, that I don't fit their morals or values.

Trust is an important factor when disclosing one's sexuality. Marie is very comfortable in her own identity but chooses wisely to whom she discloses.

At the first school that I worked at, I was out to some of my colleagues, but again, it was just one of those things that you can tell; you can tell who is cool about it, and who is not. I had a handful of coworkers at the first school that I worked at that I knew would be totally fine with me being a lesbian, and I could trust them.

Administrators have a lot of influence on the climate of a school and the openness that is expected among the faculty, especially for lesbian and gay teachers (Schneider et al., 2002).

She [her administrator] was the first person in education that was a superior to me that was willing to recognize my partner and me. So once she was okay with it, then I knew, even if some other staff members didn't necessarily approve of it, that it was still probably safe to come out to everybody because she knew and it wasn't a big deal to her.

### *Nondisclosure Strategies*

Although Marie has not disclosed her sexuality to her students, she claims it is a bit awkward around them as she is expecting her second baby with her wife.

I think it's those rumors that we've all had where a kid asks, because they assume, you know they ask about your husband. It's those situations where you have to kind of like, I mean, I won't lie to the kids, but you know, you kind of have to skirt around the question, or try to give them an answer that satisfies them. A couple of weeks ago, I was in the classroom and this girl started asking me all these questions and it's just like, 'Hey, I got to get back to work.' Focus...you know, just so you don't have to answer them. Those kinds of things stick out.

Marie uses the identity management strategy of passing (Endo et al., 2010; Flowers & Buston, 2001; King et al., 2008; Town, 1994; Wright, 1993), allowing students to believe that she is married to a man due to her pregnancy. With passing an individual assumes the role of a heterosexual in order to be treated as an equal (Bishop et al., 2010).

I think the pregnancy requires me to act differently inside the school than I do outside. I think both pregnancies, obviously, were probably that point where, as far as the students go, I let them assume that I have a husband. I got married this past September to my partner, and some of the kids just know because they have heard me talking to teachers. I just let them assume what kids know to be normal, that I have a husband.

### *Role as Teacher*

Since Marie has been at her school for almost nine years, she is quite confident that most of the students and their families would not be affected if she chose to come out of the closet.

There is a population of our school that isn't necessarily as open-minded, and so I think with a portion of the students, there would be a loss of credibility with. I guess that's the hard part, you know, what decision do you make, do I disclose my sexual identity or not, knowing that overall the majority of people will probably be fine with it, but not everyone will. And it's always the minority group that kind of holds you back from making the choices that you might want to make.

Being a role model is an important concept to Marie. She has had experiences with students at her school that she knows she could have assisted with if she had been out to her students.

One of my students actually went to one of our counselors and confided in her. He told the counselor that he was gay and he was having issues with his parents and didn't know what to do. I wish, I wish so badly that I could have talked to him, one on one; but I didn't feel that I could. I didn't feel like that was something that I could do. I wish for, for those kids that really need somebody in middle school, who are struggling with their sexual identity, I wish that I could be that person for them.

Being closeted does not necessarily affect Marie's professional life, which she attributes to her personality, but it does affect her personal life.

I am able to build relationships with the students based on other things than my sexual identity. We can still have that rapport and connection, which is important as a teacher to have with your students, but I don't feel like my sexual identity affected those



connections in any way. But personally, my wife is a teacher as well, and she's not nearly as out as I am with her staff and parents and stuff like that, so I think it does, when you are out, you're out. I just feel like you have to be more, I don't know if cautious is the word, but just more aware of who's around you and what you are doing.

Marie has had to learn how to manage things as they come, and being a lesbian parent and a closeted teacher can be a challenge.

Having a child changes all that, because when you are in Target and you are there with your family and you run into a student and your three-year-old is yelling, 'Mommy, Mommy, Mama, Mama.' We decided this before we had our first child, at no point would we ever deny who we were in front of him. At no point would we ever do that because we are family, and we are both his mothers. That's made it a little bit easier to be in those situations because when it comes down to it, our family is the most important thing.

Whether or not the students and their parents necessarily approve of it or not, I'm going to see them for a year, and then after that, life goes on.

### *Future Disclosure*

Although Marie shared that she would never deny who she was in front of her child, disclosing to her students is not important to her at this time.

I would need a really good reason because right now, as far as my personal and professional life, I'm completely satisfied with it. I guess I would have to know that no matter how much people disagree with my lifestyle, that if it ended up that 90% of the parents and students were completely against it and I lost all my credibility and stuff like that, it would have to come down to not losing your job.

The 2015 Supreme Court ruling on marriage equality may affect some societal feelings about homosexuality, but not all (Liebelson & Terkel, 2015; Liptak, 2015). Marie shared:

I think with all the changes that have happened, just politically, that we are at a far better place today than we were eight months ago, or a year ago or five to ten years ago.

However, there is still that fear that if it comes out that I am a lesbian, what could happen? Right now, I have a great job, and everybody treats me just like they treat everybody else and I don't want to risk that. I don't want to risk losing that credibility, that respect that I have simply because somebody finds out that I am a lesbian.

Although Marie grew up with a religious family, moving down to Georgia from Pennsylvania was a challenge because of the outwardly strong religious beliefs in the Bible Belt (Castle, 2011; Shelton, 2015).

Coming down to Georgia and being around a lot more people who do wear their religious beliefs on their sleeves was a challenge. My personal faith has at least given me some comfort, knowing that despite the fact that there's a large portion of the population here in Georgia that uses their religion against people like us. I truly believe that God loves all of us, no matter who we are.

### **Findings from Focus Group**

The goal of the focus group was to create a candid dialogue among the study participants that addressed a few questions in-depth. Six of the ten study participants were able to partake in the focus group conference call and were free to express their thoughts and opinions without judgment. Homosexual teachers have limited opportunities to speak with other homosexual teachers concerning sensitive topics such as nondisclosure. All the participants came together and were supportive of one another. The participants were asked if they believed there was more

benefit or risk to students, having an openly gay teacher. All six participants agreed that the benefits of having an openly gay teacher far outweigh the risk to students. One participant shared:

I would think for students who may feel that they could identify as gay or lesbian, having an openly gay teacher would provide a counterpoint to any other examples that they see in Georgia and many other opinions they see in Georgia. I think it also would help any student broaden their opinion about the LBGT community.

For another participant, exposure to a variety of people and being in different environments are the keys to well-rounded citizens.

I think one of the important things in education is to be exposed to people that are different than you, that think differently than you, and to multiple viewpoints about the world. I mean it's preparation for the world. So I can't, even if they don't agree, I can't see the harm in exposing them to the viewpoint.

There is often a contentious debate over the societal difference in acceptance between lesbian women and gay men. The negative stereotypes and overall greater social prejudice presented in the literature often reference gay men and not lesbian women (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Herek, 1984; Herek & Capitano, 1996; Kite & Whitley, 1996; Whitley & Kite, 1995). The question was posited if there is a difference being out to students for a gay man versus a lesbian woman. All six of the participants agreed that being out with students would be easier for a lesbian woman. One participant shared:

I do think there may be, this is with parents, a little more reservation with a man because when we do think sexual perpetrators in the world, the stereotype is that it is a man. So I think that thinking jumps to that [sexual perpetrators are men] quicker especially with

parents...with students, I don't know if there would be much different, from my own personal experience, like when I was in high school and the teachers that we thought were gay. I don't think that we treated, or the students talked about the men worse than the women. It seemed to be about the same to me.

Another participant pointed out an additional common stereotype and further expressed that it would not matter if it were a gay man or a lesbian woman.

I think the parents are going to say it's a gay agenda regardless it's a lesbian or a gay man. I think they are just going to take it as, you're kind of instilling this gay agenda onto our children. I don't think that you have to discriminate against whether it is a gay man or a lesbian.

An inquiry made by one participant directed to the others during the focus group was whether others had a picture of their significant others on their desk or visible in their classrooms. All six of the participants denied having that photograph present, but all expressed a desire to have one. One participant shared that it may be different now that he is legally married in the state of Georgia.

I will say I do feel, I guess, differently about some of these questions. I'm a little more confident now that I am legally married. I feel like maybe if I was a single gay teacher I would feel like it's more dangerous [to be openly gay in school]. Maybe I'm wrong, but there is some sort of legitimacy to I'm gay, but I'm legally married. The state of Georgia has my marriage license, just like your parents. I feel like that makes it safer to me; I'm not sure that other people would perceive it that way.

Another participant summed up the focus group and the lesson behind being open as a homosexual educator by stating:

This is the world that they [students] live in and we need to help them confront that and understand that. I'm not sure that protecting them from it [gay people/gay marriage], just because of fear that it might not resonate with what they hear at home is not necessarily productive. I wonder if people would say the same thing for kids who come from homes with parents that have various racial or racist viewpoints. And would you say 'Oh, we should protect them from having a black teacher because that might not jive with what their parents are saying at home?' I feel like part of our school system's mission, maybe not even a mission, but part of it is just helping our kids learn to live in the world we live in, and that's a diverse world, and they are going to have to confront that.

### **Chapter Summary**

The narratives developed from the individual interviews and the findings from the focus group reveal some of the challenges faced by lesbian and gay middle school teachers who work in the conservative state of Georgia. By using the participants' own words, the researcher aimed to build the confidence of readers in the accuracy of the portrayal of the experiences and realities of the participants. Although all participants are employed at different middle schools throughout the metro-Atlanta area and have different life experiences, there were similarities among them concerning living with a dual identity and remaining closeted with their students. From the focus group, it was discovered that all six of the contributing participants agreed that society views gay men in a more negative way than lesbian women. Additionally, it was posited that regardless of the personal desire to self-disclose one's sexual identity with their students, the participants would welcome the opportunity to display a photo of their significant other in their classrooms without worry.

## Chapter 5: Discussion of the Findings

The kind of teaching that transforms people does not happen if the student's inward teacher is ignored. We can speak to the teacher within our students only when we are on speaking terms with the teacher within ourselves.

—Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (2010, p. 32)

### Analysis of the Findings

Analysis of the interview data involved multiple reviews of eighty-one pages of transcripts and over seven-hundred minutes of audio recordings. Each transcript was read and reviewed several times with the objective of gaining a holistic sense of the participants' experiences. Although the same interview guide was used for all individual interviews, the process and experience was different for each participant.

Three overarching themes emerged from the ten participants: (1) managing dual identities, (2) partaking in identity management strategies and, (3) desiring to serve as openly gay role models to their students. All themes are interpreted through the lens of the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Turner 1975; 1985), which connects to the overall concept of gay teacher development (Jackson, 2006; 2007b).

### Interpretation of the Findings

The findings from this study revealed that eight of the ten participants agreed that they enacted a dual identity to avoid disclosure of their sexual identity with students. All ten participants gave examples of using a variety of identity management strategies to protect their sexual identity that ranged from covering the fact they are homosexuals to passing as heterosexuals. The level of *outness* varied for each participant. One participant was not explicitly out to anyone at her school. Two participants were out only to other teachers. Four participants were out to some of their teachers and administrators, while three of the ten participants were out to all teachers and administrators at their school. Eight of the ten participants desired to be open

at their school to serve as a role model to students, especially students who may be questioning their own sexual identity. Eight participants would choose not to be closeted with their students if there were written laws or policies that would protect their employment within the school and school district.

### *Social Identity Theory*

In Lisa's interview, she shared her need to "fly under the radar" at her school. From her standpoint, she already had issues fitting in at her school and because of that, she did not want people to know her sexual identity. When Lisa discovered another lesbian at the school, she quickly made friends with her.

When I met the gay teacher, it was finally someone who you know, talks my language. I think when you are a young lesbian, you want to be surrounded by gay people.

Lisa's experiences connect with the social identity theory, which highlights the significance of group members. The social identity theory, originally developed by Henri Tajfel (1978) in collaboration with John Turner (1975; 1985), posits that people tend to classify themselves into various social categories and organizational memberships. Although identity is fluid (Eliason, 1996), the social identity theory suggests that individuals possess two identities: a personal identity and a social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Williams, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Personal identity comprises abilities and interests, while social identity involves group classification and involvement in social groups (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009).

Social identity theory emphasizes "[t]he importance of collective membership and the significant effects that group membership can have on behavior" (Ethier & Deaux, 1994, p. 243). Furthermore, social identity theory advocates that individuals who feel they belong to a social

group will have a higher sense of self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Having these relationships or connections with other teachers can help build on this sense of belonging and more developed self-esteem (Fingerhut et al., 2005; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; Rosario Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2011; Ward & Winstanley, 2005). Individuals recognize their membership in a group by “defining the social boundaries” of a particular group (Gundlach, Zivnuska, & Stoner, 2006, p. 1607). Furthermore, Griffith and Hebl (2002) recognized that support from colleagues was fundamentally related to whether a homosexual disclosed at work.

Holly is an example of how having relationships or connections with other teachers can help to build on a sense of belonging. For heterosexuals, there is an unspoken recognition of normalcy no matter what the environment (Berry, 2012). Holly was fortunate to be employed at a school in which another lesbian teacher paved the way to being open with faculty and staff members. This particular teacher was open about her marriage to her partner and both pregnancies with everyone at their school. When Holly shared with others about her partner, she received a warm welcome.

When I showed a picture of my partner and talked about how long we have been together, they were just very interested and genuine about it, and happy for us. It was just like a conversation you have with anybody else, about any other thing.

The social identity theory is infused into coming out theories (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Hencken & O’Dowd, 1977; Martin, 1991; Troiden, 1989) in that the social identity theory assists to explain how social structures support the construction of a homosexual identity. A key element of coming out is the sharing of this homosexual identity with others, or what Manning (2015) refers to as “interpersonal disclosure” (p. 123). In the Homosexual Identity Model (HIM) (Cass, 1979), which has six linear stages, social group membership can assist an individual in



making her or his way through each stage. In four of the six stages of Cass's HIM model, social group membership is vital. In stage three, identity tolerance, the individual often seeks out homosexual friends to surround herself or himself with and even more so in stage four, identity acceptance (Cass, 1979). Most notably, however, is stage five, identity pride, when one is most likely to disclose one's sexual identity; group membership is influential for the need to feel accepted and free to be authentic (Cass, 1984a).

Social identity theory works in collaboration with group relations – how people view themselves as a member of a group (Stets & Burke, 2000). A homosexual identity is an “individual identity within a social context, linking individuals to others with similar experiences” (Riggle, Mohr, Rostosky, Fingerhut, & Balsam, 2014, p. 399). In the LGBT community, people tend to gather and support one another and, therefore, become an organized group. Individuals often identify with a group for a sense of self-importance, connection, and strength (Hogg & Grieve, 1999; Stets & Burke, 2000). Social identity is just one lens through which individuals “view their jobs, responsibilities, organizations, and even the dynamics of work” (Korte, 2007, p. 177). Teachers are another example of an organized group. An illustration of a lack of belonging occurs when a homosexual teacher does not feel included with other teachers due to social factors such as her or his sexuality. This lack of belonging can lead to dissociation of the profession and premature departure (Eliason & Schope, 2007; Larson & Chastain, 1990; Meyer, 1995; Potoczniak et al., 2007; Schmidt et al., 2011; Sullivan, 1993; Takatori & Ofuji, 2007; Yarhouse, 2001).

The climate of the school and the norms set by the leaders can set the tone for acceptance of others and, in this case, one's disclosure of sexual identity (Schneider et al., 2002). Marie was also fortunate that there was a lesbian teacher at her first place of employment whom she

befriended quickly, as this made it easier to adjust to the school. With that new friendship, Marie validated the need to be true to herself and live more openly, at least among the faculty and staff. Marie's experiences paralleled the participants in Jackson's (2006) study, which revealed the principal as the key person in setting the tone for acceptance within a school. When administrators set the tone for acceptance, the teachers and other staff are more likely to create a welcoming environment to all, regardless of one's sexual identity (King et al., 2008; Schneider, 1986).

The first few years I was just kind of getting my feet under me as being a new teacher; that was the bigger concern for me. Then I transferred to an even more conservative school district but was fortunate to have a very liberal and open-minded administrator.

### *Dual Identities*

Eight of the ten participants referenced being aware of their dual identity, hiding their sexual identity while in front of their students in school, and enacting their authentic self when they leave the school. Most homosexuals like to be in control over whom they disclose to and how, as well as when the disclosure happens, being selective along the way (Croteau, 1996; Lance, Anderson, & Croteau, 2010). Depending on the risks involved with disclosure, one may remain in the closet in one environment yet be open in another (Clair et al., 2005). It is the responsibility of the individual to decide just how "out" to be in different environments or in other words, at what *outness level* (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Legate et al., 2012). For Jackie, introductions of her partner came naturally.

My assistant principal met my partner. It's always for me a matter of introduction, it's not like I walk into an interview and say 'Hey, I'm gay.' He [the assistant principal] saw us

out at a school function and I said, ‘Hey this is my partner.’ I didn’t give it no more thought, it was natural, this is my partner.

Khayatt (1992) found that homosexual teachers who are not completely open purposefully distance themselves from others to avoid being discovered. In addition to this potential alienation at work, higher rates of depression and anxiety have been reported in studies involving homosexuals who are closeted (Clair et al., 2005; Larson & Chastain, 1990; Meyer, 2003; Mosher, 2001; Shallenberger, 1994; Underwood & Black, 1998; Wagner et al., 1994; Wickberg, 2000; Wiest, Brock, & Pennington, 2012). BK experienced this distancing around her colleagues.

I can’t just walk up to a group of teachers and say, ‘Hey, how’s it going, yeah, me and my girlfriend are...’ Straight teachers do that all the time, you know, they will go on about what they are going to do this weekend.

Marsha shared about her anxiety going into the teaching profession. She worried that the parents of her students would judge her.

When I went for my first teaching job, I didn’t think about not being able to get a job because I was gay, but I worried about having the parents not want their child in my class because of something that they think about gay people.

Because identity is a socially constructed, developmental construct, societal changes are “major influences on how an individual views one’s own identity and others’ identities” (Torres et al., 2009, p. 583). Although failure to be authentic and honest in one area of life can often result in detriment to the education profession because it affects different areas of one’s life (Holt & Griffin, 2003; Smith & Yost, 2009), the teachers in this study felt it necessary to remain

closeted. For Daisy, it was disappointing to realize that she did not feel comfortable being out completely.

You are kind of not truly being you if you're not living your life the same way in the home as you are on the outside. I need to be me; I need to be real.

All of the participants shared that although they have never fabricated stories to protect their sexual identity, they do refrain from sharing any personal details that would draw attention to or generate questioning from anyone within the school. This action of keeping personal details separate at the workplace was difficult for some as they strived to “comfortably fit into the world’s sense of what is appropriate conduct for a teacher” (Rofes, 2000, p. 449). For Jackie, she could not deny her true self, but would not confirm her sexual identity either. For Erickson (1995), a true self occurs when an individual believes she or he is acting unfailingly within her or his own decided values. The feelings of guilt because of her betrayal of her true self were overbearing. Jackie had an internal drive to live honestly, but within the teaching community in Georgia that was not accepted.

I knew my truth. I knew that I was a lesbian, I wasn't a pedophile. I just had to walk and own in my truth. My God gave me gifts in which I will deliver to the best of my abilities.

And for Frank, the new environment of teaching in a psychiatric hospital with students with impaired mental well-beings challenged his openness of his sexual identity. Frank lives his life openly in all facets with the exception of when he is around his students. Teaching in this type of environment, he must be aware of what he says at all times.

I am way more in the closet in this school than any other part of my life. It's been a real struggle for me with my kids because I don't wear it [being gay] on my sleeve in the sense that I am promoting an agenda, but being gay is a part of me.

Every educator in this study had some level of concern, not only about working with middle school-aged children in the *Bible Belt* (Shelton, 2015) which creates “a climate of fear based on myths of pedophilia, recruitment and deviancy” (Town, 1994, p. 207), but, also how religious views influence some individual’s beliefs about homosexuals. Religious views are often associated with Western traditions like Christianity and the Bible, and how homosexuality has come to be viewed as corrupt and sinful (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Beal, 1994; Brooke, 1993; Court & Whitehead, 1996; Wagner et al., 1994). A heterosexual’s reaction to a homosexual’s disclosure is deeply influenced by her or his own beliefs (Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993).

Living with a dual identity related to one’s sexual identity can negatively affect the confidence as a teacher (Khayatt, 1992; Town, 1995). Naturally, restricting one’s behaviors and being hypersensitive about everything that is said can lessen one’s sense of self-efficacy (Leithwood & McAdie, 2007). Half of the participants worried that their credibility as teachers and their professionalism would be questioned if they chose to disclose their sexuality to their students (Ward & Winstanley, 2005). For Marie, a change of environments was what she needed to alter the way she merged her dual identities; however, the conservative viewpoints of the community in which she taught did not allow her to feel comfortable opening up to her students. Marie shared that she knew she had to be cautious about what she said and be more mindful of who was around and what she was doing.

When I went with my principal to open up a new middle school, the school where I am now, it was at that point that I decided that I’m not going to have regrets. It was a brand new school, a brand new year, so at that point, that’s when I became out with all the staff members and all of the administrators.

### *Identity Management Strategies*

Dankmeijer (1993) claims that one must understand the role of a teacher through the eyes of society to understand the heteronormativity embedded within schools. Without much notice from the majority, homosexual teachers do not enjoy the same freedom that their heterosexual counterparts enjoy when merging their professional and personal identities with what Ferfolja and Hopkins (2013) refer to as “pedagogical luxury” (p. 321). While many teachers can argue that sexual identity has nothing to do with a role as a teacher, homosexuals are not “free to be their full human selves in the workplace” (Gowran, 2004, p. 40). A teacher who is authentic in the classroom can help students engage in material, which can lead to higher levels of learning (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008). Teachers in this study adapted to their environment using identity management strategies that helped them to cover being homosexuals or pass as being heterosexuals.

Griffin (1992b) conducted research with homosexual teachers who were not out in the workplace and suggested there was an identity management continuum from passing to being completely public. Through her research, Griffin discovered that most of her participants forewent “self-integrity to remain invisible” (1992a, p. 195). Griffin’s six stages included completely closeted, passing, covering, implicitly out, explicitly out, and publically out (Dankmeijer, 2004; Griffin, 1992a). Croteau (1996) adapted the work of Griffin (1992b) further and discussed how disclosure of one’s sexual identity lies on a scale from passing as heterosexuals, to covering one’s true self, to directly disclosing one’s sexual identity. Troiden (1989) explained passing as people who “lead double lives, that is they segregate their social worlds into heterosexual and homosexual spheres and hope the two never collide” (p. 62). Herek (1996) identified fabrication or purposely providing incorrect information about oneself;

concealment or hiding information about oneself; and discretion or avoiding questions as it pertains to oneself, as the three different ways an individual could pass as a heterosexual. All participants in this study at one time or another used one of the three passing strategies as a means to keep their sexual identity unknown.

Given the ubiquity of heteronormativity in American society, many homosexuals may be automatically branded as heterosexual without any actions taken on their behalf (Mobley & Slaney, 1996). All of the participants were involved in some type of *strategic outness*, wherein different circumstances or environments influenced how open they were (Endo et al., 2010). Orne (2011) suggested that within the strategic outness there are different strategies to being out: direct disclosure, clues, concealment, and speculation. Each strategy may be used in different environments depending on the surrounding contextual factors (Mosher, 2001). Eight of the ten participants shared their need to present themselves differently inside the school than outside of the school, while the other two claimed that remaining closeted with their students was not something that was even thought about anymore; the action of silence was now a habit. Two of the participants believe to remain professional you must remain closeted. Eight of the participants, in order to avoid conflict, chose to dress differently, refrained from discussing their partners or displaying pictures of their partners in their classrooms, and even avoided places in which students could have been present. For example, BK shared during her interview that she does not feel the need to say anything to anyone about her sexuality because people just assume she is a lesbian by the way she looks. Khayatt (1999) argues that for some homosexuals, nothing needs to be directly stated because it can be “read” by others through their actions or the way they dress. This assumption that someone is homosexual or with BK’s example, not directly disclosing her sexual identity is an example of implicitly coming out (Sparkes, 1994). BK did,

however, change the way she dressed at work to conform to the feminine stereotype, which is a concealment strategy.

I have to present myself differently inside the school than how I do outside school. Over the years, I have changed the way I dress. I now wear more clothes that I feel comfortable in, which may not be clothes that the typical woman would wear [laughter].

Jackie conformed to the heteronormative standards or the standards that support heterosexuality as normal (Donelson & Rogers, 2004) as most homosexual teachers do who seek to conceal one's sexual identity. Jackie covered as a lesbian by growing her hair out long and wearing feminine clothes, even though both of those things changed the way she saw herself; she again used a concealment strategy to change behavior and manage the outward cues (Orne, 2011). There was also an added pressure to be better than the rest for Jackie.

Being a lesbian middle school teacher in Georgia is lonely. I felt like I had to be ten times better, ten times more dedicated, ten times stronger. My success...I don't know if I put that much pressure on myself or was it kind of there in a way.

Holly lives less than ten miles from where she works. While she does not avoid places in order to prevent her from encountering students, she does refrain from being affectionate with her partner in public. Holly associates her lack of public affection with her choice to not disclose her sexual identity with her students. At school, it is not uncommon for heterosexual teachers to speak about their spouses, which is, in essence, the disclosure of their sexuality (Gray, 2013); Holly does not feel she can do that. Her refusal to display a picture of herself and her partner serves as a strategy to maintain her nondisclosure.



I go to work and do my job and who I come home to is not anybody's business type of thing. I don't have a picture of my partner in my classroom, and I have to be okay with that.

Being a teacher in the South, without workplace antidiscrimination laws regarding sexual identity for protection, homosexual teachers find unspoken comfort in staying closeted. This silent decree is unmistakable in the behavior of the participants. Daisy's strategy to stay closeted from her students is simple:

I just don't say anything. I don't ever pretend I'm straight, or say I have a husband. I don't have a picture up, but I don't have a picture of anything. I just say nothing.

Marie has a challenging situation being a mother of a four-year-old and pregnant with her second child. Although Marie states she will not lie to her students, she does "skirt" around the question if someone approaches her about being married or about her children.

It can be kind of awkward around the students. I let them assume I have a husband. I just let them assume what kids know to be normal; that I have a husband.

Another strategy, used by Frank, to deflect attention is refraining from using pronouns or changing the pronouns. While Frank claims he does not create false stories, he does have to guard what he says at times.

I have never just fabricated a story like a wife and two kids, but when I talk about things, I am grateful for, like being a member of the gay and lesbian chorus I am in, I just say it's just a chorus.

Bee's identity management strategy is to avoid personal details in all conversations. Of course, children want to know about their teacher, and Bee is careful to avoid using pronouns too.

When my students ask me repeatedly about who I live with, am I married, and all this, and I deflect those questions. I sometimes think they don't understand why I'm not sharing with them.

Lisa is in a relationship with a woman who has three children. She has participated in several identity management strategies, from dressing differently to avoiding being seen with other homosexuals. She also avoids personal details in conversations and changes pronouns in situations that would provide a clue to others that she is a lesbian. The example below is how Lisa uses the strategy of speculation, in which one does not necessarily hide information, but allows others to draw their own conclusions (Orne, 2011).

None of my students have ever said, 'Hey, Miss, are you gay?' I've not lied to them, but I've also not disclosed. I've talked about the fact that I have children, but the kids never say to me, you know, it's like they just take for granted that I must have given birth to these three children.

### *Role Models*

An individual's social identity is just one lens through which an individual views her or his responsibilities. One can be defensive about her or his sexual identity when there are no laws to protect marginalized groups in the workplace, in this case, a teacher's employment (Korte, 2007). Having an openly gay teacher can be beneficial to both homosexual and heterosexual students (Wright, 1993). In a study conducted by Jackson (2006), participants agreed that the older the students, the easier it would be to come out to them; however, middle school was the age that could have the largest influence on their development. Although the decision to remain closeted with their students was not an established rule or requirement of the participants, it was a technique to manage the lack of acceptance of being a homosexual in the education profession.

Unfortunately, societal views of heterosexuals, or the privileged majority, often impact how minorities are valued (Torres et al., 2009).

Research has indicated that mystery and silence from a teacher can develop a barrier when the teacher tries to form relationships with students (Jackson, 2007b; Jennings, 1994). Just as discussed by Fishback (2004), Hynes (2012), and some of Jackson's (2007b) participants, the majority of the participants in this study shared their desire to serve as role models to students. The participants each had at least one story of an incident with a student in which they felt compelled to help, but chose not to, in order to preserve their own concealed identity. Stories were shared about the inability to simply validate a student and reaffirm that student is a person of worth and dignity, able to handle the challenge. Additionally, participants shared the desire to authenticate what being gay is versus how it is portrayed in the media, and provide support to students, but refrained from doing so in order to protect their reputation and employment.

As a homosexual teacher, one has the ability, experience, and knowledge to help students who are questioning their own sexual identity. Many students, especially in the South, even though sexual identity is a main developmental milestone in adolescence (Bond et al., 2009; Russell et al., 2009), do not receive information about homosexuality, let alone have the opportunity to know a positive openly homosexual role model (Bailey & Phariss, 1996; Garrett, 2012; Jackson, 2006; Jennings, 1994; Shelton, 2015; Sparkes, 1994; Vann, 2012). It is mainly during adolescence when an individual attempts to make sense of one's identity, and this can cause one to enter a stage known as role confusion (Erikson, 1959). Having an openly gay teacher with whom to connect could help to alleviate further confusion and distress (Vann, 2012).

Jackie expressed her innate desire to be a role model for students and the importance for homosexuals to surround themselves with like-minded people for encouragement, which links back to the social identity theory and the need for group membership (Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Hogg & Grieve, 1999; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Korte, 2007; Riggle et al., 2014; Stets & Burke, 2000). Students can learn to be more open-minded and better able to accept sexual differences if they are around homosexual teachers (Vann, 2012).

If I could do something different, I probably would have said, okay I don't want to be gay. I had to come to grips with it like who chooses to be gay, 'cause some people be like, you can just do something different. But who chooses, who just chooses this?

Teachers are powerful figures in the classroom and our schools have the responsibility for introducing societal norms (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010). Having a homosexual educator as a role model is essential, especially for children who are questioning their own sexuality (Bridgman, 2012). BK did not have any gay role models growing up and she shared that she has kids at the school that she knows are gay. She wants to be open with her students in the event they need someone to talk with regarding their sexual identity.

I don't *need* to talk to them and I don't need to get into personal business. I don't need to know why, but if a kid is gay, they should be able to talk to someone. I want to say, 'It's going to be okay, relax. You don't have to deal with the negative actions alone.'

Studies have indicated that children are self-identifying earlier due to changing maturation rates (Bailey & Phariss, 1996). Marsha wishes to speak to the children who may be struggling with their sexual identity or questioning the way they are feeling, but not at the expense of her own disclosure.

I wish that with some of these kids I could have that connection, that I could help them deal with their sexual identity, but I don't want them to know that I'm gay.

Rofes (2000) conducted a study with students to discover if having an openly gay teacher led to any of his students questioning their own sexual identity. The findings uncovered it did not. For Frank, it is not about whether his students will question their own sexuality if he were to come out. His need to disclose stems from the tragedy of one of his students attempting suicide, which made Frank want to be open with his students. The inability to tell his students that it will be okay or that there are successful homosexuals in the world is a challenge for Frank.

I find it a little bit hard, to want to be a role model for your students, but you know you just can't do it. I just find ways to talk about gays without talking about myself. I would talk about positive gay role models in the community or I would say, 'There are role models for you.' I wouldn't say 'There are gay people all around;' I had to keep myself out of the conversation.

The middle school is a time when students are searching for their personal identities and questioning their beliefs, as well as building social cues and social skills (Bailey & Phariss, 1996). Although Bee has no plans to disclose his sexual identity to his students, he does see benefits for the children to have an openly gay teacher.

It's unfortunate that I'm not out to them because I could give them some sense of normalcy about it [being homosexual]. I think it would help them to understand being gay better.

Rudoe (2010) finds that not having openly gay role models for questioning students can have a sequestering consequence. For Daisy, it is more than just being supportive of all children; she advocates for minorities, no matter what the minority status is – sexuality, religion, or race.

She does not like people to feel excluded and has a genuine desire to educate. Daisy also feels that if the time arose for her to step up and disclose her sexual identity, she would.

If I had a bold student to ask me if I was gay, I would say, ‘Yeah, that’s why I am talking to you.’ And knowing that could open up a gate for other kids, I would do it.

Holly believes in having open communication with her students and if the time arises that kids start to inquire about her sexuality, she will deal with it then. Holly does not believe that middle school students are mature enough to handle the disclosure conversation.

Are they [middle school students] mature enough for it, first of all? Do they really even know anything about being gay? Maybe I could enlighten them on that because everything they see, the movies, have a prince and princess in it.

Marie believes that with the change in society, there should come a change in welcoming openly gay teachers. Marie trusts that schools would be safer and be more inclusively welcoming if there were openly gay teachers in schools.

There’s one or two kids every year that you run into and you see them struggling and I just feel like I can’t; I can’t help them. I’m not in a position where I can talk to them because I’m not out with everybody.

Sandy was one of two participants who expressed no desire to be a role model for her students. Sandy was very adamant in bringing up her age and the generation in which she grew up in as an influence on why she feels the way she does. She grew up in a time where there were “hidden rules and regulations whose transgression exacts severe punishment in their minds, if not in reality” (Gowran, 2004, p. 39).

I guess I’m old school because of my age. I don’t care whether you are gay or not gay. I don’t think your personal life should be involved at school, especially where students are

concerned because they are so curious anyway about your personal life. It could wreck your career, it really could. Georgia is in the Bible Belt, and I think it's because people see things through a religious lens.

Children are naturally curious; however, not disclosing one's sexual identity may be sending the message to students that something is wrong with homosexuality (Macgillivray, 2008). Lisa, the second participant who did not express strong feelings about being a role model to students, does not believe that the state of Georgia is ready to have openly gay teachers.

In order to avoid these difficult conversations, you just never speak about it, you know, you are never allowed to talk about it. That's the problem, if you aren't talking about it, then it's a problem. People are just afraid of things we don't understand.

In Gust (2007), one of the teachers articulated what it would mean to disclose to students: "By self-identifying as a queer teacher, I at least get a chance to fight back against hate, violence, and oppression. I get a chance because I demand that we talk about it. I get a chance because when I seize the power of my own voice I can tell you all: silence is not respect. Silence is not absence of judgment" (p. 50). For Jackson (2006), silence then equals acceptance. My participants all agreed that in not saying something, they feel that they are contributing to the negative label attached to homosexuality (Nixon & Givens, 2004). The struggle continues even more when the ability to be authentic with their students is not obtainable for homosexual teachers.

Disclosing one's sexual identity can bring a multitude of emotions including self-acceptance, pride, strength, and overall improvement in attitude (Floyd & Stein, 2002; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; McDermott, Roen, & Scourfield, 2008; Troiden, 1989; Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds (2007) find that when students know more about their

teachers, they often incorporate a greater sense of motivation and view the climate of the classroom more positively. Research has suggested that teachers who personalize teaching with the use of personal self-disclosure, individual stories, and humor, are perceived by their students to be effective in explaining course content (Andersen, Norton, & Nussbaum, 1981; Mazer et al., 2007; Roth et al., 2007; Wright, 1993). Jackson's (2006) participants described their teaching methods as improving upon disclosing their sexual identity.

### *Gay Teacher Development*

The school environment is one of marginalization of non-heterosexual identities and overall conservative views for anything outside the norm (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Ferfolja, 2009). Alice E. Moses (1978) used a "labeling theory" to explain how identity is "managed, not how it is achieved" (Eliason, 1996, p. 37). For the teachers in this study, identity was managed in different ways depending on the environment. The issue of passing or allowing others to believe one is heterosexual by conforming to a social or contextual norm (Barreto & Ellemers, 2003; Krane, 1996), captivated Moses. Moses (1978) recognized that identity is fluid and composed of personal choice regarding what and when to disclose. This leads to Jackson's work on gay teacher development (2006; 2007a; 2007b). Although the term *stage*, when used with identity, has been criticized for being too rigid, it is understood that the events that occur within each stage or in between each stage are unique to each individual (Côté & Schwartz, 2002). Identity development is not predictable and individuals negotiate their identity differently (Rust, 1993).

The decision to disclose or stay closeted does not come without emotional consequences that involve "hundreds of decisions, embedded, contextualized, and complex" (Sapon-Shevin, 2004, p. 73). All the teachers in this study were between stage two, the closeted teaching phase, and stage three the post-coming out stage. The participants' outness level ranged from not



explicitly being out to anyone at the school to being out to all teachers, administrators, and even some parents. All participants spoke about their individual justification behind remaining closeted with their students. Eight of the participants expressed some type of interest in eventually progressing to which they can be open and honest with their students, or entering stage three, the post-coming out phase, through the authentic teacher level (Jackson, 2006). In the authentic teacher level, one is able to be an advocate for homosexuals. Researchers have suggested that every teacher's sexuality is present in the classroom in some fashion, whether intentional or not (Endo et al., 2010; Gust, 2007). However, for many homosexual teachers, the classroom is a difficult environment to come out in due to the possible rejection from students and others (Barker & Reavey, 2009). For the participants in this study, seven of them expressed interest in disclosing their sexuality only if there were laws protecting their rights as educators. An additional request by the participants was to have an explicit verbal and a written agreement in the event of parental or community angst concerning their sexual identity.

Clair and colleagues (2005) grouped individuals' motivations to disclose into four groups: (1) to maintain a sense of self, (2) to build or maintain relationships, (3) to accommodate for that identity and, (4) to promote social change. For Lisa, her motivation to disclose would be to maintain her sense of self. She sees no issue with coming out to her students but again believes that Georgia is behind in acceptance of homosexuals and equality issues. Although Lisa would like to live authentically, and in a way that is true to herself, having employment is most important right now.

I would come out to my students if there was like a general acceptance, like an idea, a conversation. The principal stands up on the first day and says we are committed to stamping out discrimination.

Bee's motivation to disclose would be to help build relationships with his students. He ascertained that if there were explicit reassurance from the state or even from the county level that his decision to disclose would not be judged and would be supported, then he would do so. However, Bee realizes that Georgia is a conservative, religiously driven state that may be among the last states to recognize homosexuality as acceptable.

I feel like in this state, politically and culturally, being gay is just not supported. If I knew I had that support it would be no problem at the beginning of the year to be like, here's my husband, we have two cats, and we live in this house.

The benefits of being an openly gay teacher in public schools far outweigh the risks for Jackie, Frank, and Marsha, who would disclose to promote change. The sooner individuals disclose their identity, the sooner they can be genuine, build relationships, and even advocate on behalf of the marginalized group (Creed & Scully, 2000). If there were legal protections that would protect Jackie's position as a middle school teacher, she would come out to her students.

I know so many people who go through life trying to be something that they are not and drag everybody down with them. How do we teach that? I don't know.

In Georgia, there are no protections set forth to protect homosexuals in the workplace. Although Frank is undecided about whether he would come out, even if there were protections available for him, the geography of his position does influence his decision.

I really am there to teach. I want my kids to succeed academically and that includes socially. But, living in the South influences my decision to be out. I think if I was teaching in the north, I would probably have a very different perspective on being out.

Bias is an “intellectually learned process” (Wright, 1993, p. 29) and Marsha believes that regardless of biases, there are many benefits in having an openly gay teacher, visible and available for both heterosexual and homosexual students.

If there was a law that was on my side, I would come out. Like if I had parents complain, you know that I’m their child’s teacher, like if there’s like a significant amount of complaints, can I lose my job?

Despite the potential for the ENDA (Employment Non-Discrimination Act) to one-day pass the U.S. Congress, Sandy would never purposefully come out to her students. Her fear is more for the well-being of the students and she worries what disclosure could do to a student if they have different beliefs or the parents have filled the child’s head with stories of recruitment and negativity (Bishop et al., 2010; Clarke, 1996; Elliott, 1996; King, 2004; Vann, 2012).

You just don’t know what they have been taught at home. If you have a kid that really thinks, hey she’s a good teacher, she’s fair, she’s understanding, and then I come out that I am gay, and in their family, they have been taught that gay people are going to hell...that’s going to destroy them. I don’t know if I would want to put them in that position.

Sandy’s concern is relevant according to research in that the everyday interactions one has within one’s environment help to shape the overall understanding of things (Torres et al., 2009). In this case, with sexual identity, what is being learned in the environment helps to socially construct the meaning of a homosexual identity. If one is surrounded by non-accepting beliefs about homosexuals, that person will be less likely to accept themselves (Wright, 1993).

## **Synthesis of the Findings**

This study focused on three research questions: (1) What are the experiences of lesbian and gay Georgia middle school teachers who do not disclose their sexual identity with their students? (2) How, if at all, do the experiences of nondisclosure inhibit their abilities as teachers? (3) How, if at all, do the experiences of nondisclosure affect their personal lives? Both the individual, in-depth interviews and the focus group discussion allowed the researcher to listen to the voices of experience. Although each story was unique to the participant, there were common themes that were prevalent across the participant's stories. Eight of the participants admitted to enacting dual identities, all ten participants admitted to partaking in identity management strategies, and eight of the participants expressed the desire to be an openly homosexual role model for students. The participants often shared that remaining closeted with their students did not allow them to teach through an authentic lens. Although where a person is developmentally can often indicate the level which one is out to others (Alderson, 2003a), this daily fear of being discovered can lead to feelings of isolation and ultimately, to secrecy (Clair et al., 2005; Gray, 2013; Grayson, 1987; Hardie, 2012; Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008; Sparkes, 1994). With the teaching profession held to such a high moral and ethical standard, it is not unthought-of that a homosexual teacher would want to keep her or his sexual identity separate from the classroom. However, this nondisclosure can often lead to negative detriments on one's health and mental well-being (Katon & Ciechanowski, 2002; Legate et al., 2012; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Ragins, 2004). The stress of nondisclosure is "not overt, nor is it apparent to the unobservant eye," however, because of this need to remain in the closet, there are compromises and adjustments that must be made on a daily basis (Gowran, 2004, p. 47). The dual identity of having one

identity inside the classroom doors and another on the outside is a reality for the teachers in this study.

There were various factors involved for the participants concerning why they refrained from disclosing their sexuality with their students. For Sandy, age and the generation in which she grew up helped to formulate her beliefs on how she should act as a teacher. For Lisa presenting herself differently was the norm for each job interview she went on to get a teaching position because she knew that Georgia was a conservative religiously driven state. The pressure to conform to heteronormative ways was powerful for Sandy as she spent twenty years living two completely separate identities: one identity when she arrived at work and the other identity when she left. Many participants mentioned that basic things such as having a photo of their partner on their desk was something they did not feel comfortable with and how for their heterosexual counterparts that same picture was not even given a second thought.

All the teachers in this study made mention of using some type of identity management strategy, whether passing or going along with other people's assumptions that one is heterosexual (Endo et al., 2010; Flowers & Buston, 2001; King et al., 2008; Town, 1994; Wright, 1993), or covering, not disclosing information either way about their sexual identity (Smart & Wegner, 1999). Passing and covering for homosexual teachers are strategies used to help meet the heteronormative societal norms (Chase & Ressler, 2009; Sparkes, 1994; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009) and are often used to protect employment status (Button, 2001; King et al., 2008). The identity management strategies mentioned by the participants in this study included growing hair out to a more feminine style, wearing gender specific clothing, avoiding public places in which students may be present, and again simply refraining from displaying a photograph of her

or his significant other. Seven of the participants specifically mentioned being concerned about the religious beliefs of the community if they were to come out.

The desire to be a role model, especially to middle school students who are questioning their sexuality was of importance to eight of the ten of the participants. Archer and Grey (2009) suggested that sexual identity development could be stunted without adequate support from adults. Homosexual teachers can provide this support to students who are in need (Shelton, 2015). Macgillivray's (2008) study provided evidence that having an openly gay teacher contributed to the students' understanding and open-mindedness among both heterosexual and homosexual students. In agreement, Hooks (2000) explains that we, as teachers, must:

Tell the truth to ourselves and to others. Creating a false self to mask fears and insecurities has become so common that many of us forget what we are and what we feel underneath the pretense. Breaking through this denial is always the first step in uncovering our longing to be honest and clear. Lies and secrets burden us and cause stress. When an individual has always lied, he has no awareness that truth telling can take away this heavy burden. To know this he must let the lies go (p. 48).

Overall, the participants in this study shared how being closeted with their students affects their professional life and personal life. Although for some participants, passing and covering have become such a habit and part of their identity now that they could not readily recognize how their behavior was affecting both their professional and personal lives. The stories shared throughout this study have solidified the need to hear the voices of the marginalized group of teachers and help to push for laws protecting this important group of educators. Until the state of Georgia can provide workplace antidiscrimination policies that protect the rights of homosexual educators, the participants in this study will remain closeted.

## **Chapter Summary**

The social identity theory suggests that individuals generally categorize themselves into social groups and possess two identities: a personal identity and a social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The social identity theory connects to various coming out theories and to gay teacher development in which experiences and interactions with others help to cultivate a teacher's ability. When an individual is not free to express herself or himself completely, she or he is ultimately limiting individual freedom and basic human rights. Although everyone's life experiences differ, one's sense of self can fluctuate depending on the experience. The closet carries a negative stigma of guilt and secrecy and it is difficult for one to be authentic while living with that shame (Allen, 2011; Clair et al., 2005). There are consequences for homosexual teachers in both coming out and staying in the closet (Orne, 2011); however, by staying in the closet, the opportunities are missed to educate others (Gedro, 2009). The protections against discrimination for homosexual teachers must be in place before society can expect more teachers to disclose (Bishop et al., 2010; Jennings & MacGillivray, 2007).

## Chapter 6: Implications and Recommendations

The teacher within is not the voice of conscience but of identity and integrity. It speaks not of what ought to be but of what is real for us, of what is true.

—Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (2010, p. 32)

### Limitations of the Study

This study had certain limitations: (1) The sample of participants represented within the study were bound to the metro-Atlanta, Georgia area only, regardless of the several attempts made to broaden the geography of the participant pool. The results may have been altered with the inclusion of others in varying locations, due to the possible fluctuating conservatism in different geographic locations within the state of Georgia. (2) Although this research targeted the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) community, this study only included participants who self-identified as either lesbian or gay. Experiences may have differed had teachers who self-identify as bisexual or transgendered been included. (3) Although the researcher attempted to recruit a variety of participants, there was limited diversity in the ethnic and racial backgrounds of the study participants. Eliason (1996) discovered the same issue and stated, “nearly every study on sexual identity has reported difficulty in recruiting people of color, people of the working class, or people with other diverse identities to participate” (p. 53). (4) While not intentional, this study contained an unbalanced gender composition, with eight of the ten participants being lesbian women. This unbalanced representation may be due to higher social acceptance of lesbians and the possibility that gay males are more concerned about participating in social research for fear of accidental disclosure (Hu et al., 2013). (5) For the data collection, each participant was interviewed only once individually for sixty to ninety minutes. The outcome of the data collected may have been different if the interview had been separated into shorter time increments and completed multiple times. Shorter interview increments could have solicited



more in-depth responses and time to process and reflect between each interview. (6) The researcher did self-disclose to the participants before each individual interview took place in order to establish trust. The issue of subjectivity and potential bias regarding the researcher's own experiences as a closeted middle school teacher may have affected the study.

Recognizing these limitations, the researcher took the following measures. First, the researcher acknowledged her research agenda and stated her assumptions up front. A conscious attempt to create an environment that was conducive to honest and open dialogue was created. Additionally, the use of journaling and memoing occurred throughout the study as a way for the researcher to organize data and track her own assumptions and preconceptions that could influence the analysis of the data. Even though all interviews were audio-reordered, the researcher took notes during each interview. Upon conclusion of each individual interview, the researcher read over the notes and wrote a journal summary of the points made by the participant. The researcher then used memoing as a form of tracking her own assumptions and biases. For example, during the individual interview with Sandy, she shared that she does not desire to disclose with her students, even if it were a possibility.

Even if I could come out, I just don't know if I would be comfortable with that at all. My teaching comes first and then I keep my personal life out of my workplace I think that whether you are gay or not that's a good idea, especially when kids are involved. Marie made a similar comment when she too shared that she does not know whether she would disclose to her students if the opportunity presented itself.

Right now, I have a great job, and everybody treats me just like they treat everybody else. I don't want to risk that.

Using the memoing technique, the researcher noted both Sandy and Marie's strong aversions to disclosing their sexual identities to their students and made a notation to explore this statement further. As mentioned earlier, the researcher's assumptions included the inability to teach authentically if one is unable to disclose and that nondisclosure would affect an individual either professionally or personally, if not both. The researcher found it surprising that a lesbian individual would choose not to disclose if she were allowed to do so. Through memoing and personal reflection, the researcher was able to separate herself from the participants and the data that was collected and report the findings in narrative form using the participant's voice. Open communication with all participants was also used throughout the collection of data and even throughout the writing of the results to ensure accurate details and representation of individual voice was maintained throughout the findings.

### **Implications**

In states like Georgia without workplace non-discrimination laws based on sexual identity, it is the responsibility of the school-level administrators to help create and provide a welcoming environment for homosexual teachers. There are many events for homosexual teachers that heterosexual teachers take for granted such as talking about their spouse or even placing a photograph of their family in the classroom. Three of the participants specifically mentioned that the overall school climate can be altered if the administration sets an open and responsive tone for homosexual teachers within the building. This open-minded culture can also set the tone for students, parents, and other stakeholders in the community concerning homosexual teachers.

Closeted homosexual teachers must navigate their behaviors and guard their words daily around students in order to keep their sexual identity safely concealed. As discovered in this

study, the participants desire to be open and live authentically within all facets of their lives, even though they are not afforded the right or opportunity to do so. Another implication described by the participants was a deep desire to be an openly gay role model to their students. A homosexual teacher can be a powerful role model and provide information needed to students who are questioning their own sexuality (Bailey & Phariss, 1996; Garrett, 2012; Jackson, 2006; Jennings, 1994; Khayatt, 1992; Shelton, 2015; Sparkes, 1994; Vann, 2012). A teacher spends the majority of the day with her or his students and, in middle school; students typically turn to their teachers with questions (Khayatt, 1992; Biegel, 2010). Since the curriculum in United States public school systems is very much hetero-centric, homosexual students, as well as students who are questioning their sexual identity, often turn to online resources for information, which may or may not include factual information (Biegel, 2010). Furthermore, research has indicated benefits to having an openly gay teacher, such as learning to be more accepting of diversity. Commonly, when someone personally knows a homosexual individual, one is less likely to grow up to be homophobic (Rofes, 2000). An increase in the number of openly gay teachers within schools could not only promote a more positive overall well-being for the teachers (Cain, 1991b; Katon & Ciechanowski, 2002; Legate et al., 2012; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Ragins, 2004), but could also help prevent issues for gay and questioning middle school students (Anderson, 1993; Fetner & Kush, 2007; Russell, 2003; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011).

### **Recommendations for Schools**

There are a variety of things that schools and school districts can do to create a more welcoming and empathetic environment for both faculty and students. First and foremost, the state of Georgia should proceed with the development and implementation of workplace antidiscrimination laws in education with protections surrounding sexual identity and disclosure.

If the state of Georgia cannot comply with the creation of these laws to protect homosexual teachers, then individual school districts should move towards the development of such laws to defend the diversity of educators within a school district. It would behoove a community and other school stakeholders to become aware of how having visible, openly gay teachers, faculty, and staff can be beneficial to everyone within a school setting, especially students who are questioning their sexual identity (Croteau & Lark, 1995). The discussion of homosexuality and visibility of homosexuals within a school setting can encourage others to be more accepting of homosexuals.

Within an individual school, more effective teacher training, more representation of homosexuality in the curriculum, and use of homosexual public speakers in the schools would all serve as a starting point for improvements in the teaching environment for homosexual teachers (Ferfolja, 1998). If teachers were comfortable and felt supported in discussing sexual diversity and using examples in the class, then the negative connotation that has been placed on homosexuality might decline (Croteau & Lark, 1995). If teachers are not comfortable addressing sexually diverse topics in the class, simply the use of *safe space* signs to indicate support would be beneficial to all students (Evans & Broido, 1999). Individual schools should enforce stricter policies and get involved more aggressively when homophobic language is used within the schools (Croteau & Lark, 1995). Schools must be a safe and nurturing environment for all who cross the doors, regardless of their sexual identity.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study focused on the experiences of lesbian and gay Georgia middle school teachers who are closeted with their students. One recommendation for future study includes involving teachers who self-identify as bisexual and transgender. Although society is slowly accepting

lesbian and gay people, there seems to be less information and acceptance concerning bisexual and transgender people (Weiss, 2004). Next, this study focused on middle school teachers in the state of Georgia due to its conservatism and religious views (Castle, 2011; Shelton, 2015); therefore, another recommendation would be to replicate this study in a different state, perhaps a more liberal state in which teachers are free to be openly gay, but remain closeted with their students anyway. Third, middle school-level teachers were used in this study because, as research indicates, middle school years are the time for exploration of the environment and of oneself, which includes sexual identity development (Russell et al., 2009). As another recommendation for future research, one could focus on teachers at different levels of school - elementary level or high school level - to discover if the rationale to remain closeted or the identity management strategies used differ for teachers at different levels. Finally, the researcher recommends taking this study beyond the homosexual teachers and focusing on the children who are affected by having closeted teachers or have no openly gay teacher role models. The study could focus on students who are struggling with their sexual identity and how the lack of openly gay teachers within their school affects their development and attitudes towards homosexuality and even academic success.

### **Final Reflection on the Research**

The findings from the individual, in-depth interviews and focus group discussion contribute to a new understanding that extends the existing literature on homosexual teacher identity and disclosure. All the participants in this study shared their experiences of not disclosing their sexual identity with their students, using identity management strategies such as passing or covering (Chase & Ressler, 2009; Sparkes, 1994; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009). The teachers shared examples of how remaining closeted with their students does affect their

professional and personal lives in one way or another. The findings from this study could contribute to the literature on gay identity development and existing models like Cass (1979), Coleman (1982), Troiden (1989), D'Augelli and Patterson (1995) and Fassinger and Miller (1997) in that each individual's experiences, beliefs, and upbringing can influence to what extent and under what contextual factors she or he discloses her or his sexual identity.

This research has been a journey of personal growth. My intention for this study was to bring awareness and provide a voice to the often-silenced group of homosexual educators. This study was a collaborative effort and was significantly enhanced by the insight and feedback of the ten research participants who freely and generously gave of their time to share their experiences. Although each participant shared individual stories and beliefs, there were a number of similarities in experiences even among the different school environments and range of teaching experiences of the participants. Having first-hand experience using identity management strategies such as passing as a straight woman or covering up details that may give an inclination that I am a lesbian made the stories even more meaningful to me. I do believe that heterosexual privilege is a phenomenon that heterosexual teachers are not cognizant of. Something as simple as the beginning of the school year introductions or displaying a family picture in the classroom are benefits that I believe heterosexual teachers take for granted. Homosexual teachers are not asking for special privileges, only to have basic human rights: the basic human right to be authentic and to honor one's true identity. As Petrovic (1999) advocates, it is not a question of *if* but rather *how* we, as a society, embrace all human rights. Regardless of whether one believes in homosexuality or not, human rights belong to everyone, which is the morally right and ethically correct way to live united. "Gay people have become more visible and gay rights are being granted to them faster than many non-gay people have had time to

accept” (Alderson, 2003a, p. 5). We must learn how to work together as opposed to against each other and help to make schools a safer more accepting environment for all.

The stories included in this narrative inquiry reveal the intricate and multifaceted process of identity management that these lesbian and gay Georgia middle school teachers regularly engage in, with the intention of carefully negotiating the conservative, heterosexist, and at times homophobic culture of education. Disclosure for a homosexual teacher is not a one-time event. As this study revealed, managing sexual identity is an event that occurs on a regular basis. Feelings of uneasiness surrounding acceptance from others is also a regular occurrence in the homosexual community. To understand why lesbian and gay teachers feel the need to conceal and protect their homosexual identities, it is necessary to understand the social and political climate that forces them to surrender their real identity (Clarke, 1996). In our heterosexist society where homosexuals are often portrayed as different, even sinful and a recruiter of the young, it is not surprising that many homosexual teachers refrain from disclosing their sexual identity to their students, especially in the conservative state of Georgia (Clarke, 1996).

This research adds to a small yet growing body of literature that focuses on the experiences of homosexual teachers (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Endo et al., 2010; Ferfolja, 2009; Griffin, 1992a; Hardie, 2012; McKenzie-Bassant, 2007; Rasmussen, 2004; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008; Rust, 1993). As Kevin Jennings advocates in his book *One Teacher in 10* (1994), “only through telling our stories can we shatter the myths and expose the lies that allow bigots to portray us as a threatening ‘other’” (p. 13). I truly believe that when homosexual teachers deny their authentic identities and remain closeted, living this dual identity, they are just as guilty of silencing their lives as the heterosexuals who shun them. Silenced homosexuals join the

heteronormative society making a homosexual an *other*. All educators and students can benefit from an openly diverse and accepting environment.

Allowing homosexual teachers to live openly in our schools may help reduce some of the issues that transpire for gay youth in our schools (Fetner & Kush, 2007; Russell, 2003; Toomey et al., 2011). Change begins at the top, and as Bishop and colleagues (2010) state, students would benefit from teachers as “guides in their identity development” (p. 87). Research indicates a trickle-down effect regarding tolerance and acceptance; within a school, if administration and teachers are tolerant of sexual minorities, so then will be parents and students (Stader & Graca, 2007). From Bishop and colleagues (2010):

Scrutiny of the private lives of teachers has been justified for decades as a method of protecting children against adult misconduct and sexual deviance. Although educators are held to a higher standard than people in most professions, discrimination against a marginalized group of Americans in the name of protecting children does nothing more than continue spreading hate, ignorance, and intolerance. (p. 87)

The silencing of lesbian and gay teachers results in a lack of role models for homosexual students who already find themselves isolated from the general population of students (Rudoe, 2010). A homosexual teacher could model a possible life for young children who will later disclose as lesbian women or gay men as adults (King, 2004). Although there is no promise that having openly gay teachers will create a different environment for homosexual middle school students, it is safe to assume that, at a minimum, gay students will see that one can be both successful and a homosexual (Ferfolja, 1998). Allowing teachers to be open about their sexuality could also reduce prejudice against homosexuals by educating the population within the school. Above being a teacher, we are first human beings with an innate need to be authentic and true to



ourselves. I am optimistic that the time is coming in which homosexuals will be afforded the same legal protection in the workplace as other marginalized groups and will be viewed as individuals versus part of a gay agenda.

The schools in Georgia are at least partially responsible for strengthening societal norms and defining what is considered normal (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010). By remaining closeted, homosexual teachers are missing the chance to “serve as change agents” to the future society, not only for homosexual students but also for students who may live in a conservative household with narrow views on issues such as homosexuality (Gedro, 2009, p. 51). Homosexual teachers who come out, not only can help to correct the misinformation about homosexuals (Newton & Risch, 1981; Vann, 2012) but also can be significant to the future understanding and acceptance of society (Schneider et al., 2002). Being out can “model honesty” and “validate differences” and, most importantly, being out shows students “that individuals have choices...regardless of societal prescriptions” (Wright, 1993, p. 30). Both coming out and remaining in the closet are fraught with consequences and potential internal battles concerning one’s identity and authenticity (Orne, 2011). I sincerely hope I get to be a part of a healthier society in which all differences are recognized and honored within the world of education.

## APPENDIX A

### Solicitation Letter

October 2015

Dear Potential Participant,

I am conducting a study about lesbian and gay middle school teachers in Georgia in order to complete my doctoral dissertation at Lesley University, Cambridge, MA. I am seeking participants who self-identify as lesbian or gay, have taught at least one year as a full-time middle school teacher in the state of Georgia, and are not “out” in the classroom. This research study will explore the experiences of lesbian and gay middle school teachers who keep their sexual identity hidden from their students, as the study seeks to understand the experience of being “in” with students and its effect on the professional and personal lives of teachers.

The process involves completion of a demographic questionnaire, one 90-120-minute audiotaped semi-structured interviews about participants’ experiences as a lesbian or gay middle school teacher. (The location of the interview is up to you. Interviews will be scheduled between October 2015 – December 2015). Finally, in January 2016, all participants will have the opportunity to speak about their experiences in a focus group setting in a collectively chosen location.

As a lesbian and former middle school teacher who was not out, I am particularly sensitive to the real concerns LGBT teachers face. I will take steps to ensure confidentiality by changing any identifying information and by keeping your name and the names of anyone you mention confidential. Data collection will take place over the course of the October 2015 – January 2016. No data collection will take place at your school site.

During this research process, you have the option to withdraw from the study at any time or to decline to participate in any aspect of the study (including not answering any questions I ask). You should be aware that the dissertation will be a public document and that several smaller publications will likely emerge from this research.


I would welcome your participation in this project. If you choose to decline, I would invite you to recommend a friend or colleague who may be interested in sharing her or his experiences. Once participants have indicated their interest, I will contact them to schedule the first interview. At that time, I will review the study requirements and ask you to read and sign an informed consent agreement, which explains your rights and protections as a participant in the study.

Thank you for considering the opportunity to participate in the study, and please feel free to contact me with any questions or for more information at keilwitz@lesley.edu

Heather A. Keilwitz, Ed.S.  
Ph.D. Candidate Lesley University  
Educational Studies-Adult Learning and Development

## APPENDIX B

### Recruitment Postcards



**The Teacher's Closet**  
**A Dissertation Study on Lesbian and Gay Teachers**

**Participant Requirements:**  
*\*Self-identify as lesbian or gay*  
*\*Full-time GA middle school teacher*  
*\*At least a year teaching experience*  
*\*Is not "out" to students*

Please contact me if you are interested in participating in this study, or I ask for you to share this opportunity with someone who may be interested.

Heather A. Keilwitz, Ed.S.      keilwitz@lesley.edu  
Doctoral Candidate at Lesley University

Given to Males

**Study Purpose**  
This research study will explore the experiences of lesbian and gay middle school teachers who keep their sexual identity hidden from their students, and how this experience of being "in" with students effects the professional and personal lives of teachers.

**Study Procedures**  
Data Collection between October 2015-January 2016


*\*Complete demographic questionnaire*

*\*Participate in a 90-120 minute interview (location of your choice)*

*\*Participate in a focus group with all study participants (location TBD)*

**Compensation:** You will receive a \$50 gift card at completion of the study.

Back of each postcard



**The Teacher's Closet**  
**A Dissertation Study of Lesbian and Gay Teachers**

**Participant Requirements:**  
*\*Self-identify as lesbian or gay*  
*\*Full-time GA middle school teacher*  
*\*At least a year teaching experience*  
*\*Is not "out" to students*

Please contact me if you are interested in participating in this study, or I ask for you to share this opportunity with someone who may be interested.

Heather A. Keilwitz, Ed.S.      keilwitz@lesley.edu  
Doctoral Candidate at Lesley University

Given to Females

## APPENDIX C

### Recruitment Advertisement for Newspapers



#### **The Teacher's Closet A Dissertation Study on Lesbian and Gay Teachers.**

##### **Participant Requirements:**

- Self-identify as a lesbian or gay • Full-time GA middle school teacher
- At least a year teaching experience • Is not "out" to students

Please contact me if you are interested in participating in this study, or I ask for you to share in this opportunity with someone who may be interested.

HEATHER A. KEILWITZ, Ed. S. • keilwitz@leesley.edu • Doctoral Candidate at Lesley University

##### **Study Purpose**

This research will explore the experiences of lesbian and gay middle school teachers who keep their sexual identify hidden from their students, and how this experience of being "in" with students effects the professional and personal lives of teachers.

**COMPENSATION: YOU WILL RECEIVE A \$50 GIFT CARD AT THE COMPLETION OF THE STUDY.**

## APPENDIX D

### Informed Consent Letter



Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in this research study of lesbian and gay middle school teachers in Georgia.

#### **Purpose:**

This research study is for my dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Terry Keeney at Lesley University. This research study will explore the experiences of lesbian and gay middle school teachers who keep their sexual identity hidden from their students, and how this experience of being “in” with students affects the professional and personal lives of teachers.

#### **Procedures:**

The research involves:

1. Completion of a demographic questionnaire.
2. One, 90-120 minute audiotaped, semi-structured interviews about life experiences being a gay or lesbian teacher. The location of the interview is up to you.
3. Focus group-all study participants will have the opportunity to speak about one’s experiences in a group setting, with location to be collaboratively chosen.

The data collection will take place October 2015 – January 2016. No data collection will take place at your school site.

#### **Discomforts and Risks:**

There is a low risk for psychological discomfort. You may decline to answer any questions, decline to participate in any activity, or ask to withdraw from the project at any time. You may ask at any time about the ongoing analysis of the data. At the end of the research process, a summary of the findings will be made available to you. The final dissertation will be a public document available for anyone to read. Risk for loss of confidentiality will be minimized by using strict confidentiality procedures, careful handling of data, and the use of pseudonyms and nondisclosure of working environments.

#### **Benefits:**

Participating in this study may benefit you by providing new insight into your personal and professional experiences as well as add to existing research about LGBT educators in middle school classrooms. Furthermore, participants may benefit from the act of personal reflection on experiences and the opportunity to network and make connections with others in similar circumstances, in a group setting.

**Statement of Confidentiality:**

Your participation in this research is confidential. Your comments and responses will be used for research purposes and may be included in my dissertation and any published articles or larger works stemming from this project. Your name will be kept anonymous, i.e. you will not be identified by your name in any public use of this project, and I will use a pseudonym in my private notes. In addition, any potentially identifying information will be changed in such a manner that it will not affect the intention of your response in both public documents and my own notes including information about anyone you mention in the course of the research study. The data will be stored and secured at the researcher’s home, and electronic files will be password protected.

**Right to Ask Questions:**

Please contact Heather A. Keilwitz at (678) 270-6651 or keilwitz@lesley.edu with questions or concerns about this research or during the research process. The senior advisor and committee chair, Dr. Terry Keeney can be reached via email at tkeeney@lesley.edu.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your decision to participate in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to answer certain questions. Permission to use your data is voluntary and you may revoke your permission at any time. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.

**Compensation:**

In order to compensate and thank you for your time, you will receive a \$50 gift card at the completion of the study.

Sincerely,

Heather A. Keilwitz, Ed.S.  
Ph.D. Candidate Lesley University  
Educational Studies-Adult Learning and Development

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I understand the above statements and voluntarily agree to participate in this research project. I understand that I may withdraw at any time or decline to participate in any activity.

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone/Email: \_\_\_\_\_

There is a Standing Committee for Human Subjects in Research at Lesley University to which complaints or problems concerning any research project may, and should, be reported if they arise. Contact the Committee Chairperson at irb@lesley.edu

**APPENDIX E**

**Demographic Questionnaire**

Please answer the following open-ended questions. Please be as detailed as you are comfortable. You do not have to answer any questions that you are not comfortable answering.

**Pseudonym to be used during study:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Describe yourself:**

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Sexual Identification: \_\_\_\_\_

Race: \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship Status: \_\_\_\_\_

**Describe your teacher preparation**

Where did you earn your undergraduate degree: \_\_\_\_\_

What is your highest degree: \_\_\_\_\_

Years teaching middle school in Georgia: \_\_\_\_\_

**Describe your teaching experience**

What states have you taught in: \_\_\_\_\_

What grade levels/subjects: \_\_\_\_\_

Current teaching location (county): \_\_\_\_\_

Current student demographics: \_\_\_\_\_

Years at current location: \_\_\_\_\_

**Indicate your level of disclosure at school. Are you out to:**

Colleagues: \_\_\_\_\_ Administration: \_\_\_\_\_ Parents: \_\_\_\_\_

**Do you believe your school is/would be accepting of your choice to come out to students in the classroom? Please explain.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX F

### Interview Guide: Individual

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. I appreciate your willingness to discuss aspects of your life as a teacher, specifically in regards to your sexual identity. I encounter heteronormative experiences in the classroom because I too, am a lesbian teacher. I am intrigued by these experiences and this is why I am interested in hearing stories about how other lesbian and gay teachers navigate their sexual identity in the classroom. I assure you that all the information you provide in this interview will remain anonymous and that no records of this interview will include your name. I will be digitally recording this interview for the sake of accuracy. Is that okay?

- 1) In order for me to learn more about you and your lived experiences within the LGBT community, would you share your coming out experience?
- 2) When did you know that you wanted to be a teacher? Did you think about if your sexual identity would be compromised in this profession?
- 3) Describe your experiences as an LGBT middle school teacher in Georgia.
- 4) You indicated on your demographic form that you are out to: \_\_\_\_\_. What influences can you identify to be out to the degree that you are?
- 5) Can you share a memorable event in your classroom, specific to your sexual identity, and how it may have influenced your teaching? Why was it memorable to you?
- 6) Tell me about a time you had to present yourself differently from how you might present yourself outside the school (pressure to conform to the norm of the school).
- 7) Do you think there would be a loss of legitimacy or credibility if you were to come out to students, and if so, how, if not, why not?
- 8) How does the experience of being “in” with students affect your professional life?
- 9) How does the experience of being “in” with students affect your personal life?
- 10) What would influence your decision in your school or more broadly to come out to your students?



## APPENDIX G

### Interview Guide: Focus Group

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in my study. I feel honored that you all have taken time out of your schedules to meet together as a focus group. My goal for today is for all of us to share about our experiences during the course of my study. I am interested in hearing your voice as we all try to make sense of our need to stay in the “teacher’s closet” with our students.

Again, I assure you that all the information you provide in this interview will remain anonymous and that no records of this interview will include your name. I will be digitally recording this interview for the sake of accuracy. Is that okay?

- 1) What factors do you think support lesbian and gay teachers to remain IN within their classroom environment and with students?
- 2) Do you think there is more risk or benefit involved with coming out to your students?
- 3) In what ways could students benefit from your being out?
- 4) In what ways do you think the students could be put at risk by your coming out?
- 5) Do you think being out to students is different for lesbian women versus gay men?
- 6) Do you think society views lesbian women differently compared to gay men?
- 7) I really appreciate your time and participation in this study. My hope is that this study will add to the body of research involving the LGBT educational community. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience revolving this topic?

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