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## “Negotiating the closet door”: The lived experiences of two gay music teachers

By

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### Abstract

*A significant part of identity negotiation for gay teachers surrounds decisions about “coming out” in the workplace: how, when, where, why, and with whom to share status as a gay individual. Using semi-structured interviews, this qualitative case study of two inservice vocal and general music educators explored factors influencing disclosure decisions, what tools/strategies (if any) participants gleaned from their music teacher education programs regarding LGBTQ issues, where these teachers sought support and mentorship, and the influence of having a significant other on disclosure processes. The broad emergent themes that arose from the data included: (a) Negotiating the Closet Door, (b) LGBTQ Issues and (Music) Teacher Education, (c) Privilege, and (d) Mentorship. Participants cited the importance of “partner privilege”: that having a significant other can change the dynamic of social situations and may help facilitate an easier disclosure process. With increased openness and dialogue, aided by societal shifts, the veil of secrecy surrounding gay music educators can be lifted.*

**Keywords:** gay music teachers, LGBTQ, mentoring, heteronormativity, partner privilege

For heterosexuals living in a heteronormative society—one in which the default or assumed sexual orientation is heterosexuality (Kinsman, 1987; Warner, 1993)—fluid synthesis of their personal and professional lives may occur rather seamlessly. Heteronormative environments foster heteronormativity, meaning that because heterosexual orientation is an accepted societal norm, heterosexual employees can more easily dovetail their personal and professional lives without fear of offending others (Allen, 1995; Bergonzi, 2009; Croteau, 1996, Ward & Winstanley, 2005). The integration of personal and professional personae may not be so simple for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) community, for whom negotiations surrounding their gender identity and/or sexuality in the workplace involve daily decisions, evaluations, and, too often, lies and fear (Graves, 2009; Jackson, 2007). A significant part of LGBTQ identity negotiation involves decisions regarding whether to speak openly about one's non-normative orientation (“coming out of the closet”) in the workplace: decisions about how, when, why and with whom to share LGBTQ status.

### **Review of Selected Literature**

#### **“Coming Out” in the Workplace**

Complex factors influence decisions regarding disclosure of LGBTQ identity in the workplace (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; DeJean, 2007, Gorski, Davis, & Reiter, 2013; Gusmano, 2008; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002; Schneider, 1986; Ward & Winstanley, 2005). Ward and Winstanley (2005) framed disclosure as a reiterative process that happens over and over during an employee's tenure. Fear of discrimination may prevent gay employees from discussing their sexuality at work (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Mayo, 2008; Waldo & Kemp, 1997), and some gay employees have experienced negative consequences from attempting to disclose their sexual orientation in previous work situations (e.g., Day & Schoenrade, 1997; Schneider, 1986).

## **Lived Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Teachers**

Gay and lesbian teachers navigate complex environments influenced by the heteronormative biases inherent in a school's culture (Epstein, O'Flynn, & Telford, 2002; Mayo, 2008; Smith, Wright, Reilly, & Esposito, 2008; Wright & Smith, 2013). Gay teachers continually interact with people who may be extremely supportive or vehemently homophobic (e.g., Bliss & Harris, 1998; DeJean, 2007; Endo, Reece-Miller, & Santavicca, 2010; Griffin, 1991), all while working with children in a society in which sexuality may be considered an inappropriate topic of discussion at school and in which incorrect stereotypes about gay people loom large (Endo et al., 2010; Epstein et al., 2002; Khayatt, 1997; Schneider, 1986). Meyer (2010) wrote that many schools "send messages that students and their families who do not conform to the heterosexual gender norms of that community are not welcome" (p. 14), and being forthright about their sexual orientation may even impact the perceived effectiveness of gay teachers in the classroom (Russ, Simonds, & Hunt, 2002). Policies vary greatly between school districts, cities, and states, causing many LGBTQ teachers to fear discrimination and job loss if they open up about their sexuality at school (Bliss & Harris, 1998; Griffin, 1991; Jackson, 2006, 2007; Schneider, 1986; Woods & Harbeck, 1992, Wright & Smith, 2013).

## **Teachers Negotiating the Closet Door**

Haddad (2013), Griffin (1991), and Jackson (2004, 2006, 2007) explored gay and lesbian teachers' navigation of their intersecting personal and professional worlds. Haddad (2013) wrote, "For many teachers, there is a great deal of cognitive dissonance between these two aspects of identity: where one's gay identity intersects his teacher identity" (p. 8). Griffin (1991) suggested that "coming out" occurs on a continuum: from "passing" (attempting to take on heterosexual characteristics) and "covering" (subduing one's true self when others are around), to being

“implicitly out” and “explicitly out” (p. 194). Inherent in this continuum is the fact that disclosure “was not a single event, or even a single process in these educators’ lives. Going to work was like taking several journeys all at the same time; these participants were in different places with different people in school” (p. 200). Jackson (2006) referred to this process as “negotiating the closet door” (p. 27), which more accurately depicts the daily deliberations many gay teachers experience than does “coming out of the closet.” In her study of nine gay and lesbian educators, Jackson (2007) used a grounded theory approach to “analyze how gay teachers came to their understandings of what it means to be a gay teacher” (p. 13).

### **Music Educators Negotiating the Closet Door**

The music education research literature contains few studies about the complex identity negotiations of gay and lesbian teachers. As Carter (2014) wrote, “research is needed to compare and contrast ways in which *music* educators’ experiences differ from those teaching in other subject areas” (p. 545, emphasis in original). A small number of studies in the music education literature have included explorations of gay identity disclosure at school (Furman, 2012; Haywood, 2010; Natale Abramo, 2010; Paparo & Sweet, 2014; Talbot & Hendricks, 2012; Taylor, 2011).

In Paparo and Sweet’s study (2014), two gay and lesbian preservice student teachers wrestled with the “dilemma of being out” (p. 32). They discussed the dichotomy between a yearning for honesty and the ramifications following disclosure of their non-normative identity in a school setting. They also addressed how this contradiction influenced their trajectory as gay and lesbian music educators. Talbot and Hendricks (2012) presented the stories of two gay music teachers from different generations using a grounded theory approach in which they explored the “establishment of professional identity for LGBTQ individuals” (para. 1). The younger of the

two music teachers in this study was suspended from his first teaching position when his school administration discovered that he was gay. In a phenomenological case study of four gay music teachers, Haywood's (2010) participants expressed varying opinions regarding openness at school; responses ranged from "not out to students" to "honestly I consider coming out an integral part of being true to myself" (p. 5). This disparity personifies the variety of opinions among gay teachers and calls for further study on disclosure negotiation.

Taylor's (2011) exploration of ten gay band directors explored decisions regarding disclosure of gay identity to colleagues, parents, and students and how these decisions impacted interactions with these subsets of the school community. Participants expressed divergent views but generally agreed that disclosure to colleagues enhanced relationships while admission of gay identity to students and parents seemed more complicated. Natale Abramo's (2010) study portrayed the story of Chris, a gay band teacher whose experiences illustrate the notion of the closet as a place where one is silenced (Sedgwick, 1990). Chris identified the image of "teacher as chameleon" (p. 8) to describe the complex nature of his gay teacher identity. Likewise, Furman's (2012) study of three lesbian instrumental music educators explored the relationships and intersections between their personal and professional lives. These female band directors held vastly differing views and opinions about disclosure, due in part to prior experiences negotiating the closet door at school. For example, one participant lost a job due to her sexual identity and therefore disclosed her lesbian identity and relationship to administrators before she accepted another position.

While most of these studies focused on the experiences of gay and lesbian instrumental music teachers specifically, little known research exists on the experiences of gay vocal and general music teachers. Furthermore, the music education studies cited above are in-depth case

studies and therefore not generalizable; more narratives on this topic may illuminate new and unexplored facets of this complex topic.

For the purposes of the present study, I limited the scope to include the experiences of two cisgender men who self-identify as gay. An exploration of bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning identity among music educators is beyond the scope of this study. However the BTQ subgroups deserve equal attention (e.g., Broad, 2002; McCarthy, 2003). In an effort to improve music teacher education and further the ongoing sociocultural dialogue exploring lived experiences of LGBTQ music educators, the purpose of this multiple case study was to explore experiences of gay inservice vocal and general music teachers and their identity disclosure decisions. The research questions evolved as the study progressed. The original research questions were:

- What factors influence decisions about disclosure of sexual orientation at school for gay vocal/general music educators?

What tools/strategies (if any) did participants' music teacher education programs provide regarding LGBTQ issues? If so, were they helpful? Why?

During data collection, as themes began to emerge, I added two additional research questions that helped guide ensuing interviews and coding:

What impact does having a significant other play in disclosure at school?

Where have participants gone for advice, mentorship, and support regarding disclosure?

### **Theoretical Framework**

I predicated the current study on a theory of identity development by Jackson (2007), who suggested a non-linear continuum traversed by gay and lesbian teachers as they “negotiate the closet door.” In her grounded theory, the *pre-teaching* stage occurs before teachers begin

teaching, encompassing the *coming into gayness* and *coming into teaching* phases. Jackson noted the similarities between the processes involved with reconciling one's gay and teacher identities concurrently within a heteronormative culture. The *closeted teaching* stage, including the *super-teacher* and *on the verge* phases, occurs when teachers begin a new position without disclosing their gay identity. Jackson found that young gay teachers tried to keep themselves busy, working hard to establish themselves as motivated professionals by taking on a *super-teacher* persona, while giving little or no credence to their personal lives at school. As one participant concisely put it, "teacher by day, lesbian by night" (p. 65). Teachers *on the verge* take steps toward disclosure to their students, and discuss gay topics with colleagues as something of a litmus test. Teachers in this phase may come out to administrators and actively seek supportive peers. The *post-coming out* stage includes two phases: "The *gay poster child* phase differs from the *authentic teacher* phase because, in the *gay poster child* phase only gay participants were careful not to be 'perceived as having some agenda'" (p. 73). In the *authentic teacher* phase, the ability to bring their whole selves to school "[opens] up" the teaching experience for gay educators (p. 75). Jackson's theory provides a lens through which to explore the journey of the participants in the current study as they continually negotiate the closet door and navigate intersections of their personal and professional worlds.

### **Researcher Lens**

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) stated that qualitative researchers should be forthright in explaining elements of their background that could color their approach to the study. My experiences as a gay choral music teacher followed many years of having anti-gay comments hurled at me in K-12 public schools and as an undergraduate student. During my first four years of teaching in a large urban middle school on the West Coast, I heard homophobic slurs from

students on a regular basis. These experiences made me feel uncomfortable and less safe at work, and they encouraged me to construct walls around my true self: sturdy walls that have been difficult to dismantle.

While teaching at a large urban performing arts high school in the same West Coast district, I became the faculty sponsor of the student gay-straight alliance (GSA). While I never made a declarative statement about my gay identity to students, my position in the GSA was my way of “coming out” at school. I had read story after story about teachers successfully coming out directly to their students (Jennings, 1994) but never felt comfortable doing so. I remained in what Jackson (2007) termed the *super-teacher* phase: making myself too busy and too obsessed with the day-to-day routine of choral music teaching to acknowledge or deal with my gay identity at school.

More recently, as a music teacher at a small independent private school in the Mid-Atlantic region, I subtly disclosed my gay identity to seventh- and eighth-grade students during a presentation on bullying in which I encouraged students to choose words carefully. I told them that homophobic language is hurtful and that I began hearing such language from classmates at school long before I realized that I was gay. No student ever spoke with me about my disclosure, but it did change the way I interacted with students and the way that I felt at school. My honesty created a small opening in the wall that I had built around myself—and the scenery on the other side was beautiful. While it is true that being gay is only one part of who I am, it does color the way in which I see the world and influences the way that I navigate social events, professional relationships, and career choices. My feelings of ‘otherness’ have permeated my life and my teaching career.



## Method

### Research Design and Data Collection

I chose a multiple case study design to explore this topic, as this is an in-depth analysis of two systems within specified contexts (Merriam, 1998). This study allowed two participants to share their thoughts about, and experiences with, disclosure of their gay identity at school. These specific participants were chosen purposefully, using what Patton (1990) called intensity sampling, in which “one seeks excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest, but not unusual cases” (p. 171). Both participants are colleagues and personal friends who had previously disclosed their gay identity to me and are well-spoken, successful teachers who I knew would share rich, truthful stories. Additionally, in an effort to provide divergent perspectives, the two participants differ in terms of grade levels and type of music courses taught, age, and length of teaching career.

Data collection took place over a period of four months. During this time, I interviewed each participant twice via the video conferencing program Skype™; each interview was 30 to 40 minutes in length. I recorded all Skype™ interviews using the program Screenflick, which creates a screen capture video of the computer screen. Having access to these videos allowed me to interpret participants’ body language and facial expressions, allowing for more meaningful transcription and a deeper understanding of the data. I devised follow-up questions based on emerging themes and preliminary codes. I e-mailed follow-up questions to both participants, and they responded in writing. This process afforded the participants time to consider their thoughts and words carefully, free from the time constraints of a Skype™ interview.

## **Coding and Trustworthiness**

The constant comparison method guided the coding process (Merriam, 1998), which occurred in three phases. I began writing specific words, topics, and quotes from the transcripts in the left margin. Second, I grouped ideas from the initial list by category in the right margin. Finally, I analyzed and grouped the phrases and notes from the right margin into broader themes. During this process I utilized a combination of descriptive and In Vivo coding (Saldaña, 2013).

Trustworthiness was an ever-present concern. Peer review of codes by a colleague with similar research interests and consultation with a second qualitative researcher helped clarify emergent themes and initial codes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process helped clarify themes and guided me toward emergent research questions. Member checks of interview transcripts and case descriptions allowed participants to ensure that their words were being represented accurately (Creswell, 2007). One participant requested minor grammatical changes.

## **Case Descriptions**

Tall, gregarious, and animated, **Caleb Powell**<sup>1</sup> was a White teacher in his mid-30s. He grew up in a military family and lived in several states and abroad, eventually landing in a homogeneous suburban community in the eastern United States where he attended high school. The son of a piano teacher, Caleb grew up reveling in and playing music. Meaningful experiences in secondary choral and instrumental ensembles, including marching band, prompted his initial decision to study music education with hopes of becoming a band teacher. Following influential choral experiences in high school and college, Caleb completed his bachelor's degree with a vocal emphasis. He taught high school choir for four years, then left to teach middle school choir in a different school in the same region, where he was in his seventh year at the time

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<sup>1</sup> All names included in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

of data collection. Caleb disclosed his gay identity to his parents as a sophomore in high school, and, though his mother was supportive, his father reacted negatively. Caleb explained that his parents “almost separated over that.” Caleb had some uncertainty about being part of the gay community; soon after he came out, his mother brought him to a PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) meeting, which made him uncomfortable. He felt that, rather than empowering him as a gay person, participation in this group would cause him to feel like an outlier. He said, “I knew in my heart this [membership in an organization in which I would be outed and ‘othered’ as gay] was not for me.”

Small in size but extra large in personality, **Sam Flores** was a 24-year-old elementary music educator in a medium-sized city in the Southwest at the time of data collection. This was his first year teaching K-5 general music and choir after one year teaching work skills to high school students with special needs in the same district. A Hispanic first-generation college student, Sam identified education as an important factor in his life and always appreciated being challenged. After his upbringing in a small Southwest community he described as “very Hispanic and Latino populated,” Sam moved to a large city in the same region where he attended high school and sang with a well-respected youth chorus. He described feeling “different” growing up, but said that his gay identity “didn’t slap [him] in the face until [his] first year of college.” At age 18, he disclosed this identity to his best friend, who was already “out.” Sam said, “I think he was good and instrumental in [my] being able to... come out peacefully.”

### **Findings**

Analysis uncovered several broad categories related to negotiating the closet door at school. The following four emergent themes arose, corresponding to the research questions: (a)

*Negotiating the Closet Door, (b) LGBTQ Issues and (Music) Teacher Education, (c) Privilege, and (d) Mentorship.*

### **Negotiating the Closet Door**

Caleb and Sam's choices regarding disclosure of their gay identity at school were context dependent. For example, Caleb had not planned to disclose his gay identity at school, but a staff member asked him about it unexpectedly.

I'm out to *[long pause]* pretty much any faculty member that I work closely with. Two years ago, I walked into school one morning and the admin. secretary—it was actually pretty early in the day (I was really, really early for some reason). There was no one else in the office except her and, she looks at me (this was my fifth year teaching) she looks at me and is like, "Caleb, you're gay, right?" And I was like, "yes." *[laughs]* And she said, *[speaking quickly]* "Ok, good. Ok, so my son just came out to me this past weekend and I just told him I love him and I'm going to support him and I wanted to make sure that that was the right thing to say." And I'm like, "You couldn't have said anything better!" That was that. I was out.

Caleb believes that this conversation, and what it symbolized, changed his relationships with colleagues "for the better":

Before that, I didn't really hang out with teachers. I didn't go to the happy hours. I always got invites like to the Halloween party but I never wanted to go because I didn't want to bring Greg [my partner] because I didn't know how that would be perceived. But then when she sort of *[clicking sound]* opened the door, I was like, "Ok, if she knows, everybody else does too"... So yeah, I was grateful that she did it.

Sam began teaching at a new school the year data collection occurred and his negotiation included him sharing details about his personal life with his principal, including his gay identity and his relationship status, before the school year began. He used this disclosure as a litmus test to see if the school was a work environment in which he would feel comfortable.

I think it was important to come out to my administrator early on so they didn't feel surprised in any way and for me to understand what kind of situation I was going into: to see if they were supportive... if this was going to cause some kind of problem for the rest of the year... at least I knew what kind of situation I was going into.

Sam's desire for connection and openness fueled his motivation for being so direct.

I feel that I shouldn't be afraid anymore. And, I'm tired of beating around the bush for things like that, and I don't feel like I should be afraid to do that anymore. I don't think that I should have that fear in my life. And, I don't know, I feel much more myself at the school; I feel myself at the workplace. I really wouldn't feel that I had a genuine working relationship with any of the teachers if I hadn't come out to them.

Despite sharing their gay identity with faculty colleagues and administrators, neither Caleb nor Sam felt comfortable being open with students, as exemplified by Sam's comment, "I've never really felt the need to disclose my gay identity to my students. Personally, I would rather my students know me as their teacher."

Dankmeijer (1993), Griffin (1991), and Jackson (2007) discussed ideas mirroring Sam and Caleb's experiences—being "out" to different facets of the school population; Jackson posited that identity disclosure occurs on a non-linear continuum. The idea of disclosing gay identity to students makes the intersection of their personal and professional lives more complicated (Furman, 2012). Neither participant felt comfortable coming out directly to students. Harkening the closet as silencing agent metaphor (Sedgwick, 1990), Caleb described how his gay identity silenced him while conversing with students:

*I can't say, when my kids say, "So, Mr. Powell, what did you do this weekend?" I can't say, "I went hiking with my partner." I can't say that. And I know that, the way that a [heterosexual] female teacher could say, "I went hiking with my husband." 'Cause that's, it's just two completely different things. I say, "I went hiking with a friend." Something like that... I do recognize that there is a professional line that I just can't cross.*

Here, Caleb described one way he has managed his personal life at school. Caleb's assertion that a heterosexual teacher's ability to talk about his/her relationship openly, but a gay teacher's ability to do so are, "just two completely different things" exemplifies the 'other' status that gay and lesbian teachers may experience. This tendency toward secrecy and silence presents serious roadblocks to forming relationships with students (Jackson, 2007; Jennings, 1994). As Caleb said, "I would say that I'm pretty close with my kids and that that one thing keeps me from being closer. Like *[pause, searching for words]* I definitely keep my kids at a little bit of a distance."

In the face of daily interactions with administrators, colleagues, parents, and students who may hold vastly differing views about gender-sexual diversity, Caleb and Sam adopted

strategies that they thought would create positive situations for themselves at work. For example, Caleb discussed his confidence about being a valued faculty member. Still, he remained cautious.

I don't think anyone, homophobic or not, would ever try to [get me fired]. I've built too strong a reputation to have my sexual orientation be a factor in that. That said, I'm still not prepared to jump in those waters.

Though Caleb and Sam had positive experiences disclosing and discussing their gay identities with adults at school, lingering strains of heterosexism pervaded their experiences, causing them to feel that there was an essential part of themselves that they could not share with certain subsets of the school's population, including the students whom they mentor and with whom they desire connection (e.g., Caleb's assertion that the "professional" option is to be vague, and, therefore, not completely truthful). This fear may stem from misconceptions and societal norms teachers like Caleb and Sam could potentially disrupt; if they were "out" to students, they could challenge these norms.

**Resisting pre-conceived notions.** Both participants resisted pre-conceived notions and stereotypes while navigating their disclosure decisions and processes. Though he saw himself as 'other' and did not talk openly with his students about his gay orientation, Caleb expressed a desire to be a role model to students who may be questioning their sexuality, helping them to see that gay identity need not inexorably change one's life.

I would love for that kid to know that I'm gay to see that I have a job; I have a normal life. I have a good relationship with somebody. I have friends. Everything is *normal*. Everything is the same as it is for anyone else.

Sam had similar feelings but framed his thoughts on conforming to societal norms as a rejection of one particular stereotype, that of the gay music teacher:

I feel like there's a big stereotype of gay male music educators in general, so I don't like dealing with that stereotype. When I do come out to people, I sometimes get the look that says, "Oh yeah, of course, you're the music teacher." And, of course, now there's a mainstream sitcom gay male music educator on *Modern Family* [a popular sitcom].

This statement represents heteronormativity in action, as teachers who fit the “normal” orientation (heterosexuality) can use anecdotes from their personal lives, free from the burden of disclosure, to improve and enrich their relationships with students, an approach not necessarily open to gay teachers. In their own way, and based in their own experiences, Caleb and Sam attempted to remain true to themselves, to be role models, but ultimately felt a need to protect their jobs. Because of this, they remained in what Jackson (2007) labeled the *closeted teaching* stage.

**Anti-discrimination policies.** The presence (or lack) of district, city, and state anti-discrimination policies affected the disclosure decisions of both participants. For Caleb, lack of legal protection fueled worry.

There is no anti-discrimination clause in [my] county, so if they wanted to, they could fire somebody for being gay. Whether that would happen or not, I don't know. But, they could, and that is *always* in the back of my mind.

Sam had a vastly different opinion about the power of anti-discrimination policies. Noting societal shifts, such as the recent debate about ENDA (the Employment Non-Discrimination Act) in Congress, he was confident that he would be safe even without explicit legal protection: “I had assumed that there was no protection available in [my state], but given the current social circumstance I knew that if there ever was a problem, I think I would actually be more protected than the law allows.” The power of school, district, county, state, and national policies send strong messages to teachers. Even Caleb, a successful educator, presenter, and guest conductor, had incessant doubt due to the lack of legal protection in his county. On the other hand, Sam believed that his lack of legal protection was not so necessary due to the fact that society seems to be growing more accepting of LGBTQ individuals.

**Bullying.** Both participants spoke candidly about the role bullying played in their lives growing up. Sam experienced bullying on several fronts, even hearing negative comments about

how having light skin color in his “very Latino” hometown in the Southwest made him the “*huedito*: the little white guy.” Here we see a glimpse of the intersectionality (Carter, 2014) that Sam faces as he navigates his gay, teacher, and Hispanic identities simultaneously. Having dealt with harassment while growing up, Caleb’s approach to teaching acceptance and citizenship seems greatly influenced by these challenging situations. “[In high school] I got picked on, but more because I was just entirely un-athletic.” Later he described how this affected him and how it plays out in the classroom by using proxy language and choosing stories about being bullied for being non-athletic rather than for being gay. So, though Caleb had not shared his gay identity with his students, he still attempted to instill elements of empathy and respect. He performed his choice not to be open by using proxy language.

So, all the time, *all* the time, I talk about me growing up, being picked on. I don’t mention for being gay, but I talk about it all the time for not being athletic. I was *not* into sports at all and I tell the guys, “I was teased *so bad* for that... isn’t that ridiculous?” And all the guys are like, [*mock middle school voice*] “Yeah... that’s stupid Mr. Powell.”

Caleb and Sam re-inscribe the bullying they experienced as a way to teach life lessons to their students.

### **LGBTQ Issues and (Music) Teacher Education**

Neither participant could recall an instance in which LGBTQ issues were discussed in their teacher education program. This is in line with ideas of Robinson and Ferfolja (2001) who discussed how preservice teacher education courses focus more on pedagogy and content than on social justice issues, and that such social justice conversations occur so far out of context that they become virtually useless. This neutral dialogue also supports Ferfolja’s (2007) assertion that school cultures “reinforce and perpetuate silences and invisibility” in relation to gender-sexual diversity, promoting heterosexism and a “heterosexual them homosexual us” binary (p. 160).



As demonstrated in Sam's student teaching mentorship experience, Sam and Caleb sought information and support to negotiate being a successful gay music educator in the context of their own teaching setting. Caleb was less active in seeking advice, whereas Sam was deliberate and sought out information and support. When I asked if he received any training in discussing LGBTQ issues as an undergraduate, Sam recalled a startling realization about being silenced at school:

If I were to remember one conversation, I can't even remember who it was with, but [it was about my realization that] I wouldn't be able to put pictures of my family on my desk because then students and parents and teachers and whatnot would be coming in and then that would be a big issue. So, that's the only thing I can really remember—it wasn't ever really discussed explicitly in any way...

I asked Sam where he sought resources regarding disclosure at school. After hearing stories in the news about gay teachers being fired, he recalled turning to sources outside the school district or university.

I have not found many resources available that specifically address LGBT teachers much less LGBT music teachers, but have read many articles that have addressed being out in the workplace in gay content magazines [e.g., *The Advocate*, *Out*]. Although they were not career specific, I did find them helpful as they addressed the struggles one might face legally, administratively, or with fellow co-workers. Bringing those issues to light has helped me navigate my own process.

During the interview phase, Caleb was heartened to hear that LGBTQ issues were being discussed more frequently in undergraduate music education courses. As he bluntly put it, “[Preservice teachers are all] going to have gay students. [They] need to learn how to deal with it now.”

## **Privilege**

**Heteronormativity.** Two different types of privilege emerged from the data: heteronormativity and what I term “partner privilege.” Heteronormativity is a pervasive underlying theme in much of what was expressed by Caleb and Sam regarding their experiences.

For example, both participants spoke at length about the things they *cannot* do (e.g., speak about hiking with their partner, have a picture of their family on their desk), all based on assumed heterosexuality. As Jackson (2007) wrote in quoting Oscar Wilde, “Because of past silence imposed on gay people, homosexuality has been called the ‘love that dare not speak its name’” (p. 134). These norms further cycles of silence in schools.

**Partner privilege.** Partner privilege is an emergent theme that I did not expect to find. Based on the commentary of these participants, it seems as though having a partner changes the dynamic of many social situations and may alter the interactions a gay teacher can have with members of the school community. Caleb described how he used his relationship status to disclose his gay identity indirectly to administrators:

Officially, I have never gone up to them and said, “I am gay,” but all of them have met Greg [partner]. All of them know who Greg is.... I will talk about Greg. I generally will not say, unless I know who I’m talking to, “my boyfriend” or “my partner,” but they all know.

Caleb also described how he assumed that the presence of his partner at school events led students to assume that he is gay:

Even starting when I was teaching high school, the high school kids started figuring it out: they were like, “Oh, he’s here a lot.” Now, my middle school kids, whether they figure it out or not... I don’t know. It’s not broached. It’s not talked about. My first couple years, I would get the question, “Mr. Powell are you married? Do you have kids?” Things like that. Those questions stopped.

Both participants used the presence of their boyfriend or partner at school or school functions as a subtle way to disclose their gay identity. Sam said,

I should say I’ve been using the opportunities that have come up in conversation—to use those as an opportunity to come out. It was a pretty obvious situation. I brought Gabe over to set up my classroom, and it was really quickly, ‘Hi, this is my boyfriend Gabe.’

When I asked Sam if having a boyfriend helped make his coming out process at school easier, he gave a good working definition of partner privilege.

I completely agree that having a boyfriend does help facilitate it much more so. I think if I were single, I would still do it, and if I did, I would say it would be much harder. I wouldn’t have a reason to bring it up in conversation: it wouldn’t be so normal... I think it would be much more

difficult, and, I don't know, I think it would be harder to bring it up in conversation and not make it awkward.

For both participants, the presence of a partner at school aided their disclosure process. The presence of their significant other at school was an indication of their gay identity, but also an indication of a monogamous relationship, and therefore in line with societal norms. Jackson (2004) alluded to this idea: "Several participants expressed that the more they resembled the hetero-sexual 'norm' of having a partner and children, the more accepted they felt at school, the more comfortable they felt coming out" (p. 133). Thus, gay and lesbian teachers in relationships may benefit simply by taking part in the societal expectation of monogamy.

### **Mentorship**

Both Caleb and Sam were shepherded through the teaching professions by LGBTQ mentors who demonstrated various models for closet door negotiation. Like the participants in the Talbot and Hendricks (2012), Paparo and Sweet (2014), and Taylor (2011) studies, Caleb and Sam identified friends and colleagues who served as mentors and role models as they negotiated their gay identity at school. This mentorship, while often informal, provided Caleb and Sam with blueprints for complex situations. In Caleb's first teaching position, his co-teacher Mike, who was more open than Caleb about his gay identity at school, served as a role model and an inspiration.

A kid told Mike a week and a half ago, came out to Mike, and Mike says, "I've been there. Let's talk about it." That's *so cool!* So, if I'm ever put in that position I'll have to just decide, am I going to help this kid out... or... you know, I don't know.

Caleb's heterosexual high school band director was a strong role model in his life both personally and professionally. Similar to a story from Fitzpatrick and Hansen's (2010) study, Caleb's band director inquired about his coming out process and offered support.

My senior year my band director, said after rehearsal, after marching band rehearsal one day, it's like, "Hey Caleb, do you want to go have dinner real quick?" I was like, "Ok." And, that was not unusual for him. And so we go out and we go to this Chinese buffet place and he sits down, we sit

down, and the *first words* out of his mouth, and I will never forget this quote, “I know what your orientation is.” That’s what he said to me. I was like, “Great, Mr. Franklin. Ok! That’s what you want to talk about?” and he said, “Yeah, I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

During student teaching in a large choral program in the Midwest, Sam worked with a teacher who was openly gay with virtually everyone, including his students. Witnessing the unequivocal acceptance of this teacher was influential for Sam, who described how this cooperating teacher was well respected as a music educator and as a person. “I have to think that they know [that he is gay]. And they *love* him... They take him as who he is.” Consistent with the experience of participants in Paparo and Sweet’s study (2014), Sam’s cooperating teachers mentored him throughout the student teaching semester:

That was I guess my first experience trying to navigate whether to be open in the workplace or not. And, I spent the first month there and didn’t tell them anything and didn’t say anything or whatever, and finally, maybe six weeks later, one of the three who is known for being the loudest [*laughs*] just finally asked: “Do you have a boyfriend or do you have a girlfriend?”

After telling them about his boyfriend, Sam’s relationships with his cooperating teachers improved markedly:

From that point on, it seemed like I developed such a greater relationship with all three of them... And I didn’t learn until another two or three weeks after that that one of the three of them was gay as well... Toward the end of my four months there I was able to talk to him a little bit about his relationships and stuff like that, so I think now delving into that... that was a pretty big turning point for me on this whole issue.

Recently Sam’s friend and colleague, an elementary music teacher in the same state, called to ask for support and advice about an “LGBT issue” at school. Some fourth grade students informed this colleague that fifth graders on the bus were calling him gay. Sam offered advice regarding what he would do were he the teacher being called gay by students at school:

I said that those students should come and talk to *me* personally and when they did, if they came and asked the question, I would say something like: “if I *was* [gay], or anybody else is in the school you should let them know that I support them whoever they are.” So, I guess kind of beating around the bush, but still showing my support for LGBT students or students who are in any way gender variant or anything like that.

“Beating around the bush” is Sam’s term for the process of avoiding potentially difficult discussions about gender-sexual diversity. This mirrors Jackson’s notion that (2007): “ways of

creating safety, relating to students, incorporating social justice, and building understanding...were present during the *closeted teaching* stage, but were muted to exclude any indication that the participant might be gay or lesbian” (p. 124). Ironically, it was declarative, direct statements from Caleb and Sam’s K-12 teachers, teaching colleagues, and cooperating teachers that made them feel comfortable. Lack of mentorship stands as a roadblock to Caleb and Sam stating unequivocally that they support LGBTQ people.

## **Discussion**

### **Research Question 1: Factors Influencing Disclosure Decisions**

**Caleb and Sam Negotiating the Closet Door.** Sam and Caleb’s lived experiences illuminate the complex roads that gay and lesbian teachers may traverse. Following principles of Sedgwick (1990), as also discussed in Dankmeijer (1993) and Natale Abramo (2010), Caleb and Sam’s identity management strategies involved what could be called strategic silence. Gay and lesbian teachers may choose to test out situations and gauge the opinions of others before they disclose their gay identity. Caleb taught for several years in his current school before a colleague asked him unexpectedly about his gay identity, providing him the opportunity to become more open at school. Conversely, Sam began disclosing his gay identity at school before students arrived his first year. But, as evidenced by the experiences of Caleb after the secretary at his school forced the question, uncertainty and fear can force gay teachers to feel silenced in social situations. Both participants faced situations in which they felt silence was the best option, a finding echoed by Jackson (2007): “by becoming experts at manipulating conversations, closeted participants managed to conceal their gay identities at school” (p. 63). Similarly, Haddad (2013) and Meyer (2010) noted that schools face choices to reinforce heterosexism or, conversely, help resist incorrect, outdated, or binary notions about gender-sexual diversity.

Though Caleb had more years of teaching experience than Sam, they appeared to both be in what Jackson (2007) called the *closeted teaching* stage. Sam was in the *super-teacher* phase—he worked to establish his identity with students as a competent, caring music educator, as embodied in his statement, “Personally, I would rather my students know me as their teacher.” Caleb seemed to be moving slowly toward the *on the verge* stage, though this progression was rife with fits and starts. He vacillated between statements like, “I would love for that kid to know that I’m gay,” and “So, if I’m ever put in that position I’ll have to just decide, am I going to help this kid out... or... you know, I don’t know.” Neither Caleb nor Sam blended their personal and professional worlds as described by Jackson (2006, 2007). However, they felt comfortable in their jobs, and they felt comfortable with their level of ‘outness’ in the context of their school situation. Sam referred several times to “beating around the bush.” Here the proverbial bush may be the heteronormative assumptions inherent in his school’s culture. Sam’s comment about an unfulfilled desire to show the school community his support and acceptance for queer or gender variant students demonstrated his inner struggle, but without making a declarative statement (Jennings, 1994; Khayatt, 1997). Overall, Sam and Caleb seemed to be happy, successful gay professional music educators living in a time of great change for the LGBTQ community.

**Societal shifts.** Societal shifts play a key role in the disclosure patterns of gay teachers. The confidence and optimism Sam held about coming out may exemplify a larger societal trend. Endo et al. (2010) identified the presence of the U.S. military “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) policy as a contributing factor in teachers fearing openness. In recent years, however, the federal government repealed DADT. In light of discussion of ENDA in Congress and the recent federal legalization of marriage for same-gender couples across the United States, perhaps the U.S. is becoming more accepting of LGBTQ people and same-gender marriage (Gallup, 2014; Pew

Research Center, 2013). Organizations like Lady Gaga's Born This Way Foundation (Born This Way Foundation, n.d.) are spreading messages about courage and strength in the face of bullying. Sam's quotes like "I shouldn't be afraid anymore" echoed themes of the Born This Way Foundation bus tour, teaching adolescents to work for a "kinder braver world." Similar to Schope's (2002) findings, Caleb is one generation older than Sam, and the difference in optimism between the two regarding acceptance issues is marked. Perhaps acceptance of disclosure will be more prevalent in future generations of music educators.

**Administrator support and anti-discrimination policies.** Administrator support can be crucial for gay and lesbian teachers who desire openness at school. Both Caleb and Sam eventually disclosed their gay identity to their administrators, which was one important part of their continuing disclosure process at school. Participants in Jackson's (2006) study identified the principal as "the most important player in setting the tone of the school" (p. 45). Administrators and teachers have the ability to create workplaces that are welcoming to all employees, including those who may be members of the gay community (King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008; Schneider, 1986). School personnel should be sensitive and use gender-neutral pronouns with new employees. For example, Sam felt open in disclosing his gay identity when other teachers inquired if he had a "significant other" (not "a girlfriend"). This simple yet powerful word choice created a moment of clarity and openness as Sam first met colleagues with whom he worked closely.

Anti-discrimination policies protecting LGBTQ Americans should be in place at all levels—from the school site level to the federal government. Heterosexual teachers can discuss their families freely and openly without fear of being fired. Caleb is a successful and well-respected choral music educator. Still, doubts about legal protection from his county/district

pervaded his thinking. Schools and school districts should enact policies that protect all competent and caring teachers regardless of their ethnicity, background, religion, socioeconomic status, or gender-sexual diversity.

An overarching concern for many gay and lesbian music teachers is the opportunity to be forthright about their gay identity with all members of the school community without fear of being chastised, fired, or seen as a less effective educator. As discussed by Fishback (2004), Hynes (2012), and some of Jackson's (2007) participants, Caleb and Sam expressed a desire to stand as role models for students who are LGBTQ or questioning their gender or sexual identity. Just as Caleb's heterosexual high school band director was able to speak with him openly about his gay identity, gay and lesbian teachers may desire the same opportunity without fear of being ostracized or fired. Transparency from all parties may send a strong message to schools and communities that gay identity need not be feared.

### **Research Question 2: Strategies from Music Education Programs**

University programs educating the preservice teachers should begin addressing gender-sexual diversity as a common thread throughout the undergraduate music education curriculum. Neither Caleb nor Sam received any formal training about LGBTQ issues in their teacher education programs. While informal mentoring as described by Talbot and Hendricks (2012) and Taylor (2011) is important, formal mentoring from university professors can equip preservice teachers with tools and strategies to support LGBTQ students and colleagues. It can also directly help members of the LGBTQ community successfully negotiate the closet door. Such formal mentorship also can help preservice teachers understand the reality that, as Caleb said: "You're going to have gay students. You need to learn how to deal with it now." Garrett (2012) noted, "music educators are in a special position to teach the value of inclusion so that LGBTQ students



and their family members feel that they belong in our classroom” (p. 60). Garrett suggested several ways to include LGBTQ-related content within the undergraduate music education curriculum, including discussion of gay composers, lessons on creating safe and inclusive classrooms, and instruction about anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies.

More broadly, music teacher educators should work to educate their students on gender-sexual diversity: what gender means (the fact that it is socially constructed and not the same thing as sex), and how gender interacts with, or acts independently of, sexuality. Because ensemble courses can be highly gendered environments (e.g., men’s choir, women’s choir) (Green, 2002), music teachers are in a unique position to interrupt stereotypes and misunderstandings about sexuality and gender. Modeling fearlessness in discussing these topics is vital for music educators. For example, Sam’s awareness of gender variance is indicative of a larger societal trend—the discussion of the “T” (transgender) in LGBTQ, which has largely been ignored in conversations about education (McCarthy, 2003), a sentiment echoed in a recent study by Nichols (2013) about the musical life of a gender fluid student named Rie/Ryan. In another study on transgender issues, Sullivan (2014) found that the music room was a particularly powerful and safe space for several transgender elementary students. Forthcoming research from the present author will explore transgender students in high school choral programs.

### **Emergent Research Question: Influence of Significant Others**

**Partner privilege.** Findings about “partner privilege” brought an interesting phenomenon to the fore. Though she did not acknowledge it as part of the process of negotiating the closet door, Laura, a participant in Jackson’s (2007) study, used a picture of her family to disclose her gay identity to her students: “I never announce it, [instead students ask] ‘Oh, who’s that?’ ‘That’s my granddaughter.’ ‘Oh, where’s your husband?’ ‘I don’t have a husband. There’s my

partner right there” (p. 68). Ironically, this is the very thing Sam felt that he could not display in class. Both Robinson and Ferfolja (2001) and Gould (2012) alluded to this concept in citing Wittig’s framing of homosexuality as “(failed) heterosexuality” (Gould, 2012, p. 48). Similarly, Epstein, O’Flynn, and Telford (2002) discussed how “what happens in education is tightly bound up with the organization and regulation of the heterosexual family” (p. 286). Perhaps in being part of monogamous relationships, gay and lesbian couples are considered more normal. Sam’s comment about single gay teachers being seen as “awkward” exemplifies the fact that they may have fewer opportunities to bring up their gay identity in conversation, making disclosure more difficult. This theme echoed DePaulo and Morris’s (2006) discussion of *singlism*: negative stereotypes and discrimination based on the fact that one is not married. Single people may be seen as “maladjusted and self-centered” (p. 251), thus representing a rarely explored facet of intersectionality. In this instance, single teachers may be at a disadvantage, and face an additional layer of ‘otherness.’

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The process of negotiating the closet door is a complex topic that deserves further study. A large-scale survey study of preservice music educators may highlight national trends about discussion of gender-sexual diversity. A case study of recently “out” teachers may clarify closet door negotiations in university and K-12 contexts. Furthermore, additional study is needed on two themes of the current study: proxy language and partner privilege. Examples such as Caleb’s being non-athletic as proxy language for teaching lessons about acceptance may be a strategy used by other gay teachers who have not shared their gay identity with students. Also, the idea of partner privilege in education deserves further study as it may mean that single gay teachers have one more layer of ‘other’ status to deal with at school, and possible interactions with the concept

of *singlism* as described by DePaulo and Morris (2006). Additionally, further study about bisexual, transgender, asexual, intersex, and queer/questioning perspectives in music education are long overdue. It may be interesting to explore regional differences within the U.S. regarding openness about LGBTQ issues in music education. Finally, more scholarship is needed to understand the various intersectionalities experienced by those who negotiate LGBTQ identity in conjunction with one or more layers of ‘otherness’ (e.g., the intersection between Sam’s Latino identity and his gay identity). As Carter (2014) wrote, “life is too messy and complicated to simply state that being a member of one group denotes a single type of representation” (p. 550).

### **Conclusion**

As echoed by Bergonzi (2009), Talbot and Hendricks (2012), and Taylor (2011), music teachers have a unique opportunity to remain in their students’ lives over a number of years. Before a gay person can share their non-normative identity with another person, they must feel safe and comfortable. Trailblazing gay rights activist Harvey Milk posited that the more Americans who knew an openly gay person, the more accepting society would become. My conjecture is that he was correct. The pace of societal change on LGBTQ rights issues has been rapid, yet the quandary for gay teachers remains: to tell people and possibly offend them or make them feel uncomfortable, or to silently navigate social situations, thus maintaining a problematic status quo. There are no easy answers, but gay teachers should be brave, be themselves without apology, and show their school community that gay identity need not be feared or covered up. Stated differently, out gay teachers can enrich the culture of their schools. Caleb, with a strong dose of optimism, summed up this idea: “There are just people that have yet to understand that we’re people too. We’ll get there.”

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