

**Lived Experiences of Two Gay Vocal Music Educators: A Comparative Case Study**

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## **Introduction**

Gender and sexuality research in music education is a recent area of study that has become more accepted and encouraged at higher education institutions (Carter, 2014). Much of the research on gender and education has focused on the lived experiences of educators and students, not educators within a specific field, such as music education; and published literature on LGBTQ music educators is limited (Furman, 2010). Articles written about the lived experiences of LGBTQ music educators suggest that additional research needs to be completed in order to fully understand what members of experience on a day to day basis (Bergonzi, 2009; Furman, 2010; Natale-Abramo, 2010; Palkki, 2015; Taylor 2011).

This study explores the various ways in which two gay music educators navigate their sexual identities in and out of the music classroom. Common themes permeating the current literature on the lived experiences of educators who identify as members of the LGBTQ community include: heteronormativity in the public school setting; heterosexual privilege in the school setting; performing gender and conforming to gender roles in a school community; and the process of coming out in a school community.

## **Literature Review**

### **Heteronormativity in the classroom**

Palkki (2015), basing his work on Kinsman (1987) describes heteronormativity as the assumption or default position that sexuality is heterosexuality. This assumption of the dominant heterosexuality plays out in various systems throughout schools. Bergonzi (2015) writes, “Schooling not only reflects dominant discourses about identities, but constitutes them. Systems of heteronormativity and heterosexism rely on myths and misconceptions surrounding gender-sexual diversity commonly found in schools. These views, when allowed to persist, create and

sustain hostile climates towards LGBT individuals and families” (p. 223). Rodriguez (2010) suggests that “heteronormativity is an institutionalized ideology that positions heterosexuality, heterosexual identity, and heterosexual practices as normal, natural, and universal” (p. 9). Rodriguez writes that in order for this hegemonic structure to continue to persist that it must continue to reproduce itself. In education this occurs at multiple levels through the multiple binaries that are encountered on a daily basis and that LGBTQ music educators must navigate. These binaries, male/female, teacher/student, right/wrong, good/bad, public/private, natural/unnatural, personal/professional, further restrain LGBTQ educators into a heteronormative society (Connell, 2015; Wilchins, 2004). Schools are a prime location for reproducing the hegemonic, heteronormative state of being and the ways in which classes are conducted: bathrooms, gender specific physical education classes and gender specific choirs.

Gay and lesbian teachers must somehow conform to these standards of heteronormativity. Connell (2015) writes, “the archetype of the ideal teacher is determined by heteronormativity: he or she should act, dress, speak, and self-present according to normative gender and sexual expectations” (p. 65). Conforming to these standards may look and feel different for every teacher, but for some teachers this may be consciously adjusting how one talks, what one wears, how they walk, and information they may or may not disclose to students, colleagues, administrators, or parents (Connell, 2015; Natale-Abramo, 2011). Natale-Abramo’s (2011) study examined how gay and lesbian music educators constructed their identity in and out of the classroom. Participants in Natale-Abramo’s study suggested that they felt like a “chameleon” by the constant state of changing and adapting to the surroundings. Connell’s (2015) study, which includes interviews with over 50 participants who identified as either gay, lesbian, or bisexual, as well as straight allies, suggested that many of the participants believed that teachers should

represent themselves as asexual, whether or not the teacher identified as LGBTQ or heterosexual. Connell (2015) uses the study of James Woods and Jay Lucas, *The Corporate Closet: The Professional Lives of Gay Men in America*, to discuss how many men consider the option of “playing straight” (p. 18) in order to succeed in the heteronormative cooperate workplace. While the corporate world may have begun to make changes to their policies in order to become more “gay-friendly,” Connell argues that the same cannot be said for the education world, that a hegemonic, heteronormative structure remains intact in the education profession.

### **Heterosexual privilege in the classroom**

Bergonzi’s (2009) landmark article tackles heterosexual privilege by stating, “Schools and music programs are not neutral when it comes to sexual orientation. Heterosexual students and teachers enjoy advantages over their LGBT counterparts regarding their professional environment classroom experiences, and visibility in instructional materials” (p.22). Heterosexual privilege can best be understood as being the “norm” of sexuality and the privileges that come with that norm. A basic example of heterosexual privilege is the ability for a heterosexual white male to put pictures of family and significant others on his desk. While a white gay male might be able to do this as well, it is likely that there will be a different thought process that occurs, possibly ridden with anxiety. Bergonzi (2009) weighs the differences between heterosexual teachers and students and their gay and lesbian counterparts and makes a solid case for heterosexual privilege. Garrett (2012) and Cavicchia (2010) discuss heterosexual privilege from a gay or lesbian’s student standpoint and the implications of a heteronormative classroom might have on a student who identifies as gay or lesbian.

Many believe that music educators build strong relationships with their students that extend beyond content knowledge through the emotional experiences of collective music

making. Music educators often work with music students and families for multiple years and during this time students and teachers may gain knowledge of each other's personal lives.

Members of a school music community may describe their relationship to the program as being part of a large musical family. Students may see their teacher as a confidant, and for some, as a mentor or responsible adult who takes on a somewhat parental role. Through this relationship with students, educators may share more personal details such as their home life, which may or may not include a significant other, pets, or children (Furman, 2004). However, for the gay or lesbian educator, this potential conversation of private life matters may cause anxiety (Bergonzi, 2009; Chamness & Endo, 2014; Connell, 2015; Ferfolja; 2007; Furman, 2004; Horvitz, 2011; Palkki, 2015; Taylor, 2010).

Bergonzi (2009) discusses the implications of a heteronormative curriculum with regards to the National Music Standard 9: "Understanding music in relation to history and culture" (p. 24). He discusses the way in which we may discuss the private life of Beethoven but perhaps not the private life of Leonard Bernstein. He breaks the discussion into "heterosexual norm" and the "homosexual dilemma" (p. 24), suggesting that we as educators encounter certain dilemmas as to what to include and what to exclude when educating students about composers and their personal lives, especially if they were gay or lesbian. Bergonzi notes that this would not be an issue if there had not been any gays or lesbians that contributed to the music that we teach in schools, but this is hardly the case. Bergonzi again connects these issues to students who identify as gay or lesbian and what it might mean for students who may be struggling to understand their place in this world, to be able to identify with a composer, or teacher, who may have gone through a similar struggle.

### **Performing and Conforming**

Connell (2015) writes of the complexities of performing gender or “gender expression” (p. 117), specifically in the classroom setting. She writes “to do gender correctly is to perform not only masculinity or femininity, but also heterosexuality” (p. 12). Historically and socially, gender and biological sex have been thought of as one in the same; however feminist theorists and queer theorists suggest that gender is far from the binary of male or female. Rather, they suggest that gender is fluid and along a continuum; it is not a static state of being (Butler, 2004; Connell, 2015). Ferfolja (2007) uses Judith Butler’s model of performativity to describe the various identities that a gay or lesbian teacher may need to adopt throughout the school day. In addition to performing gender, gay and lesbian teachers may also have considered performing heterosexuality as well. (Ferfolja, 2007). In the context of performing gender as a music educator there is an assumption that male teachers are strict, masculine, and authoritative. Female educators are often seen as nurturing, motherly, and soft-spoken (Connell, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

In Peter McLaren’s ethnography, *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*, McLaren (1999) discusses the various “states of interactions” he observes students adopting throughout the school day in order to conform to a standard of acceptance in the Catholic school culture. Throughout the book, McLaren describes the various rituals that students and teachers go through in order to “create” humans that will conform to the demands of society. McLaren categorizes four states of interactions: “the streetcorner state,” “the student state,” “the sanctity state,” and “the home state.” These different states describe the various ways in which students manipulate their identities in order to succeed in school and behave in what would be deemed “appropriate” according to the school’s cultural climate. Students in “the streetcorner state” are acting on their

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that this kind of gender performativity is not exclusive to gay and lesbian educators. This performativity can be seen with male elementary music teachers as well as secondary female band directors.

accord, with little to no fear about the consequences of their actions. During this state, students are themselves and are free to act on their own will; they are not in school. As students enter the school building, they enter “the student state.” During this state, “students realign and readjust their behavior” (p. 90). McLaren describes students during this state as being “generally quiet, well-mannered, predictable and obedient” (p. 91). Students are expected to act a certain way in school and if not, are punished by teachers and school officials in some fashion. When students enter “the sanctity state” they are in deep prayer. McLaren suggests that students in this state “are filled with a realization of something greater beyond themselves which cannot be explained in rational terms” (p. 92). In this moment students are releasing themselves of any sort of individuality so that they may say the daily prayer together with their peers as well as the teacher. Finally, McLaren describes “the home state” which resembles “the student state,” but the standards and expectations have been shifted towards the home. The main difference between “the student state” and “the home state” is that students have quick access to “the streetcorner state” if they need emotional release, which is not possible when they are at school. While McLaren’s (1999) book focuses on the rituals that students encounter and the above “states of interaction” describe the various ways students conform, I suggest that teachers may also adopt these various rituals in order to conform to society’s subjectivities of teachers.

Educators often adopt a “teacher-self” in the classroom that may be very different than the individual who is at home enjoying a family dinner, or at a social event. Teachers are expected to act and present a certain level of decorum in the school that is appropriate for students. Historically, educators have been held to the highest moral standard because of their daily interactions with young children and the belief that children are impressionable and malleable beings (Blount, 2005 & Graves, 2009). However, those teachers who identify as

lesbian or gay may have an additional layer of conforming that weaves with performing. Ferfolja (2007) discusses these subjectivities and the ways in which schools often “silence and marginalize those who do not conform to the dominant gender and (hetero)sexual discourses that operate in broader society” (p. 569—570).

### **Identity Formation and the Process of Coming Out**

When I initially began my research for this study, I alleged that identity formation and the process of coming out were two separate processes. However, after reading through previous research, I have realized that these two concepts are much more interwoven than I had initially believed. Connell (2015), Griffin (1991), and Palkki (2015) describe the process of “coming out” not as a singular event in one’s life, but an occurrence that happens on a daily basis, implicitly or explicitly, intentionally or unintentionally. LGBTQ educators often have to determine whether various situations are an appropriate place to reveal their sexual identity (Klein, Holtby, Cook, & Travers, 2014; Palkki, 2015). Both Griffin (1991) and Connell (2015) describe the various “techniques” that gay and lesbian educators employ to navigate their identities throughout the school day. Because the process of coming out is an ongoing process, and one that gays and lesbians are constantly analyzing situations for the possibility of coming out, there are different ways in which these educators “manage” their identity in and out of the classroom. Griffin (1991) writes of the various behaviors lesbian and gay music educators employ to either conceal or reveal their sexuality:

**Passing**-not actively challenging other people's presumptions about one's assumed heterosexuality;

**Covering**-censoring/hiding one's lesbian/gay subjectivity without trying to make others believe that one was a heterosexual;

**Implicitly**-out-teacher assumes that others know of his/her lesbian/gay activity but did not necessarily overtly state their sexual preference;

**Explicitly out**-teacher directly discloses his/her sexuality status (p. 194).

Using critical feminist theory and labeling theory, Griffin (1991) discusses the various ways in which gay and lesbian music educators negotiate their sexuality, but also confront the various ways in which society places labels on individuals who deviate from dominant cultural standards and expectations.

Connell (2015) navigates the various means of coming out through a process of identity formation that she coined as “Splitting” and “Knitting” (p. 58). She uses these terms to describe how gay and lesbian teachers navigate their personal and private lives within a school setting. According to Connell, a “splitter” is someone who draws a strict line between the personal and private life, that there is no crossover between the two. Connell’s research suggests that these individuals who adopt a “splitting” identity will never come out to their students, and will most likely not come out to their colleagues because they feel that discussing sexuality and their private lives, for any educator, in the workplace is inappropriate. However, Connell discusses that these individuals often feel torn, because they feel as though they have a responsibility to come out for those students who are in the process of identifying their own sexual orientation.

The other term that Connell uses when describing coming out and sexual identity is “knitters” (p. 82). She describes these individuals as feeling as though that they have a responsibility to be gay and lesbian role models to their colleagues, and maybe to their students if they so choose to come out to them. “Knitters,” according to Connell, are passionate about “bringing the two identities [public and private] together, regardless of the penalties or drawbacks” (p. 83). This “knitting” phenomenon coincides with LBGTQ rights activists to be “out and proud” (Connell, 2015; Klein, Holtby, Cook, & Travers, 2014), but can also be problematic for educators if students, colleagues, parents and administrators are not willing to accept the educator.

Based on the themes from previous research, the following research questions guided this study:

- How do gay and lesbian music educators adapt to a heteronormative profession in light of the cultural shift that is occurring surrounding the walls of K-12 schools?
- What considerations do gay and lesbian music educators make when deciding how to come out to faculty and/or students?

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design and Data Generation**

This comparative case study explores the individual experiences of two gay music educators. Because each individual is unique and no two people will experience the same emotions I chose a comparative case study as a means to understand the experiences of these individuals (Maxwell, 2013). The participants for this study were purposefully chosen, due to the sensitive nature of this topic. Both participants were friends of mine who previously disclosed their identities to me. While both participants are male and vocal teachers, both are at different career points, which allowed for more diverse responses. Due to the sensitivity of this topic pseudonyms and non-identifying features are used throughout this study to protect both participants.

Data generated with the participants took place over the course of two hour-long interviews, a thirty-minute follow-up interview, and weekly journal writings that each participant sent to me via email. Interviews were audio and video recorded so that I could transcribe both their words and facial expressions which might aid in the interpretation of the conversation. The journal entries and video recordings also served as a form of triangulation, so that I might be able to go back and double check what I heard or what I interpreted. Using these two data sources

added credibility to my interpretations and conclusions, based on the amount of data I had generated with the participants (Maxwell, 2013).

Initial interview questions were based on the research questions guiding the study but I also used research questions from the related literature. Questions for the second and follow-up interviews included questions that were pre-determined prior to the start of the study I developed additional questions pertaining to journal entries that I felt we needed to explore more either for clarification or because I felt that there was a potential for additional information. Because of the nature of the discussions, I allowed conversations to travel off the path of the pre-determined questions to allow for a deeper and richer understanding of the participant's lives.

### **Researcher Lens**

As a heterosexual, white, married female, I have wondered about my role in this research besides generating data with participants. I have many friends, some of whom are very close, who identify as gay or lesbian and who are also music teachers. We have never spoken in length or in detail with regards to their personal experiences of navigating their sexuality in and out of their classroom. Perhaps I didn't have the right tools or understanding to pursue those questions and now, being in graduate school, I have acquired a certain amount of understanding through readings and inquiry to start asking those questions.

My biggest question for myself has constantly been, "who am I to be asking these questions, interpreting these discussions and journal entries, and what right do I have to this information?" I am dealing with issues that to many, could be very sensitive or upsetting. In my pursuit to fully understand the lived experiences of gay and lesbian educators I immersed myself in reading studies that challenged me to think about being an educator who did not fit into the heterosexual norm. I began to become more empathetic to the needs of the gay and lesbian

population beyond what I had previously felt. However, I needed to keep this in check as I conducted interviews and analyzed the data to not confuse emotions and interpretation, so this was difficult at times. I have maintained a lengthy researcher journal that helped me sort through my feelings about what I was reading and what I was hearing. I also made sure that my interpretations of interviews were consistent with what the participants were feeling by asking them if what I was writing was in line with their personal thoughts. The participants are people, and while I am writing about them, I also feel as though I am writing to share their story in a way that may impact others.

Using my voice to share others' voices was an additional struggle of power that I dealt with. Nichols (2013) discusses this potential entanglement of power and voice in her narrative study. Nichols writes that in narrative research "power and control is shared with the participant and necessitates a restructuring of the research relationship" (p. 264). While the study that I have embarked on is a comparative case study, not a narrative study, I want to make sure that the words that I write were the same words that I heard during interviews and words that I read in the participants' journal entries. However, once the words are written down on the paper, personal interpretation is then handed over to each reader who, through their own life experiences, makes additional interpretations. This is one of the biases of qualitative research, but it is one that I faced head on and hope that others face as they read through the paper.

### **Description of Participants**

#### *Kyle*

Kyle, a quiet and observant young man, grew up in a southwest metropolitan city with both of his grandparents. His parents never married and his father does not live in the same state, but Kyle regularly visits his dad to visit that side of the family, which includes a half-brother and

half-sister. He is in contact with his mother, who has another son, a half-brother for Kyle, but the relationship is strained at times. Kyle and his grandparents have a loving and open relationship and his grandparents are very supportive of his pursuits to become a music educator.

Kyle has known since he was in high school that he wanted to be a music educator, but he took a non-traditional path to become a music educator. After high school he attended a community college to start the process towards becoming a music educator. Kyle also worked part-time at a chain coffee shop. While this was a start in the right direction, Kyle knew that his passion was not tending to customers' drink orders. After he completed his classes at the community college he transferred to a university where he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts. While at the university he was heavily involved in various choirs and developed an interest in early music and music theory. During this time, his love for singing in choir grew more than it had before and he was able to see himself teaching choir.

I always loved choir music. I loved the community of it, the structure it could offer. It was a place to sing obviously, but it was also a place to come together, make friends and talk and hang out. It opened some really great doors at a variety of different places in my life. And I think being a choir singer became a big part of my identity early on in high school. And even when I wasn't singing I saw myself as a choir singer, as a chorister. And I knew that I wanted to be a choir teacher some time so that is why I am back in school, to become a choir teacher.

After graduation, Kyle spent time working at a youth writing center as an ESL tutor, which he thoroughly enjoyed. During this time he decided that he wanted to begin to focus on his career path to make his dreams of becoming a choir teacher a reality. He enrolled in a master's program in music education to earn his teaching license and in the Spring of 2015, he completed his student teaching and accepted his first full time teaching position at an elementary school. Ironically, this school is in the same school district that he attended as a young child.

Growing up in an urban community and a diverse school, Kyle was comfortable coming into his sexuality. He was accepted into his social circle, first as bi-sexual, (although he never really had interest in girls) then as a gay teenager. During our discussions Kyle commented on how even though he saw himself as gay, he did not necessarily associate with other individuals who identified or presented themselves as gay. Kyle's social group was more interested in skateboarding, listening to punk music, and singing in choir. His perception of students who were gay reveal a sentiment that not all gay individuals identify with being a member of a "gay crowd": "I didn't feel a part of that community at the time. It was really *weird* and *gay* (emphasized those words and scrunched up his face). And it was all about being gay and I was like 'I am gay' but that isn't how I saw myself." He did not attend the school's Gay Straight Alliance group because he did not feel as though he needed that support because his support came from his friends and family members. In our discussions, Kyle used the term "internalized homophobia" to describe some of his initial feelings towards other gay students. He described the understanding that he was gay, and other students were gay, but did not want to associate with them. His speculations regarding internalized homophobia reflect how society often presents gay individuals in media, often overtly feminine, flamboyant, and boisterous. Kyle's demeanor does not represent these stereotypical traits and thus he did not see himself as a member of the overall gay population. As Kyle began to immerse himself into his collegiate music studies, he began to form relationships with other gay men and used these relationships as a way to navigate the social complexities of being gay.

### ***Corey***

Corey, a tall and energetic young man, also grew up in a southwest city. As an elementary general music teacher and a member of several performing choirs, Corey maintains a

very busy schedule. During the summer of 2015 Corey moved to a larger metropolitan city on the East Coast to be with his boyfriend and to seek out additional performance opportunities that might be more readily available.

Corey's childhood was spent with his mother and his sister as his parents divorced when he was still relatively young. Corey has two younger half-brothers, whom he adores, but they live with his father in a different state, so he does not get to see them as much as he would like. His relationship with his mother has been open and supportive, while the relationship with his father has had times of struggle, where he thought he had his father's support, but then an incident would occur and the two of them might go months without speaking. Corey takes this strained relationship in stride, focusing on the more positive interactions he has had with his father.

Corey recalled that even from a young age he felt different from other boys. While he was in dance class the boys from his school would be next door in a karate class. Boys would taunt and tease him and call him "gay" but he didn't understand what that meant. He discussed a time when he found a parenting book that his mother had called "Raising the Sensitive Son," which to him reflected on his nature as a less than stereotypical boy.

Corey's love for music began in high school, when he joined the choir his sophomore year. It was during this year and this particular experience that shaped his future as a singer and as a music educator.

So I started singing year in choir my sophomore year in high school and I went to a regional choir festival and during the warm ups of that first night the, the visceral reaction I had of standing in this room with a hundred other kids making these sounds, like singing like an open chord. And having, just feeling that and then working with the clinician all weekend and seeing how he did this magical choral things, it just blew my mind and that's when I knew that I wanted to be a conductor, that I wanted to be a music teacher.

This experience had a profound impact on Corey. However, at the same time, he found himself becoming involved with a very conservative, evangelical church. At one point, Corey considered abandoning his love for music to pursue a career in the church. Corey shared during our discussions that as he started to become more aware of his gay identity, his affiliation with the church became more of a struggle due to the church's stance on homosexuality. Early in college Corey was living a dual life of being a devoted follower of the church, but also testing the waters of his gay identity by being involved in his first same-sex relationship. This struggle, and his awareness of the church's stance, encouraged him to divorce himself from his relationships with the church.

I had been going back to church and doing this double life thing and I had been trying really hard to reconcile these two parts of me. This old self who identified with this church and this new self who identified as being a homosexual and being with someone that I cared about who also happened to be a man. And there was just finally a time when I stopped driving home to go this church where I was like I can't figure out how to make these two worlds coexist.

During his first year of college he also started grow into his gay identity, but somewhat reluctantly. His first encounter with a gay friend included Corey stating that he was not gay, and as Corey discussed he "took a comfortable stop in bi-town." However, through the encouragement and various social setups by friends, he found himself with a boyfriend. It was by an accidental encounter with his mother and his boyfriend that Corey was outed as a gay man, but Corey received nothing but love and support from his mother.

So the first real coming out thing I had was with my mom. And ummm...and I was having a performance that day, and I had been dating him for six or seven months. We started dating that January and that summer we moved in together with like three or four other people. I had my room, he had his own master bedroom and like all of my stuff was in my bedroom but I was always in his. But this one morning I had a performance later that day and mom decided to just pop by, to say hi, 'cause she was up there and wanted to see if I wanted to get lunch.

So she knocks on the door and he answers the door and of course they have never met before and she is like “Hello I’m just looking for Corey, I’m his mom.” And he goes “Hh, hello,” and then he said it was very apparent from that point on because I was in his shower, showering, and so he comes in to the bathroom and goes “Corey there’s a lady here for you.” And I’m like “ok...what does she look like?” And he is like “Well your height, brown hair.” And at that moment I was like...oh shit. oh my god, my mom’s here. What do I do? Do I put on his clothes and pretend I was working on the faucet? Do I jump out the window and go around the house? I don’t know what to do right now. So I just bit the bullet and went out and was like “Hey mom, cat’s out of the bag!” (sheepishly) This is verbatim. “This is my boyfriend. I’m gay.” And she was like...”Oh, ok, well I already knew”... And then I was like “Oh, ok, do you wanna go to lunch or something?” And she was like...”Yeah...where do you wanna go” and it was like awkward, what do we do?! And I was like “Ok, just let me get my shoes,” and I was shaking like crazy! And she was like honey, “I will just let you go and when you are ready just call me for lunch, ok!?” (laughing) And I was like “Ok that sounds good.” (laughing) So that was my first coming out experience. And then later when we met up and she was like “Honey, I have always kinda known and it doesn’t change anything. I have always kind of known and I still love you.”

## Findings

Because this is a qualitative study and focuses on two individuals, the findings cannot be generalized to the larger population of gays and lesbians, rather, the findings represent two unique experiences of gay men who are educators. I am hopeful that these findings will promote some additional thought and conversation among those in the profession and otherwise. As described below, while these men have had unique experiences, many of their experiences are similar and could be used for comparison in other studies as well. Three themes emerged from the data generation and analysis process: 1.) Navigating multiple identities in and out of the classroom; 2.) Importance of being a role model or mentor to students who identify as LGBTQ; and 3.) Partner Privilege. These themes permeated throughout my conversations with Corey and Kyle and, while these were not the only topics discussed, these themes were consistently discussed.

### **Navigating multiple identities in and out of the classroom**

Both Corey and Kyle agreed during our separate conversations that music educators, and educators in general, rely on multiple identities that allow them to navigate through the many structures of a school setting. Like McLaren's students in his book *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*, educators must adopt multiple identities that will vary throughout the school day, often dependent on where the educator is located, with whom the educator is working, and the age of the students. While this is commonplace for many educators, gay and lesbian educators must confront an additional layer: their gay or lesbian identity and whether or not it should have a place in the classroom.

This additional layer of identity is shaped by how society views gays and lesbians but also the moral grounds in which educators are held. Griffin (1991) used contemporary labeling theory to describe "how a group responds to being labeled" (p. 189). Using this theory in the context of Corey and Kyle allows us to better understand some of the thought processes they experienced as they deal with the multiple identities they encounter throughout the school day and how the social construction of gay being labeled as deviant may have inhibited them from coming out to their students. The process of coming out is embedded into each daily ritual that Kyle and Corey encountered. The phrase "hetero until proven otherwise" (used by Kyle several times in our conversations) is apparent in the way in which Kyle and Corey moved about their day. While straight teachers do not need to concern themselves with family pictures on their desks or discussing weekend activities, these conversations have the ability to possibly provoke additional questioning from colleagues and students. With these considerations, Kyle and Corey constantly navigate their identity through daily decisions on whether or not they should implicitly or explicitly come out (Palkki, 2015).

Kyle and I discussed the various identities that he adopts throughout the school day, from the moment he wakes up to the moment he leaves school. For Kyle, he wakes up as “teacher Kyle” and remains “teacher Kyle” throughout day. Kyle discussed how, in his situation as a student teacher, he did not feel compelled to go out of his way to divulge personal relationships with students nor other faculty members. Even in the teacher’s lounge Kyle often remained quiet, observing conversations and trying to learn as a much as possible but also avoiding any conversations that might out him as gay.

The person I wake up [as] Monday morning is teacher Kyle. And I wake up and I play my NPR and I prepare myself to be teacher Kyle. And if I were to go out with my choir friends on a Friday evening, for example, I wouldn't be the same Kyle at that point. I would probably would play different music. I would have different conversations to prepare myself to be with those friends versus students and teaching colleagues. I guess...a ritual is a bizarre term to use, but I think that there are different rituals and preparations for teacher Kyle versus choir Kyle versus weekend Kyle.

Corey’s described his various identities in a similar fashion as Kyle; however, he was out to most of his colleagues and administrators. Because he had been teaching at the school for three years, he had developed trusting and safe relationships with fellow faculty members. Corey described that his teacher identity also fluctuated depending on the situation.

I have a different teacher demeanor I think. Well...with like group instruction I think I am different. But when I am one on one with kids I am more like myself. Teacher Corey happens when I open the door after they knock on it. When I walk out into the hallway I remind them to stand in straight line etc. Teacher Corey comes up. Umm...but then after that it is just normal Corey. I still make Corey jokes with my teacher friends or in the teacher's lounge.

Even though Corey was out to colleagues he struggled with the idea of coming out to students. During our conversations he discussed the age of the students that he worked with and that disclosing his sexuality to the students of this age (K-5) was not appropriate. He was

concerned that they would not comprehend what he was talking about, how their parents might interpret it, but also what the value of it was in the music classroom.

They are so little, so young and it is like scary that they will probably go home and say, tell their parents. Not so much that it will come back to me but whatever information that they will get at that point will come from their parents. There isn't really that opportunity to do that at the level that I teach at now...it's not the right place. I still don't feel right about it because I am taking music time to talk about my personal life, so I don't really feel like is something I should take time to do.

Corey's sentiments regarding the appropriateness of these discussions resonates with the "Splitters" identified in Connell's study. The participants whom she identified as "Splitters" suggested that personal information, regardless of sexuality, should be avoided in the classroom. Additionally, concerns about disclosing personal information, as well as sexuality and the "appropriateness" of those conversations was also a theme that was apparent not only in Connell's study but additional studies as well (Furman, 2012; Hooker, 2010; Rudoe, 2012). While the "Splitters" in Connell's study remained completely in the closet, Corey has come out to his colleagues though conversations about weekend activities. However, he has never explicitly stated that he is gay.

Kyle discussed that while student teaching, he did not feel that it was his place to explicitly come out to students; however, through conversation he did come out to his mentor teacher. Kyle not explicitly state "I am gay," but through casual conversations Kyle hinted that he had an ex-boyfriend.

So we were talking about college and dating and I mentioned an ex-boyfriend as a detail. And I may have mentioned gay bars and gay friends. And I think I had very intentionally included gay details because I do think that's a very important part of who I am.

In this moment Kyle was not particularly concerned about coming out to his mentor teacher; he knew of his mentor teacher before working with him and he knew they both had

mutual friends were also gay. So for this particular situation, coming out was a non-issue for Kyle. However, Kyle did consider how he might navigate this in the future when he is teaching full time and how he may need to compromise his gay identity to secure a job.

For the past two years in school especially, but like the past five years I have prepared myself to be as embracing of myself as the gay person as much as possible and the fact that I might actually compromise that for a job is really concerning. I know that my lifestyle might not be endorsed by that [school's] set of values.

That goes back to the school that I interviewed at on Monday. I'm wondering if weekend Kyle would be compromised by taking this job because they strive to be so virtuous. I wonder if my activities on Friday through Sunday would be out of line with what they hope their teachers to exemplify outside of school.

This comment came shortly after Kyle interviewed for a job that had very specific “moral virtues” that the school upheld. Indeed, teachers and schools have often been held to a higher moral standard that suggest that schools and school employees are asexual (Connell, 2015), when in fact, schools promote the hegemonic structure of heterosexuality. When I asked Kyle if he were offered the job, would he take it, he was unsure. He discussed how he might be able to take the job and just “deal” with it for at least a year, but that it would not be a long-term job. Kyle’s main concern was not so much about his identity at school, where he felt he was able to manage his identity more, but rather what happened outside of school and how his gay identity might “escape” him more on a weekend. Kyle shared with me a moment that he encountered while at a local establishment:

I went out after the concert on Friday and I saw a student-teacher friend there and saw a few others were there and it was all people I was comfortable with. And I walked in, and the conversation I was having beforehand was really sassy and loud and outgoing and flamboyant. And low and behold there is a parent of a senior sitting there from my school and he was like “[Mr. Kyle] good to see you,” and I was like Oh my god, he is going to see me not as this nice, gray pants, black shirt wearing t-shirt guy. He is going to see me as whoever I am not outside of school. And nothing happened, but for 5 seconds I panicked and I thought how is

this going to affect me in the next day. How he perceives [me]. Nothing happened, which was nice.

This fear of being outed can cause real anxiety for many gay and lesbian educators.

Furman (2012) discusses this fear that one of her participants experienced as a high school band director. The fear of being outed by others and the impact that being “discovered” can be so high that it causes gay and lesbian teachers to leave the profession (Connell, 2015).

### **“I want to be a Role Model”**

Both Kyle and Corey discussed at length how important it is for them to develop some sort of role model and/or mentor identity for their students. Neither Corey nor Kyle recall having a role model or mentor during their K-12 education and higher education experiences to help them navigate through their own coming out experiences as young gay men. Don Taylor’s 2016 study partnered established gay and lesbian educators with gay and lesbian teacher candidates as means to facilitate additional conversations and mentoring that may not occur if the teacher candidates were paired with a heterosexual teacher. Taylor’s study suggests that this partnership can have profound effects on the mentors and mentees, as well as other individuals involved in the teacher candidates’ experiences. Both Corey and Kyle may have benefitted from this kind of mentorship during their pre-service teaching as well as their current placements. Corey and Kyle both felt that they had some sort of responsibility or obligation as a gay man to show and share with students that it is possible to be “normal, happy, and gay.”

I feel like I have a huge responsibility as a gay man to be the best role model and best example of what a happy healthy successful gay man could be. I do think that although that it is good that homosexuality is becoming more commonplace in mainstream culture, I think there are unhealthy stereotypes we have to face. And I think that people, especially teachers, who are gay, have some kind of responsibility that we are more than the things that you see on TV.

The “out and proud” mentality resonates with the Pride/Gay rights movement that began in the late 1960’s (Connell, 2015) and persists today. The ethos of the LGBTQ movement suggests that LGBTQ individuals should not stay in the closet, rather they should celebrate and be celebrated for who they are. However, this can be a tricky situation in the school community. “Out and proud” often celebrates the stereotyped gay or lesbian and the queer aesthetic: a suggestively flamboyant lifestyle that includes: “leather daddies to drag queens to bears to gym bunnies to dandies...and lipstick lesbians, bull dykes, and sapphic sisters in tuxedos, top hats and monocles” (Davis, 2013). In order to “normalize” the LGBTQ world, gays and lesbians need to adapt the heteronormative version of what normal is: middle class, white and partnered. Both Kyle and Corey commented they indeed want to be that ideal to their students. They are both white, middle class, and while Corey is currently partnered while Kyle has aspirations to eventually be married.

Let's say I got a job in a middle school or a high school, I think it would be neat, in theory, of myself and some same-sex partner...to show some sort of homonormativity, I guess. To show that we can be productive, successful people, and still be gay and not have it be some sort of weird marginalized thing.

Both Kyle and Corey discussed multiple times how important it was for them to show their students, straight and otherwise, that gay men could be successful and happy. They both feel compelled to start breaking stereotypes in and out of the classroom in their schools by creating safe spaces for their students where individuality is celebrated and accepted (Caldwell & Palkki, 2015). Corey shared a story regarding how he handled a potentially complicated situation with a student:

I have a student who could very likely grow up to be gay and has acted in certain ways that made the other children label him that way. We will call him Pablo. He came to class one day with a purse, I guess, that he had made out of duct tape, black duct tape and there was pink duct tape too. So he made this purse thing that he was wearing and I thought it was super cool and I immediately heard the boys

making fun of him, "Oh Pablo, nice purse," and Pablo said, "It's not a purse it is a just a bag," and I immediately complimented him on it and told him that I thought it was cool that he made it. I didn't shame the other students for making fun of him, but I definitely told them that they needed to keep their negative comments to themselves.

Kyle shared with me an interaction that he initially brushed off as being insignificant, but later in a journal article, reflected on how the conversation made him feel good that the student found him approachable enough to discuss with him that he was a transgender student. Kyle was not explicitly out to his student, but did have a Human Rights Equality sticker on his water bottle.

Today one of the students from one of the mixed ensembles at my school for student teaching came up to ask me if I was going to be at the Gay Pride festivities this weekend. . . .The Monday after Pride I asked him if he made it out, and he mentioned that he did and that he was a part of a float for a transgender group. So I think it's really great that he felt comfortable enough with me to be open about that.

Kyle and Corey shared with me that they hope that these moments will help their students in the future as they are navigating their own sexuality. For Corey, it is his hope that Pablo will be able to reflect back, perhaps during a time where he is struggling, and remember his music teacher as being supportive of him. Kyle hopes that his student will continue to seek out support from other adults as well. Both teachers believe that their interest in the student, and not the sexuality, is what will make the biggest impact on the student in the future.

### **Partner Privilege**

When disclosing their sexuality to their colleagues, both Kyle and Corey used their partners, or ex-partners as a way to come out. Palkki (2015) describes this as "partner privilege" in which "gay and lesbian teachers in monogamous relationships may benefit simply by taking part in this socially accepted (and heteronormative) tradition" (p. 22). Connell (2015) also describes this vehicle for coming out that the participants in her study often employed as a means

to seem more “normal” and accepted into the heteronormative sphere. Indeed Butler (2004) discusses in her book, *Undoing Gender*, the ways in which gays and lesbians are legitimizing heteronormativity by being partnered or desiring marriage. Connell (2015) describes that even the basic tradition of wearing a wedding ring allowed for participants to ease their sexuality into their conversations more easily. Being single and gay can raise all kinds of questions, and it seems that in Connell’s research, that having a partner was the easiest way for people to come out.

So too, this partner privilege was the stepping stone for both Kyle and Corey when coming out to their colleagues. While neither made announcements about their boyfriends, both would “casually” mention their significant others during conversation and allow their colleagues to process that information on their own. Corey shared with me how he used partner privilege as a means of coming out to his colleagues.

I believe they all know because I have casually talked about my boyfriend. I just sorta dropped that. I didn't do it at first. I was single when I first started working there and it wouldn't have come up in conversation anyway. But I think the longer I was there the more comfortable I was with those people I could answer, what did you do this weekend or why do you look so sad today (laughing). I just kinda dropped that and let them handle it.

Many of these sentiments are mentioned in the collective memoirs of LGBTQ educators, *Queer Voices from the Classroom* (Endo & Miller, 2014). One author reflected in depth on the ways in which her whole life has been spent becoming and being “normal” and how there was no reason to announce that she had a girlfriend. “Unless it comes up, I don’t see the need to mention that I have a girlfriend. If I were dating a man, I wouldn’t feel the need to interrupt the conversation and blurt out, ‘I am a heterosexual!’ So why do the same because it is opposite? After all, it’s about normalizing my life, not announcing it” (p. 117).

Partner privilege is not just a means for coming out, even though having a partner provides a vehicle for the conversation, but partner privilege, as Palkki (2015) describes, is a way for gays and lesbians to adapt to a heteronormative culture. This can include having pictures of families and partners on desks, discussing weekend plans, or even bringing a partner to a school function. However, all of these symbols of normalcy can often be wrought with additional feelings of fear, in case the topic is brought up and the teacher is not partnered at the moment. In this moment, gay and lesbian teachers need to make decisions about whether or not they use gender neutral language or avoid discussing partners, or lack thereof altogether. Bergonzi (2009) discusses these struggles in his article, "Sexual Orientation in Music Education: Continuing a Tradition." He describes how LGBTQ teachers have additional considerations of possible personal and professional ramifications if they so choose to disclose their sexuality through partner privilege.

Like Palkki (2015) discussed in his findings regarding partner privilege, so too, I must mention here that there has been little research done on this phenomenon of 'partner privilege.' Collected memoirs that I have read and conversations with both Kyle and Corey suggest that this is the easiest and smoothest way for gay and lesbians to come out to faculty, colleagues and sometimes students. Having a partner, both in gay and straight relationships is much more appealing, less questionable, and more "normal" than to be alone. For gays and lesbians, trying to be as "normal" is often part of their daily routine and it seems that having a partner aids in this effort.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

With the recent passing of the Supreme Court of the United States ruling of legalizing same-sex marriages nation-wide (June, 2015), one might think that we are now headed in the right direction for LGBTQ educators and their ability to be out and proud in and out of the classrooms. However, this ruling is one small step in the right direction. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, only twenty-two states offer anti-discriminatory laws on sexual orientation and gender identity (ACLU, 2015). Additionally, only nineteen states have passed anti-bullying laws to protect students and staff (GLSEN, 2015). So while same-sex couples will be recognized in every state as married, it is still possible in many states to be fired from the job for being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. This was a fear that Kyle commented on throughout our conversations and was an additional concern for him as he entered the profession. In fact, Kyle does not intend to stay in his home state for this very reason. He feels that the fear of coming out and possibly losing his job will cause too much anxiety, and is not something that he wants to deal with for longer than five years.

When considering both Kyle's and Corey's experiences in and out of the classroom, it can be argued that they have had relatively positive experiences being gay in the music education field. Both have relatively positive experiences growing up and coming out to their parents as well as when they have shared their sexuality with their colleagues. Both Kyle and Corey acknowledge this as something that is not quite the norm for the general gay population and that they are both quite lucky to have had positive encounters. They also both acknowledged that if

the time comes when they are not accepted as a gay person that they will be devastated and perhaps “reality will truly hit.”<sup>2</sup>

It seems that navigating multiple identities, gay/straight, “teacher-Kyle”/ “non-teacher-Kyle”, colleague/student, is the hardest and most frustrating for Kyle. Throughout the day, Kyle must consider who he is speaking with and in what context and in what space. He dreams of being an openly gay educator who is married, but we did not discuss whether or not he would come out to his students and colleagues if he were not partnered. Kyle has used partner privilege (even though it was about an ex-boyfriend) to disclose his sexuality to his mentor in his student-teaching placement.

Kyle’s concerns about whether or not his weekend activities align with a school’s expectations are a real concern for all educators, but even more so for gay educators. Being seen at a gay bar or out with a partner, or even at a community event such as a Pride Festival may have dire consequences in the school environment. The double life that gay and lesbian teachers live, closeted at work and out in their “private” lives may not complement each other if colleagues and students discover the teacher’s sexuality.

Despite being out to his colleagues, Corey remained unsure about his responsibility to come out to his students. While he acknowledged the importance of being a strong role model for older students, he believed that bringing his sexuality into the elementary classroom was neither necessary nor appropriate. Corey felt that too many things could potentially go wrong if he came out to his young students and that the negative might overpower the positive effects. His concerns were not so much about the students’ reactions, but rather what the parents might say to

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<sup>2</sup> In the fall of 2015, Kyle started his first teaching job and was consistently verbally abused by students. He approached the administration regarding the pejorative words, but received little support. He shared with me that he wasn’t sure how to handle the stress emotionally or physically at school by being called a ‘fag’ by his students.

their children as well as any commentary to the administrators about Corey's sexuality. Despite this duality of be out to administrators and not to his students, Corey facilitated a safe space for all of his students and defended those who were picked on for being gay (Caldwell & Palkki, 2015). While not being explicitly out to his students, this small effort could have a meaningful impact on his students in the future.

Both Kyle and Corey have big dreams of being role models to students, both who identify as LGBTQ, but also to all students. They would like to show that it is possible for gay men to be happy, healthy, productive and successful in life. However, this idea of "normal" is coming from an extremely heteronormative ideal that has been put into place by society. According to Kyle, the "ideal" American is as follows:

Because American heteros are like nice, pretty, 30-year-old white people. And just make that work for the gay world and instead of a guy and a girl we have two guys. . . who are 30-year-old, middle class white people. Like there was an Amazon commercial. There were two ladies at the beach and their husbands were at the bar getting cocktails. . .the portrait that this commercial was painting was this nice middle class America.

The struggle to be gay, out, and "normal" is very real and contributes to the navigation of a heterosexual world through the eyes and body of a gay or lesbian. Both Kyle and Corey have high hopes for themselves as gay men who are music educators, but they also struggle with societal and personal expectations of exactly what it means to be "out and proud" and at the same time "normal." While there are many societal shifts occurring outside the school walls, especially with the legalization of same-sex marriages, many traditional heteronormative ideals persist within the confines of the school walls. As educators, as LGBTQ and straight, it might be wise for us to consider how our actions and words may be affecting all who we encounter and how we might consider these insignificant practices to be potentially significant not only to our students but also to our colleagues.

S.MINETTE

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