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Negotiating Curricular Boundaries And Sexual Orientation: The Lived Experiences Of Gay Secondary Teachers In West Central Florida

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Negotiating Curricular Boundaries And Sexual Orientation:
The Lived Experiences Of Gay Secondary Teachers In West Central Florida

by

James B. Mayo, Jr.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Secondary Education
College of Education
University of South Florida

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secondary education, sexual orientation, teacher education

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ABSTRACT

There is little known about the daily lives of gay teachers at school. Studies have been conducted in this area, but the wide range of individual life experiences makes it difficult to define “the” gay teacher experience. Gay teachers’ geographic location, gender, age, and race, are a few of those factors that will have a direct influence upon their lives. Therefore, I believe more focused, regional or case studies will yield better understandings of the lives that gay teachers lead at school.

Until now, no other study had investigated the lives of gay teachers in West Central Florida. I decided to focus this study on male teachers who teach in secondary schools because I believe the lesbian experience at school differs to such a degree to warrant a separate study for them. I also believe that secondary teachers must confront controversial issues that are connected to the mandated curriculum and a more mature student audience that will be more apt to ask questions about those issues to a far greater extent than elementary school students.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of gay male teachers in West Central Florida and uncover their understandings of various key issues: the perceived impact of their sexual orientation on curricular decision-making, the perceived impact of their sexual orientation on classroom management, and their understandings of the perceived barriers to addressing homophobic language and coming out at school. After six months of conducting personal interviews, engaging in telephone conversations, and exchanging electronic mail messages with the seven participants in this study, my analysis of the data resulted in the emergence of ten themes: (1) gay-themed materials in the classroom, (2) interactions with students perceived to be gay, (3) separation of informants' private lives from life at school, (4) informants' perceptions of proper conduct by a gay male teacher, (5) challenges and problems faced by the informants at school, (6) informants' understandings of how students use homophobic language, (7) informants' use of humor in the classroom, (8) informants' relationships and interactions with colleagues at school, (9) informants' perceptions of the acceptance of gay male teachers, and (10) informants' perceived special talents of gay male teachers.

In the end, all seven informants shared their unique stories, but demonstrated some commonalities as well. All of them addressed gay-themed issues when they came up in class, all addressed homophobic language to some degree, and, with the exception of one individual, most agreed that it was best for gay male teachers to remain closeted at work, even if they personally wished that it could be different. I believe the one dissenting voice offers hope that at some time in the near future, gay male teachers will be able to be out at school despite the negative stereotypes that surround them. Further, the one dissenter demonstrated his ability to help all students better understand diversity, and his

presence increases the possibility that someday teachers, administrators, and students will all be more open to accept the existence of and the performance of multiple forms of masculinity at school.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Modern day teachers face a wide range of challenges in their classrooms. In addition to teaching content, they must manage behaviors, meet deadlines, and attend to the needs of all stakeholders within the community, while simultaneously tackling the demands of standardized testing. For those teachers who are gay or perceived to be gay by their students and/or colleagues, these challenges take on new meaning. Not only must these teachers address the challenges noted above, but often they must also contend with various stereotypes and misconceptions, which may alter their teaching behaviors in the classroom in terms of the content they teach and the effectiveness of their classroom management procedures. Chief among these stereotypes is that gay teachers wish to recruit students to their “team” and push the gay agenda in the classroom. If gay teachers perceive that their administrators, colleagues, and/or students’ parents believe these stereotypes, they might fail to teach certain content on gay themes even if such content is appropriate for a given topic. This may result in an incomplete education for their students or, at minimum, an education that lacks nuance, completeness, and complexity.

In addition, many people still hold onto the idea that gay people, especially men, are child molesters (Khayatt, 1997; Kissen, 1996; Renesenbrink, 1996; Rofes, 1989). In

today's society, most teachers, male and female, gay and straight alike, understand that it is unwise to be alone in a classroom with a student for any reason, but the added pressure on gay male teachers to adhere to this unspoken rule often leaks into other areas of classroom interaction. In fact, gay teachers report that they often suffer strained relationships with students because of their efforts to remain at arms length in order to avoid any speculation that they might be attracted to their students (Sanlo, 1999). The distance created may affect not only teacher/student relationships, but could potentially affect a student's academic performance. If the teacher is unwilling to offer one-on-one help where it is needed most because he fears how others might perceive such interaction, a student's grade could suffer. In many cases, gay teachers must also decide whether or not to be open about their sexual orientation to students and colleagues (Khayatt, 1997; Renesenbrink, 1996; Sanlo, 1999) and to what degree of openness is comfortable for the faculty and students involved (Griffin, 1992). Because this issue of "degree of openness" is so prevalent, many gay teachers expend a significant amount of energy hoping to be perceived by students and colleagues as heterosexual. Even if this may have serious psychological ramifications for gay teachers and possibly lead to early burnout, the consequences gay teachers fear for being perceived as gay at school are often even more severe and threatening to them (Griffin, 1992). Indeed, all of these issues play out on a daily basis against the backdrop of gay teachers' fears about being fired from their jobs because many school districts across the country have non-discrimination policies that do not include sexual orientation. Such is the case in Florida, and especially in the rural communities found in the west central region of the state.

Theoretical Framework

The study was framed within an interpretivist view of the world. Society, from this perspective, cannot exist outside of human understandings of it, and social life is based on socially constructed meaning systems. Therefore, facts are fluid, partial, and subjective depending upon people's understanding of their lived experiences. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) The framework within which this study fell was also informed by the transformative-emancipatory paradigm in that the teachers' diversity described in this study, their homosexuality, was portrayed as a "dimension of human difference and not a defect" (Mertens, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 144). The teachers selected for this study discussed their lived experiences at school, which were based upon their personal perceptions and understandings. This discussion offered these gay teachers an opportunity to reflect upon their curricular and management decisions and may empower them to take future actions in terms of introducing additional gay-themed materials to students, openly confronting homophobic colleagues and parents, or participating in school-wide events that promote diversity in its many forms, including sexual orientation. Therefore, *transformation* is a plausible outcome for the participants in this study.

Purpose of Study & Rationale

To date, little is known about the day-to-day, lived experiences of gay teachers in the classroom. A few studies have been conducted in this area (Griffin, 1992; Khayatt, 1997; King, 1998; Kissen, 1996; Renesenbrink, 1996; Rofes, 1989; Sanlo, 1999); however some are dated and none of them speak directly to the circumstances faced by gay teachers in West Central Florida. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to highlight the

lived experiences of gay male teachers in this region who teach in secondary schools, grades 6-12. Van Manen (1990) defines a *lived experience* as one that “involves our immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life: a reflexive or self-given awareness which is, as awareness, unaware of itself” (p. 35). It is the self-awareness of an experience while it is actually happening akin to feeling the eyes of an audience upon you as you stand before them. In this study, I invited gay male teachers in this area to reflect upon and recount various classroom and related life experiences in their own words and on their own terms.

Because gay teachers are not protected by an anti-discrimination clause in this area of the country and could face dismissal from a teaching position because they are gay, it was assumed that most of them kept their sexual identities a secret at work. This study investigated the degree to which this assumption held true from the perspective of the participants. In fact, I investigated whether or not gay teachers participated in “covering” as stated in the literature, and if they did, I questioned if part of the “hiding” gay male teachers performed included withholding certain historical information or avoiding various current events issues or discussions in class.

Qualitative Research Questions

The following qualitative research questions were addressed:

1. How do gay male teachers describe the role their sexual orientation plays in their classroom decision-making about content?
2. How do gay male teachers describe the effect of their sexual orientation on classroom management decisions?

3. What barriers do gay male teachers perceive that prevent them from addressing anti-gay or homophobic language uttered by their students or colleagues?
4. What barriers do gay male teachers perceive that prevent them from revealing their sexual orientation to their colleagues and students at school?

Significance of the Study

Until now, no study had investigated the lived experiences of gay, male teachers in the school districts of West Central Florida. It revealed the unique challenges faced by sexual minorities who work in an oftentimes-hostile environment on a daily basis. In addition, this study may have shed some light on the experiences of gay teachers who work in similar communities throughout the state of Florida. As a result of this study, policy makers throughout the West Central Florida region, and the state at large, must reconsider their rationale for endorsing the limited and prejudicial non-discrimination policies currently in place in their school districts. Equally important, the gay teachers in the West Central area of Florida who were unable to speak out and be a participant in this study now have access to the experiences of other gay teachers who live in their area. This access may empower them to speak out for change at their individual school sites.

This study depended primarily upon interpretive qualitative methods, and was significant from a research perspective for at least two reasons. First, it was significant because it attempted to fill one of the many gaps in the literature. The problems, issues, and triumphs experienced by gay male teachers and their daily negotiations is so little known that I could not articulate any viable, research-based hypotheses based on prior work. This exploratory study attempted to enhance the literature by addressing the

particular nuanced experiences of gay male teachers living and teaching in West Central Florida so that other researchers will not have to wrestle with that shortcoming. Second, in an attempt to create a companion piece for other studies of gay teachers in Florida, I hope that future researchers will use this study, and other regional studies like it, to create a coherent and cogent research agenda centered on the issues discussed in this study.

Definition of Terms

Ally. An ally is a person who identifies and is perceived as heterosexual but is a friend to those who identify as homosexual. Often an ally is an integral part of a gay person's support network at school or at work.

Coming Out. This term means revealing one's sexual orientation to family, friends and/or colleagues. For many people, coming out is an ongoing process because most people in society assume that everyone they meet is heterosexual. Several different levels of openness are possible. A person may be open about his/her sexuality among friends, for example, but not with family or at work.

Covering. This term refers to the actions taken by a gay person who censors his/her language in order to mask his/her sexual identity. Gay people who engage in "covering" behaviors do not want to be known as homosexual, but they do not overtly lie about their sexuality.

Heteronormativity. This term refers to the assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that, in fact, being heterosexual is “normal” within this society.

Heterosexism. This term refers to bias and discrimination regarding sexual orientation. It denotes prejudice against bisexual and homosexual people in the same way that racism refers to prejudice against people of color.

Homophobia. Prejudice, discrimination, harassment, or acts of violence against sexual minorities, including gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered persons, evidenced in a deep-seated fear or hatred of those love and sexually desire those of the same sex (Sears and Williams, 1997).

In The Closet. This term means that a person’s sexual orientation remains purposefully hidden from family, friends, and/or colleagues. Many of the informants for this study may be “in the closet” at work given the lack of legal protection they possess. The term “closeted” has the same meaning.

Out. This term generally refers to a gay person who is open about his or her sexual identity. In certain special circumstances, a heterosexual may refer to himself as “out” if he interacts with the gay community to a high degree.

Passing. This term refers to the actions taken by a gay person who wants to be known and seen by others as a heterosexual. In order to accomplish this feat, one who “passes”

may create mythical partners of the opposite sex and act according to societal norms: “passing” men will display overtly masculine behaviors and “passing” women may choose to display overtly feminine behaviors.

Questioning. This term refers to individuals who are unsure about their sexual identity. Most often associated with adolescents who are on the cusp of sexual maturity, this term also refers to adults who may choose to perform heterosexual acts in order to conform to society’s norms, but who secretly desire same-sex encounters.

Sexual Minority. This term refers to anyone who does not self-identify as heterosexual. In most cases those individuals *perceived* by others as non-heterosexual are considered sexual minorities as well.

The Glass Closet. This term refers to the “place” where gay people reside who are not completely “out,” but who do not object to being perceived as gay or lesbian. People who reside here will tell the truth about having relationships but without using gay or lesbian labels, and they choose not to *verify* any assumptions made about their sexual identity.

Delimitations

This study investigated the lives of gay male teachers who work in secondary schools, grades 6-12. The majority of the informants worked in area high schools and taught grades 9-12, but gay men who taught in area middle schools were included as well. In fact, only two of the seven participants taught middle school aged children at the time I

conducted this study, but one other informant had taught in a middle school as recently as last year. This study included only males because the issues faced by gay men and lesbians in the classroom are so different that only a separate study can treat the issues justly. I expect that some of the issues faced by gay men and lesbian teachers are similar, but I also assume that the differences between the gay male and lesbian teacher experience justified a more narrow focus on men only.

Limitations

Given the personal connection between the chosen topic and my own lived experiences as a gay male teacher who taught in a suburban school district in Central Virginia, there are many threats to internal and external validity. The greatest threat to the former was researcher bias, which occurs “when the researcher has personal biases or *a priori* assumptions that he/she is unable to bracket” or separate from what he/she hears from the informants (Onwuegbuzie, 2002, p. 19). Consequently, I may have been completely unaware of certain held beliefs and their influence on my perspective. Based upon my own experiences in the classroom from the recent past and memories of those experiences, I may have heard what I hoped to hear from my informants and interpreted their words in such a way as to obtain the results I want to have. Because I was the only person collecting data for this study, there is no question that my personal bias was present to some degree at every stage of this project, from data collection to data interpretation to data analysis to final explanation of results (Onwuegbuzie, 2002). That being said, however, I believe that any inherent bias constituted another possible reality. Just as each individual participant had a voice, so too did the author, but my voice did not

dominate the conversation. The informants' thoughts and ideas were far more significant than mine and their voices spoke out more loudly.

Another threat to internal validity for this study was observational bias. Given that researcher bias was a difficult challenge to overcome, I may have determined that data saturation had occurred before it actually did. In essence, my understanding of the data and the analysis that I conducted was influenced by the assumptions I brought to the study. Therefore, I may have been guilty of spending insufficient time on the interview and/or observation procedures necessary to conduct a valid study. Along a similar vein, confirmation bias may have also been a challenge to internal validity for this study. It occurs when the researcher interprets new data or draws conclusions that fit very neatly with the data collected at earlier stages. As I collected new data from the informants, I may have automatically fit those new pieces of information into existing categories without considering the possibility that new categories would have been more appropriate for the given information. If that happened, I threatened data credibility because plausible rival explanations or categories, which could have been superior to existing ones, did not have a chance to emerge (Onwuegbuzie, 2002). Even though this study did not contain a specific qualitative hypothesis, neatly fitting new informant statements into pre-existing categories based upon my assumptions would have been akin to finding congruence between new data and *a priori* hypotheses (Greenwald, Pratkanis, Leippe, & Baumgardner, 1986).

The threats to external validity, those that pertain to the degree to which results can be generalized, were as severe as the threats to internal validity stated above. In general, the biggest among these threats to external validity was population generalizability. Even

though the study pertained to one region in one state and discussed one sex among gay teachers who work in secondary schools only, the temptation to generalize for all gay male teachers was ever present. That the sample of informants in this study represented just a fraction of the total population of gay male teachers who work in West Central Florida did not decrease this temptation. Indeed, the temptation to generalize was also linked to a second threat to external validity, researcher bias. Because the behaviors I observed and the assertions I made about the informants mirrored some of my personal lived experiences, I was tempted to assume that other gay male teachers reacted in similar ways. This temptation was strong and, at times, difficult to avoid. Yet another possible threat to external validity was order bias. It is possible that the interview schedule used for this study “made a difference to the truth dependability and confirmability of the findings” (Onwuegbuzie, 2002, p. 23).

Despite the many threats to internal and external validity contained within this study, I used several procedures that have been identified to negate those threats given that those threats can never be totally eliminated. Onwuegbuzie (2002) discusses several of these procedures that increase the legitimation of a given study. For the purposes of this study, the follow legitimizing procedures discussed by Onwuegbuzie were most salient: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking. Not employing these procedures would have, in fact, increased the threat to legitimation.

Prolonged engagement involves conducting a study over a period of time long enough such that the author can reproduce the voice of his/her informants in the writing. A number of factors including the nature of the questions, the ability of the researcher to pinpoint and report subtle nuances in the telling of informants’ stories, and the

informants' willingness to share information, will dictate the specific amount of time needed. For this study, I conducted one-hour interviews, engaged the informants in telephone conversations, and exchanged electronic mail messages over a period of six months, November 2004 – April 2005. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), prolonged engagement allows the researcher to understand the culture of the informant and allows time for the researcher to build trust so that informant responses may be more authentic. Persistent observation allows the researcher to focus on the most relevant portions of the informants' responses and provides depth to those responses (Onwuegbuzie, 2002). Triangulation involves the use of many different sources or methods to obtain solid evidence, which increases the reader's confidence in any given findings (Maxwell, 1992; Onwuegbuzie, 2002). Member checking occurs when the author systematically checks with his/her informants to verify that what the author wrote was actually stated by the informant (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). For this study, member checking occurred at several different stages including post-interview, post creation of categories, and even post enunciation of results, and increased the chances that said results represented the informants' truest intentions and understandings. By employing a combination of these procedures, I increased the legitimation of findings and helped the reader distinguish the voices of the informants from the voice of the researcher.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

Chapter 2 contains a review of the current, relevant literature on gay teachers. Of most importance, the focus is on how gay teachers cope with their sexual identities in the school setting, how they interact with and interpret the curriculum, and to what degree

their sexual orientation affects relationships with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators. To a limited degree, the review of the literature also touches upon gay teachers' connections to support groups like the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs). In addition there is some mention of how gay teachers at the secondary school level connect to gay educators at the college level and with research that has been conducted on the concept of *multiple masculinities*.

Chapter 3 reviews the various methods that were used to obtain data for this study. The primary focus of this section is on qualitative methods and the process I used to best obtain and report the voices of the informants. This well established approach gives the reader a more complete picture of the lives lived by gay male educators who teach in secondary classrooms in West Central Florida.

In Chapter 4, the reader is fully introduced to the participants. There, the reader discovers where each participant teaches and receives a biographical sketch of each informant. Once that is accomplished, the reader finds the ten major themes that emerged from this study and reads the actual words, thoughts, and feeling of the informants about those ten themes. At the end of this chapter, the reader is privy to an intimate glimpse of each participant's innermost thoughts about being a gay male teacher in the school districts of West Central Florida.

In Chapter 5, I make some assertions about the lived experiences of the seven gay male teachers who participated in this study. In particular, I focus on those informant comments that directly inform the major research questions for this study. As such, I comment on sexual orientation and academic content, on addressing homophobic language at school, on how gay teachers in this study reach out to students they perceive

as gay, and about the barriers the informants face to being out at school. I also take a look at those ten emergent themes from Chapter 4, and discuss how they relate to the research questions as well. I tie all these themes together and assert in the end that from the perspective of the informants, an “appropriate” male performance for gay male teachers in this region of Florida appears to exist. I also suggest, however, that other possibilities exist – that other “male performances” are possible – for the gay male teachers in this region. And, if given a chance to perform in such a way, gay male teachers have an opportunity to teach about diversity to such a degree that has rarely been witnessed at the secondary schools in West Central Florida.

Chapter 2

Review of the Related Literature

Introduction

The literature on gay issues at school covers a wide range of topics, most of which do not center on the lives of gay teachers. Those topics include the challenges faced by gay, lesbian, and questioning students; the creation of various programs and schools designed to meet the perceived special needs of gay students; the role that straight teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators play in the lives of gay teachers and students; the curriculum; and the many voices of those who oppose any perceived preferential treatment for gay teachers and gay students or the inclusion of gay themes in the schools' mandated curricula. The literature also includes works written from various theoretical frameworks, like queer theory, designed to help us better understand the gay experience whether that includes students or adults at school. In addition, there is a group of literature that discusses various forms of masculinity. Given the unfortunate number of accepted stereotypes that surround homosexuals, including those that center on the bending of gender norms, it is appropriate to discuss some of this literature as it pertains to the various theoretical forms of masculinity performed by gay men. The following review of the literature will touch upon these topics, to varying degrees, depending upon their connection to the central characters of this study, gay male teachers.

Gay Students

The vast majority of the current literature on gay issues at school focuses on the students who are openly gay, students who are closeted, or students who are questioning their sexuality (Eisen & Hall, 1996; Griffin, 1994; Kissen, 2002; Rofes, 1994; Taylor, 2000; Unks, 1994). Most researchers talk about the lives that gay teens lead at school and the fears they experience there. Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds (2002) found that their participants expressed fear of being thought of as a “sexual predator” by friends, and that this fear was fueled by the subtle negative messages they received in the school environment about gay people. These authors conclude that the participants in their study, all from the Raleigh/Durham area, “experienced cognitive isolation because they had extremely limited access to accurate information on issues related to sexual orientation; emotional isolation as a result of constant negative messages about homosexuality from peers, school personnel, and family; and social isolation, not only from peers and family that they could not tell about their sexuality, but also from many of the friends they did tell” (Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002, p. 60). In all cases, the participants described a cycling back and forth between feelings of denial, fear, alienation, confusion, and acceptance during their high school years. Like many other studies of this type, the comments made were retrospective in nature, and the authors are quick to point out that despite the literature that strongly suggests that LGBT youth are at increased risk for many health problems, such as depression and alcoholism, the majority of these young adults manage to develop positive and productive coping strategies to assist them through adolescence and into adulthood.

Unlike some researchers who speak for the students they study, Eisen and Hall (1996) capture the voices of gay students directly by including short articles, speeches, and poems written by the students themselves. These students reveal in their writings the regretful lack of honest discussion about sexuality they experience in their schools, with their families, and in their communities. They also provide a unique glimpse into what it means to be young and “queer” in today’s society. One of these teens in a speech given on Celebrate Humanity Day wrote,

I stand here not as a stranger, plucked from society and placed before you on a stage in yet another forum, but as your peer, your fellow student, your friend, someone you see everyday in the halls, in the quad, or in the classroom. Sadly, I do not stand here in trust and comfort, but in fear. Fear that you who befriend me today will turn your backs on me tomorrow. Fear that those same people who whispered, “Go home, Dyke!” during a forum a few weeks ago will now say that to me [again]. Fear that I will be left alone (Eisen & Hall, 1996, p. 178).

In another example taken from Eisen & Hall (1996), a young man who identifies as queer expresses his constant worry about fellow gay friends and an uncertain future. He writes:

I worry about my friend, Rick, who hustles sometimes, because his parents threw him out of their house at the age of sixteen when he told them he was gay. I worry about my friend, William, who constantly gets harassed in school about his sexuality. I know that harassment is not conducive to his learning. I still have to

think about where there are safe places that my boyfriend and I can show affection publicly. Yet, despite all the prejudice and ignorance in the world directed toward Queers, I would never desire anything but to be who I am (Ibid, p. 188).

Despite the worries gay teens endure, they possess a strong desire to overcome fears and to express themselves freely, which is evident in the amount of literature that focuses on the formation of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) across the nation. First established in 1985 in a Los Angeles high school as a part of Project 10, a comprehensive, school-wide program designed to meet the needs of gay and lesbian students, GSAs are school-sponsored clubs for gay teens and their straight peers. As of 1989, they have become student-led organizations---the first of this kind appearing in a Concord, Massachusetts, high school---and now number more than 2000, and are found in all 50 states (MacGillivray, 2004). The increase in numbers has been particularly strong since the death of Matthew Shepard in 1998 (Platt, 2001).

The Christian Right demonizes GSAs and warns that they will promote the homosexual agenda in schools. Human rights activists, however, consider them the “darlings of the diversity crowd” because they are initiated by teenagers and often serve a dual function where they exist (Lee, 2002). On the one hand, they serve as a place where gay and questioning teens can find needed support from fellow peers and adults at school. GSAs also provide a home base for activism. Some GSAs have sponsored “queer” dances, parties, and, recently, the observance of the Day of Silence, which pays homage to all those gay teens who still exist in the shadows in schools across the nation. One GSA located in Charlottesville, Virginia, even entered the political realm and

successfully petitioned for the inclusion of sexual orientation on Albemarle County's non-discrimination policy.

The acceptance of GSAs has varied among communities across the United States. Boone (2000) reports that parents opposed to the formation of a GSA in the Orange [California] School District passed out fliers that read, "The gay agenda is attacking our school district. Stop them!" (Boone, 2000, p.10). Some of these same parents held up signs outside one of the school board meetings that read, "GRADES, NOT AIDS" (p. 10). Lawyers, working on behalf of the students who wished to form the GSA, have filed a suit against the school district for not allowing the club to form. Similar suits have been filed in Aurora, Colorado; Manchester, New Hampshire; and Salt Lake City, Utah. In Aurora, the suit resulted in a consent decree, which allowed the students to meet. In Manchester, the school board formally recognized the GSA after the suit was filed, but in Salt Lake City, "school officials banned all non-curricular, non-gay student groups rather than approve one gay group" (p. 12). Surprisingly, Decatur High School, "smack in the middle of Georgia's Bible Belt," has had a GSA since 1998 with "practically no dissent" (*Newsweek*, March 20, 2000).

Even though GSAs have spread across the country and have helped many gay teens find support, one particular sub-group of gay youth continues to struggle. In fact, this group exemplifies the difficulties faced by many gay teens while simultaneously demonstrating the conflicting role some gay teachers play in their lives. Rofes (1994) maintains that effeminate boys face especially difficult scenarios in schools. Bullying, verbal harassment, and lack of support from teachers are commonplace for these young men. Even gay activists often neglect to speak up for the "sissies" because they do not

want to promote the stereotype that “gay equals sissy.” Instead, they choose to endorse the reality that gay kids may include athletes, musicians, or members of various academic and social clubs at school, and that many effeminate boys are indeed heterosexual (Rofes, 1994). In the meantime, however, effeminate boys suffer because they lack the support they need from adults at school. Often, they are forced to act “manly” to avoid torment.

Support Structures for GLBT Youth

Gay Straight Alliances are strong support structures found within many schools across the nation, but Rofes (1989) and Uribe (1994) discuss other structures, Project 10 in Los Angeles and the Harvey Milk School in New York City, which were both founded by adults, unlike the student-initiated GSAs. Rofes (1989) stresses the need for these adult-initiated school structures because in his past school experiences, he had witnessed a complete denial of the existence of gay and lesbian youth by teachers and the silencing of GLBT youth voices. In fact, Rofes (1989) believes that a lack of courage on the part of adults is a key barrier for gay and lesbian youth to overcome. As such, he makes the following recommendations, which still go unheeded almost twenty years later. He says:

1. Schools must focus on the needs of young people and not the demands of parents or the larger community.
2. Issues of sexuality must move from the taboo into public forum, especially AIDS education.
3. Teachers need to be comfortable with gay and lesbian issues.

4. School curricula need to include the historical contributions of gay men and lesbians including literature giants, James Baldwin, Adrienne Rich, Gertrude Stein, and Walt Whitman.
5. Society must abandon the concept that by discussing homosexuality in a positive light one causes children to grow up gay (p. 45).

In addition to making the aforementioned recommendations, Rofes (1989) also discusses Project 10 and the Harvey Milk School, both founded to meet the needs of gay and lesbian youth in the mid 1980's.

Project 10 is a school-based outreach program for gay and lesbian youth in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Founded in 1985 by Virginia Uribe, Project 10 is also a counseling and educational vehicle for straight and gay teachers and students that has four major components: education, school safety, drop-out prevention, and support services. It also works toward the reduction of verbal and physical abuse, suicide prevention, and the dissemination of accurate AIDS information (Rofes, 1989 & Uribe, 1994). Each of the senior high school in the district has a support group consisting of trained teachers, counselors, and other support staff as well. The major goal of Project 10 is to provide support services that allow gay and lesbian youth to remain in their local high schools, while simultaneously forcing straight peers and staff members to confront their homophobia (Uribe, 1994). The Project 10 model is adaptable to any school district.

The Harvey Milk School in New York City is the second major initiative Rofes (1989) discusses. This alternative high school was founded in 1985 and serves gay teens who have encountered extreme difficulties in other public and private schools. Some of

these difficulties stem from cross-dressing, effeminate behavior in boys, and extreme masculine behaviors in girls (Rofes, 1989). The school is run by the Hetrick-Martin Institute, formerly called the Institute for the Protection of Gay and Lesbian Youth, on an annual budget of more than \$2 million. Its 40 staff members serve more than 1,500 lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth between the ages of 12 and 21 each year. An additional 6,000 young people request information or receive counseling via the telephone nationwide (Grossman, 1995). Unlike Project 10, which keeps gay and questioning students in school with their straight peers, the Harvey Milk School provides services for gay teens only. As of 2004, Harvey Milk, although a private institution, receives public funding from the city of New York.

Gay Teachers

The group of adults at school who often feel the most pressure to help students like those described above are the same people who sometimes feel the most helpless: gay teachers. Clearly, gay and questioning students do not face issues of sexuality and harassment in America's schools alone--gay and lesbian teachers join them as well. In a study conducted in the five counties near Jacksonville, Florida – Baker, Clay, Duval, Nassau, and St. John's -- Sanlo (1999) discusses the lives of 16 gay teachers who work in the public schools. All of her informants, 12 female and 4 male, were Caucasian, averaged 39 years of age, and taught for an average of 14 years at various school sites. Based on earlier studies of gay educators (Griffin, 1992; Harbeck, 1992; Jennings, 1994; Juul & Repa, 1993; Khayatt, 1992; Mayer, 1993), Sanlo assumed that the teachers she interviewed would be open about their sexualities and active within the gay community.

From the very beginning of her study, however, “it became apparent that these assumptions did not apply to this set of participants, these gay and lesbian educators in northeast Florida” (Sanlo, 1999, p. 31). On the contrary, Sanlo discovered a group of professionals gripped by fear who lived in a culture of silence.

Sanlo (1999) created the “Filter of Fear Model” to graphically demonstrate what her participants shared: their “intense sense of isolation and pervasive fear of job loss” (p. 81). The model places lesbian and gay educators at the center with a series of concentric circles indicating certain “triggers of fear.” While not always activated, these triggers included the teachers’ supervisors, their colleagues, their students, and their students’ parents. The participants shared with Sanlo various events that might actively engage their continuous fears: “overhearing a colleague speaking negatively of gay or lesbian people; a student calling another student a faggot; election-year rhetoric; a party invitation to the principal’s house;” and many others far too numerous to list (Sanlo, 1999, p. 81).

In addition to the triggers of fear, Sanlo’s model also includes those groups from whom gay teachers in northeast Florida felt isolated: the education community, the lesbian and gay community, and their lesbian and gay colleagues. According to the participants in Sanlo’s study, contact with other gay colleagues or the gay community was virtually impossible for fear of being “discovered.” The participants also “discussed their own reluctance to reach out to anyone in the public school system in northeast Florida and acknowledged that by their silence they, too, are responsible for maintaining a homophobic environment” (Sanlo, 1999, p. 92).

As a direct result of the fear and isolation felt by the participants, they experienced strained relationships with the groups of people that most teachers hope to embrace. According to Sanlo, all of the participants described “self-imposed distance from their students” (p. 95). They also expressed “deep anxiety about answering questions students normally ask all teachers about their private lives” (p. 96). None of the teachers in Sanlo’s study perceived the parents of their students to be allies, and even though they wished to acknowledge and help their [perceived] gay students, “they expressed an unwillingness to be available [to them] for fear of discovery and ultimate job loss” (p. 100). Sadly, these teachers described their gay students as an at-risk population in need of assistance, but felt powerless to do anything for them. They even felt uncomfortable “teaching about lesbian and gay heroes as a means of providing indirect role models” and, unfortunately, many reported unfamiliarity with significant gay events and people (Sanlo, 1999, p. 102). For example, they did not know about the thousands of gay people executed during the Holocaust or the “well-documented homosexuality of people throughout history, such as Plato, King James, Leonardo da Vinci, Peter Tchaikovsky, Margaret Mead, Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, James Baldwin, and many others” (p. 102). The culture of fear and isolation that engulfed these teachers also created an atmosphere of ignorance, which blocked the flow of information.

Unlike Sanlo (1999) who focused her work on the lived experiences of lesbian and gay educators in a specific geographic location, Kissen (1996) tells the story of many gay and lesbian grade school teachers from across the country. She interviewed male and female teachers in rural and urban communities who worked in public and private schools and who came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Using the Lesbian and Gay

Educators Identity Management Strategies Model developed by Griffin (1992), Kissen describes how the teachers she interviewed all fell into one of four categories in terms of the degree to which they were open about their sexual orientation.

Teachers who openly lied about their sexuality, who created mythical partners of the opposite sex, and who wanted to be known as heterosexuals fell into the “passing” category (Griffin, 1992). Those who passed as straight often felt a greater sense of job security, but also endured the greatest amount of personal turmoil. Teachers who censored their language without lying about their sexuality, and who did not want to be known as homosexuals fell into the “covering” category (Griffin, 1992). These teachers felt a little less job security than those who passed, but endured less inner turmoil. Kissen described the next group of teachers as being “implicitly out.” These teachers told the truth about relationships without using lesbian or gay labels. This group of teachers did not mind being seen as gay or lesbian, but they chose not to verify any assumptions made by students or colleagues at school. Griffin (1992) describes this condition as the “glass closet.” Griffin (1992) describes the final group of teachers as “explicitly out.” They actively affirmed their gay or lesbian identities and felt comfortable knowing that others knew about their sexual orientation. This group of teachers desired to be seen as lesbian or gay and most often felt no sense of inner turmoil. Depending on where they teach, however, teachers who are explicitly out may not enjoy the freedom of job security, and for that reason, caution is encouraged (Harbeck, 1992; Lipkin, 2004).

Not only did Kissen (1996) find that the teachers in her study fit into Griffin’s (1992) Identity Management Strategies Model, but she also reported other commonalities among gay and lesbian teachers including their common fears, their frequent contact with verbal

harassment, and their mixed feelings about coming out when confronted by a gay student. Lipkin (2004) and Rofes (1994) both believe that there are compelling reasons for gay teachers to come out to their students. Gay teachers may serve as powerful role models and counselors for gay and questioning students, they indicate to students that a school is “safe” for their freedom of sexual expression, and gay teachers often lead the way in school reform policies. Unfortunately, gay and lesbian teachers still live in fear of being accused of recruiting youth to the homosexual world, or worse, being branded a child molester (Lipkin, 1999, 2004; Rowe, 1993). Speaking directly to the recruitment issue, Rowe (1993) writes,

This accusation completely lacks merit. In fact, much that could be called “recruitment” is more common to heterosexuals. A constant bombardment through social customs, advertising media, church decrees, etc., is obvious. Instead of recruitment, responsible homosexuals are attempting to enlighten all interested youth and to assure people who are homosexual that a support structure does exist, that a tolerable place in society is being established for them (p.509).

Given that people still make such accusations and believe them to be true, gay teachers must exercise caution.

Kissen (1996) describes other common fears among gay teachers including losing their jobs and being an ineffective educator and role model, particularly for students who are questioning their sexualities. Even though Lipkin (2004) believes that gay teachers may serve as excellent role models for gay students, Kissen (1996) found that the gay

teachers in her study believed that their personal fears kept them from performing as a positive role model, and this caused tremendous feelings of guilt and anxiety among them. While dealing with this guilt, gay teachers also reported hearing countless homophobic slurs like “fag, queer, and dyke” in the hallways and in the classroom (Kissen, 1996; Lipkin, 1999). Most teachers were not surprised to hear those words from students, but hearing them from fellow teachers cut especially deep. Even when some of the teachers wanted to correct these inappropriate behaviors, they feared that taking such action would raise suspicion about them. Why should they care if some kid called another student a queer? For those gay and lesbian teachers who were “passing” or “covering,” this scenario was particularly common and especially painful (Kissen, 1996).

Rofes (1989) maintains that one of the barriers to helping gay and lesbian youth is the lack of courage from the adults in school. Whereas the plight of the gay teacher may not excuse his or her unwillingness to speak up on behalf of gay students who have been mistreated, it does offer some insights into a possible reason for the silence. In addition, it highlights the fact that while some adults may not act, it does not mean that they do not care about the students or feel inner turmoil for having to make a tough decision.

The decision to come out and to what degree one should be open to his or her students and fellow faculty members about sexuality rests heavily on the minds of many gay and lesbian teachers (Harbeck, 1992; Khayatt, 1997; Lipkin, 2004; Renesenbrink, 1996; Woog, 1995). Khayatt (1997) challenges making the declarative statement, “I am a lesbian” [or I am gay] as the best way to come out to students, if at all (p. 130). She offers pedagogical reasons why it may be best to use a more indirect approach if a teacher decides to come out to his or her students. Khayatt (1997) also lists and challenges four

assumptions commonly made about why a teacher should come out to students. Those assumptions include:

1. Coming out encourages and supports students who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
2. Coming out provides gay students with a role model.
3. Coming out unsettles the dominance of heterosexuality.
4. Failure to come out promotes homophobia within the school.

Khayatt (1997) questions the meaning and benefits of putting one's body on the line and discusses the different issues facing gay teachers at the college level, as compared to gay teachers who teach at the elementary, middle, or high school level. She concludes that "the decision whether and how to come out in class must remain with the individual teacher" (p. 141). As seen earlier, other researchers echo this note of caution as well.

Despite the caution, the following extended example of one teacher's decision to come out to her class shows the benefits that such an action can have on all parties involved. Renesenbrink (1996) explores the effects of a fifth-grade teacher's decision to come out to her students. Upon returning from a weekend trip to Washington, D.C. in the spring of 1993, Rosemary Towbridge told the truth about her weekend activities. In a weekly activity where students share what they did over the weekend, Towbridge told her class that she had gone to a Gay Pride March, and that she had attended a party where there were lesbian and gay teachers. She also shared that she had attended training sessions at the Department of Education so that she could "train teachers to make the schools safe for gay and lesbian students." The students responded by applauding and saying, "That's

good, Ms. Towbridge!” Said Towbridge, “I just coulda died” (Renesenbrink, 1996, p. 263).

Later that day Towbridge was confronted by three students who wanted to be sure they understood what had happened earlier that day during sharing time. Confirming to them that she was indeed a lesbian, the students reacted strongly. One of them shouted, “It’s disgusting! You do that?” (Renesenbrink, 1996, p. 263). Responding quickly and firmly, Towbridge explained to the students “if you’re straight, you fall in love with someone of the opposite sex and if you’re gay, you fall in love with someone of the same gender. That’s all it means and I’m still your teacher. You still have to do your homework” (p. 263).

In the end, Towbridge believes that being out to her students creates safety despite the anxiety that goes along with her decision. According to Towbridge, “It counters those million little suicides so that kids know you can be who you are here” (p. 270). Renesenbrink (1996) reports several incidents of safety in Towbridge’s classroom and observed how her questioning and activism empowered her students to think critically and to speak up. On that level, Towbridge’s lesbianism made a difference. When she was later confronted with the rumor that a fellow male faculty member was also gay, Towbridge reacted strongly to being questioned about how that might affect him as a teacher. Emphatically, she responded, “No, it doesn’t matter! And, yes, there are several different ways it does make a difference” (p. 270). The contradiction in Towbridge’s response points to the complexity of the matter. Renesenbrink (1996), like many other researchers, concludes that Towbridge, like many of her gay colleagues, is proud of the designation “teacher.” Sometimes she wants to leave it at that. At other times, she wants

to prefix it with “lesbian” and describe what a difference it makes. Ultimately, “both choices should be hers” (p. 270).

The Role of Heterosexual Teachers, Principals, and Guidance Counselors

Gay teachers clearly face unique challenges in the classroom, but the majority of gay and lesbian students will *not* have a gay teacher. Therefore, all teachers must be prepared to meet the needs of GLBT youth. Following is what the literature says all teachers can and must do to grant gay students the same educational opportunities afforded to heterosexual students. The vital roles played by school administration, principals in particular, and guidance counselors are included in this section as well.

Mathison (1998), stresses the important role of teacher educators in pre-service teachers’ preparation to meet the needs of their future gay and lesbian students. She concludes that teacher educators must first recognize the need for pre-service teachers to be more knowledgeable about gay and lesbian students. Second, it is important for teacher educators to honestly acknowledge and confront their thoughts and feelings on homosexuality. Similar sentiments are found in Frieman, O’Hara, & Settel (1996) and in Taylor (2000) who all stress the importance of current and future teachers examining their feelings about homosexuality. These authors suggest that elementary school and middle school teachers reflect on their feelings in the following scenario: A little boy, perceived as effeminate by his peers, is teased to the brink of tears. Would those teachers feel equally comfortable comforting him as they would a little girl who is teased by her peers on the playground? In a similar self-reflection vein, Mathison (1998) believes that teacher educators need to consider the following questions:

1. Do I assume that all my teacher education students and colleagues are heterosexual?
2. Do I believe that it is appropriate for gay men and lesbians to become teachers?
3. As I discuss historians, philosophers, theorists, and practitioners with teacher education students, do I ever identify individuals as homosexual in the same manner that I might mention ethnicity, gender, or other cultural attributes?
4. Do the examples I use in class assume that everyone is heterosexual?
5. Have I ever said anything in or out of class that would let the students know how I feel about homosexuality?
6. If a teacher education student wanted to talk to someone about ways to better serve gay and lesbian children and adolescents in the classroom, would he or she feel comfortable coming to me?
7. If someone were to look at my course syllabi or any other aspect of my teaching activities, would that person see any evidence that preparing teachers to serve gay and lesbian students was important to me? (Mathison, 1998, p. 154).

In addition to the self-reflection that these researchers strongly encourage from teachers and pre-service teachers at every level, they also suggest that these teachers take several direct actions to help gay students. These actions include creating a safe environment for gay and lesbian students, challenging the negative remarks they overhear students make about gay people and other minorities, and learning about homophobia and gay and lesbian history by reading books, articles, and periodicals that feature gay themes (Frieman, O'Hara, & Settel, 1996; Mathison, 1998). They can also consult gay and

lesbian organizations and attend gay-themed film festivals and lectures to become more knowledgeable and consult with their librarians about obtaining age appropriate, gay-themed literature for the schools' media centers (Taylor, 2000). And finally, Mathison (1998) suggests that teacher educators provide information and training for faculty. Just as they can provide workshops centered on multiculturalism or the gifted learner, teacher educators can provide in-service education for teachers, counselors, and administrators on gay themes as well.

Teachers, undoubtedly, play a vital role in providing an open atmosphere within which gay and lesbian students may thrive. This atmosphere can be greatly affected, however, by the attitude of the school's principal. In fact, Sanelli & Perreault (2001) conclude, "the principal's actions and values affect overall climate, instructional procedures, and even the usually unstated theory of justice that prevails within a school" (p. 77). A principal's moral leadership is often challenged by issues of diversity and by issues of sexual orientation in particular. If a principal hopes to affectively address issues of sexuality within the school the following actions are suggested:

1. Principals should extend the teaching of tolerance and respect for culturally different people to include those with different sexual orientations. Most often, expressions of gay culture are excluded from the school curriculum and this communicates to gay students that their way of life is not valued within the context of school or society as a whole.
2. Despite the common belief that positive contacts with gay people will somehow influence children to become gay and that such openness may be politically

dangerous, principals need to encourage gay community members and especially gay parents to participate in their schools in meaningful ways.

3. Principals need to support individual teachers in their attempts to incorporate the topic of sexual orientation into their courses. Principals must also support teachers who discipline students for harassing or assaulting (verbal or physical) another with homophobic intent.
4. Principals should be advocates for all cultures so that the entire student body can accept the diversity among them. This will encourage the idea that homosexuality is simply another facet of our diverse society, a naturally occurring variety of sexual expression. (Sanelli & Perreault, 2001, p. 75).

A final thought offered for principals who may struggle with this issue is that it may be useful to substitute the word *black* for *gay* and reflect on whether he or she would reach the same conclusion about an appropriate action or response. This suggestion may work because, unfortunately, inappropriate words and actions motivated by one's dislike for another student's race or ethnic background creates disgust and a public uproar unlike similar words or actions directed at one because of his or her sexual orientation.

The school counselor, particularly at the high school level, is another member of the schools' personnel that can have an important impact upon the lives of gay and lesbian students. One might assume that a guidance counselor would be a natural resource where gay teens can talk openly about various issues. That assumption, however, proves incorrect because until recently, "few counselors were trained to deal with the specific

challenges faced by gay youth” (Reynolds & Koski, 1994, p. 91). The training, however, can be accomplished and part of the literature addresses this specific issue.

Because the gay teen is often isolated, unable to turn to family or friends, and because their “condition” is hidden, the well-equipped counselor must perform all the normal functions of others in the field in addition to paying greater attention to language (saying things like “partner” instead of boyfriend or girlfriend) providing support and affirmation; having access to accurate information for gay teens; acting as a role model, willing to speak out against homophobia; and having awareness of their own personal bias. The well-informed counselor must also ensure confidentiality and privacy and must have the ability to train other staff members or find those who can perform this function (Reynolds & Koski, 1994, p. 90). Like the enlightened teacher and principal, the counselor should present information about sexuality not as a problem, but as a matter of natural development.

Now, that more and more clinicians and researchers are beginning to recognize the special challenges faced by gay teens, various vital competencies have been identified. Those recognized for all teens, both gay and straight, include empathy, problem solving, consultation, and listening. Those competencies that are particularly important when counselors interact with gay youth include toleration of ambiguity and conflict, risk taking, and a willingness to act as a catalyst for change in schools (Reynolds & Koski, 1994, p.92). Counselors can provide support and advocacy through a combination of “self-awareness, self-assurance, and knowledge, as well as openness, acceptance, and a demonstration of non-heterosexist behavior” (Newman, Dannenfelser, & Benishek, 2002, p. 283). The school counselor needs to be an ally for gay and lesbian youth

regardless of the risk involved. As continued research increases counselors' knowledge base, they must be prepared to speak out for the oppressed group, challenge the status quo, and break the silence that has kept gay and lesbian youth hidden for so long.

Curriculum Issues

Including gay themes where they fit naturally in a school's curriculum, such as the plight of homosexuals during the Holocaust or the role of lesbians during the Suffrage Movement; discussing current events, such as gay marriage or the Supreme Court's recent deliberation and overturning of anti-sodomy laws in Texas; and disclosing personal information about famous gays and lesbians who have contributed mightily in American History, are three methods to expose all students to positive gay images. With a little extra effort, any teacher can find such information using the Internet as a resource. In fact, Thornton (2003) offers some excellent examples on how all social studies teachers can achieve a seamless weaving of gay themes into their "normal" lesson plans. When teaching about individuals like Jane Addams, for example, students should know that she never married and "chose to spend her adult life among a community of women and had a long-time special relationship with one woman" (Thornton, 2003, p. 228). Even if the word "lesbian" never comes up in discussion, would it not be educational for students to think critically about Addams' life and consider whether or not her many accomplishments are somehow diminished or enhanced by her personal choices? Similarly, Thornton (2003) asks teachers to consider revealing to their students that Alexander the Great was gay and to "sensitively approach [his] homosexuality in its cultural and temporal context." Thornton continues, "such a perspective may lead

students to rethink stereotypes of both warriors and homosexuals” (p. 229). And finally, the teaching of minorities’ struggles for civil rights throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s is common to most social studies curricula across the nation. Students learn about the hard-fought struggles of African Americans, women, Latinos, and Native Americans, but rarely, if ever, are the struggles of gay Americans mentioned. As Thornton (2003) reminds us, “Such a unit [on civil rights] could be made more genuinely inclusive if it also included a lesson devoted to a turning point in civil rights for gay people, such as the 1969 Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village, New York City” (p. 229).

Thornton’s examples of the natural inclusion of gay themes into the social studies makes the information more explicit, empowers teachers to create opportunities rather than wait for them, and provides knowledge that heretofore may not have been known. With the increasingly wide usage of the Internet, all teachers are gaining access to information they may not have been privy to years ago. And Thornton (2003) states clearly that any social studies teacher can make his or her lessons more inclusive. He says, “Let me underscore that we are still working with standard material in the curriculum. No new instructional materials are required. A specialist’s knowledge, while as desirable as ever, is unessential” (p. 228). What *is* essential, however, is for teachers to have the desire to expose their students to information that some people might consider controversial. Individual teachers remain the curriculum gatekeepers, and in that capacity, they may choose to allow gay themes to flow freely in their classrooms.

The literature covers some other curricular issues centered on homosexuality, however, which are more controversial and less seamless. One such item centers on a proposed Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual History Month. According to some gay-rights

activists, the celebration would take place in October and only in high schools. The proposed curriculum would not discuss the “mechanics of homosexuality” but instead would “encourage schools to acknowledge the homosexuality of figures like Julius Caesar and Michelangelo, detail the long history of homosexual persecution in America, and allow students to judge for themselves the possibility that famous Americans like Abraham Lincoln and Eleanor Roosevelt were gay” (Wingert & Waldman, 1995, p. 81). This is certainly not an idea that has impacted the consciousness of the mainstream but, the National Education Association, the largest teachers’ union in America, has endorsed the idea.

Other curricular concerns found in the literature center on whether or not it is appropriate to introduce gay themes to elementary school children (Foulks, 1999; Graham, 1993; Park, 1993), about discussing the use of homophobic musical lyrics (Bull 2001), and discussing gay themes within the context of a multicultural lesson (Athanases, 1996). Two editorials were presented in the *Advocate* concerning the introduction of gay themes to elementary school students—one in favor and one against—but a more compelling discussion on this issue is found in Foulks’ (1999) article, *Should Gay and Lesbian Issues Be Discussed In Elementary School?* Teachers involved in an in-service training session categorized their opinions on this issue into three topics: the biological approach, the religious approach, and the societal approach. Those who supported teaching elementary students gay themes and who fell into the biological category “firmly felt that schools have the responsibility to provide accurate information and to clarify misunderstanding” (Foulks, 1999, p 40). Opponents claimed that the matter should be discussed at home with parents rather than at school with teachers. Proponents of

teaching elementary students gay themes who fell under the religious category “claim that schools have the responsibility of providing exposure to all beliefs, as well as broadening awareness that some people have different lifestyles” (Foulks, 1999, p. 40) Opponents in this category stressed that homosexuality is morally wrong and discussing it would infringe upon religious rights. Proponents of teaching elementary students gay themes who fell under the lifestyle category “assert that gay and lesbian issues cannot be ignored in society today, especially since children are already exposed to them in the media” (Foulks, 1999, p. 40). Opponents in this category “claim that [elementary] children are too young to understand gay and lesbian lifestyles and ...should remain innocent and not be exposed to sexual issues” (p. 40). Although these teachers reached no consensus on the matter, their discussion added to the debate and will inspire future research in this area of study.

In a lesson plan for middle and high school students called “Do Words Hurt?,” the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) used the lyrics of pop star, Eminem, to promote awareness of the acceptance of homophobia in society. As part of the lesson, students were encouraged to listen to the lyrics and reflect on how they might affect a gay student or teacher at school. Reactions varied, and in some cases principals hesitated to allow the execution of the plan fearing the repercussions from conservatives in the community. According to the author, conservatives argued that the lesson focused too much on sexuality. Members of GLSEN “completely reject the notion that to talk about these issues is to talk about sex” (Bull, 2001, p. 17). They claim that the point of the lesson is to teach about respect for other people. Other GLSEN members agreed saying, “It’s not just Eminem. Television, movies, and the entertainment industry as a

whole expose kids to explicit images on a daily basis. We want to discuss the impact such images and lyrics have on different people” (Bull, 2001, p. 17).

The integration of a gay-themed lesson into a multicultural context serves as a final curricular issue within the literature. The purpose of the lesson, called “Dear Anita” was to teach the students sensitivity to diversity while seeking common ground across marginalized groups. In the class called “The Ethnic Experience in Literature,” the teacher chose to include a letter written by a Catholic lesbian in response to Anita Bryant, who campaigned against the rights of gay people to teach in Dade County schools. Of importance here, “some educators fear that including sexual orientation and homophobia in a multicultural curriculum dilutes the focus on race and ethnicity that belongs at the heart of the multicultural agenda” (Athanases, 1996, p. 240). The “Dear Anita” lesson shows that a lesson on gay and lesbian concerns need not detract from the aforementioned curricular goals, but instead may “deepen students’ understanding about identity and oppression and the ways in which marginal groups share features and differ” (p. 254). This lesson also speaks to the essential need for “coalition building” in struggles for civil rights and equality. The author speaks strongly against the idea that a “pecking order of oppression” should exist among marginalized groups. This lesson demonstrates the parallels between gay-themed lessons and the multicultural model and, equally important, points to the possibility of including gay themes within other social studies contexts like education for democracy and social justice.

Literature on Masculinity

Gay men are often stereotyped as effeminate-acting, limp-wristed, pansies that speak with a lisp in their voices. While this is admittedly an extreme characterization, there are people who actually believe this to be true. Those of us who are gay are fully aware of this stereotype and sometimes try diligently to mask any perceived effeminate characteristics that we may have so that we can appear more “manly.” Given this scenario, it is appropriate to discuss research that takes a closer look at masculinity. This discussion is particularly poignant given that several of the gay male teachers in this study believe that it is important to be perceived as a heterosexual, masculine man at work.

According to Gilbert and Gilbert (1998), “essentialist arguments hold the view that there is a core personality and character which defines masculinity, and which all men actually or potentially share” (p. 31). This essentialist viewpoint leads one to believe that all men are alike over time and space and therefore any behavior displayed by boys and men must indeed be natural. This essentialist view also assumes that any unexpected behavior rests outside the norm and is, therefore, abnormal or anomalous at best. This view is further sub-divided into two categories, psychic and biological.

Those theorists who support psychic essentialism see masculinity as “a psychological force which governs the state of the male psyche, and which specifies the content of the masculine personality” (Gilbert & Gilbert, p. 32). One popular version of this line of thought stresses the idea that men suffer from a spiritual lack, that a man’s natural competitiveness and repression of emotion has somehow been violated. From this perspective, modern society has somehow repressed this natural masculinity and this

repression has caused serious psychological turmoil for the male species. The clear implication here is that boys' "misbehavior" in modern classrooms and adult males' aggressive, and sometimes criminal, behaviors exemplify the inner struggle to balance their "natural" desires with society's expectations of proper social behavior.

Even though this psychic essentialist argument appeals to some theorists, Gilbert & Gilbert (1998) and Connell (1995) find that it has three major weaknesses because the theory is based upon a series of false premises. First, it assumes that conflicting pressures are somehow unnatural. Yet, boys and girls face complex situations, must make tough choices, and deal with confusing scenarios everyday. Just one glimpse of a student's social life at school points to the complexity they face on a daily basis. Psychic essentialism promotes "unified and unchanging harmony" which is just not a part of the modern world.

Second, theorists who support psychic essentialism wrongly believe that there is only one true way for a man to be. If we support that notion, there is surely no room for growth and change over time. And third, this essentialist argument implies that all men over time and geographic space face similar and unchanging problems. Further, supporters of this idea would have us believe that "there is one common solution in a universal masculinity" (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998 p. 35). This line of thinking totally negates the effects of historical change and severely limits cultural diversity. It is difficult to believe that the problems faced by men and boys in pre-Industrial England, for example, have the same solutions for boys and men growing up in modern-day Tampa.

The second dimension of the essentialist argument centers on biology. Here, the supporters turn to the body to find the essence of the one true masculinity. In particular,

brain research has been used to demonstrate sex differences. The major argument is that male and female brains differ in structure and size, are organized differently, and process information differently causing a variety of outcomes. The idea is that the brain's natural wiring causes men to do better on some tasks and women to do better on others. One of the more classic assumptions based on such research is that boys perform better in logic exercises like math and science or puzzles, while girls perform better in the creative arts and in Language Arts or literature. Also heavily implied in this type of research is that since the brain also controls emotions, the differences in male and female brains causes one sex (male) to be more emotionally equipped than the other (female). Other studies have even linked brain research to the differences observed in boys' and girls' memory, imagination, and in how they differentially think, feel, and act under various conditions.

Despite the claims of brain researchers, Gilbert & Gilbert (1998) find that the use of unusually small sample sizes in experiments and overly simplistic interpretations of results render biological essentialist arguments moot. For example, while some studies claim that men have larger brains, others claim just the opposite while still others say that different portions of the brain are different sizes in both men and women. In addition, Gilbert & Gilbert (1998) believe that most brain studies deny the complexity and interactiveness of brain function and endorse the idea that all brains are connected in the same way like some electronic device or game. The larger point here “demonstrates the very complex and unresolved state of research into brain organization and structure” (Gilbert & Gilbert, p. 39). Unfortunately, however, too many people are willing to believe unsubstantiated conclusions because they confirm some personal perceptions and

observations from the classroom. Indeed, these perceptions often support gender dichotomy and the existence of essentialist masculinity.

Clearly, supporters of essentialist masculinity have many converts based upon the perceptions of boy behavior in the classroom and in the larger society as well. These supporters see masculinity as unchanging and common to all men and further that there is some shared essence of masculinity, which manifests itself similarly in all boys. (Imms, 2000, p. 5) That many people support the idea that “boys will be boys” and will excuse certain behaviors based upon that faulty premise is evidence of the power and popularity of this line of thinking. There is growing evidence, however, that despite the popular perception of one, essential masculinity, that multiple masculinities exist. Imms (2000), however, believes that a multiple masculinities approach yields a more complete understanding of male behaviors, and that it may successfully challenge the popularity of essentialist masculinity. According to this researcher, the multiple masculinities approach has several key characteristics. First, it is not reducible to one set of simple characteristics. Second, gender is socially constructed (Lorber & Farrell, 1991) and individuals do not automatically adopt one set of pre-determined gender roles. From this perspective, people continually negotiate and change their perceptions of gender throughout their lifetimes. Third, Imms (2000) believes that gender is a “relational construct.” In other words, boys and men do not create and perform their versions of masculinity totally outside of female influence and other men. (p. 6) The idea of performance is critical here as Buchbinder (1998) and Imms (2000) believe that over the span of a lifetime and even within the span of a boy’s adolescent years, he tries out different forms of masculinity at home and at school. In fact, Gilbert & Gilbert (1998)

discuss research conducted in England and in Sydney, Australia, that clearly indicates the existence of multiple male performances.

The first and most commonly discussed example of masculinity is the stereotypical hegemonic masculinity performed by a group of boys Mac an Ghail (1994) called “Macho Lads.” These young men reject many of the school’s values and oppose authority in very open and direct ways. They joke around in class, often flaunt their superior sexual experience over conventional boys (at the high school level), drink, and swear in public as evidence of their independence. These boys often display their need to promote themselves and their worldview by putting down others, and they reject school for its focus on mental rather than manual work. Macho Lads often ridicule boys who engage in the learning process as weak and effeminate and often display both racist and sexist attitudes. Indeed, Mac an Ghail (1994) found that Macho Lads “reject the school curriculum and regulations in favor of learning to be tough, which for them involves fighting, fucking, and football” (p. 58). In Sydney, Walker (1988) called a similar group of boys “competitors” and “footballers” because “sport played a powerful role in their group identity based on the superiority of heterosexuality, of machismo demonstrated through athletic and sexual prowess, physical strength, drinking, and appropriate verbal display” (p. 39).

It is important to note that this strong, dominant form of masculinity may not be performed all the time and may actually be seen only in certain situations. Within the context of sport or play on the playground, these macho behaviors may be seen much more than in the classroom setting, depending on the level of a student’s engagement and the number of students in class willing to support the behavior. Macho antics most often

occur when the perpetrator has a willing audience for whom to perform. This macho performance also takes the form of bullying which often occurs in the hallways between classes and at the cafeteria when adult supervision and structure is often less pronounced than it is in the regular classroom setting.

The next performance of masculinity researchers have observed comes from a group of boys dubbed “Academic Achievers.” This smaller group of boys, as compared to the Macho Lads, is more positively oriented toward the school curriculum, but not necessarily toward the school itself. Often viewed as effeminate by Macho Lads (and some teachers), these boys in time develop an intellectual confidence that allows them to confront the more macho individuals. Gilbert & Gilbert (1998) report that at the grade school level, these boys often face difficult times socially, but maintain a feeling of intellectual superiority while in the classroom. Further, Mac an Ghail (1994) found that even though some boys and teachers viewed these Academic Achievers as effeminate, they saw themselves as quite masculine. In one particular English class, for example, these boys clearly explained how they were different from the girls. From their perspective, Academic Achievers “focused on an intellectual approach to being an expert” to describe their love for English, while the girls’ interests were in “feminine writers and all the emotional stuff” (Mac an Ghail, p. 61). Like the Macho Lads, it was important to distinguish their behavior from the girls’ behaviors – indeed, to display their unique form of masculinity.

The third group identified in the research is called the New Enterprisers. According to Mac an Ghail (1994), this group of young men performed masculinity through a pragmatic commitment to rationality and knowledge, and a concern for future careers.

Utilitarian in their views, these boys best related to school through technological subjects and were often involved in “mini-enterprises.” These boys viewed Macho Lads as “childish” and believe that macho behavior damaged the overall reputation of the school, and thereby damaged their reputations as well. The New Enterprisers felt that teachers were too soft on inappropriate (Lad) behavior and supported the administrators who were often seen as having more authority.

And, finally, Mac an Ghail (1994) describes a group of boys who, according to Gilbert & Gilbert (1998), came “from a non-commercial, middle class background with professional aspirations who saw themselves as cultural arbiters of taste and style” (p. 128). This group of boys considers most teachers and students conventional and boring. In an earlier study, Abraham (1989) referred to this group of independent boys as “gothic punks.” Never giving this group of boys an official title, Mac an Ghail (1994) found that these boys considered the Macho Lads to be “trash” and looked down upon Academic Achievers and New Enterprisers for working far too hard on meaningless assignments and projects. Unlike the other groups, Abraham (1989) reports that his “gothic punks” often included girls in the group and preferred art, music, and conversation to technology or sport (Gilbert & Gilbert, p. 128). This group openly rejected the macho image and formed more egalitarian relationships with girls. Accordingly, they certainly did not view girls as sexual objects, which is characteristic of the Macho Lads. In fact, “the gothic punks seem to be an exception to a widespread feature of boys’ school culture, in that sexuality is not a central part of the distinctions around which they construct their sense of themselves” (p. 129). This mixed group of students saw themselves as more mature

and more enlightened than their classmates and considered school “an intrusion into their real lives of bands and nightlife” (Gilbert & Gilbert, p. 129).

These various performances of masculinity demonstrate the ineffectiveness of essentialist arguments that center on biology or the male psyche. Even if teachers think they perceive one dominant set of masculine behaviors in the classroom at school, the research clearly indicates the existence of multiple masculinities that play out everyday in various school settings. Perhaps teachers need to look more closely at those boys being teased or those boys who sit quietly in order to notice something other than the dominant, hegemonic masculinity displayed by the Macho Lads or the jocks. If other performances of masculinity are given more attention, perhaps openly sexist behavior will be minimized, perhaps bullying will decrease, and perhaps male students perceived as gay will no longer be labeled effeminate. I speculate that if teachers and parents become more supportive of multiple masculine performances at home and at school then adult men will feel freer to openly display similar performances as well. Regardless of a man’s sexual orientation, I believe we all engage in such varied performances on a daily basis, whether or not the performance is intended for public viewing.

Summary

The literature covers the lives of gay, lesbian, and questioning students to a high degree. Whether it focuses on the challenges they face or the mechanisms established to help them, the gay student experience is widely discussed. By no means should one assume that this coverage is complete, but the number of articles and books about the gay student experience far outnumbers the articles and books about gay teachers. Griffin

(1992) established a model that has been useful in understanding how gay teachers cope with issues of sexuality at school. Kissen (1996) successfully used that model to explain the behaviors of the teacher in her study. Meanwhile, many researchers have discussed the fears faced by gay teachers and the various relationships they have with students and adults. Of particular interest, it appears, is the issue about whether or not and when a gay teacher should come out to his or her students (Khayatt, 1997; Lipkin, 2004; Renesenbrink, 1996). Among all the literature reviewed, however, only one book discussed the day-to-day lived experiences of gay teachers in Florida, Sanlo's (1999) *Unheard Voices*.

In the current study, I discuss some of the issues mentioned by other gay teachers found in the literature. Some of my informants mentioned enduring verbal harassment; one mentioned the fear of losing his job; and two discussed being accused of committing an inappropriate action that involved a male student. In addition, Griffin's (1992) model helped me to understand better how teachers in West Central Florida cope with the challenges associated with being gay. Like Sanlo (1999), my study focused on the lives of gay teachers in one specific area in one state, but it included only men who work in secondary schools. This specific focus allows the reader to gain a more complete understanding of this group of people and the decisions they make in class. The following research questions guided my quest for a better understanding of gay male teachers' lived, classroom experiences.

1. How do gay male teachers describe the role their sexual orientation plays in their classroom decision-making about content?

2. How do gay male teachers describe the effect of their sexual orientation on classroom management decisions?
3. What barriers do gay male teachers perceive that prevent them from addressing anti-gay or homophobic language uttered by their students or colleagues?
4. What barriers do gay male teachers perceive that prevent them from revealing their sexual orientation to their colleagues and students at school?

Because the school districts of West Central Florida do not include sexual orientation on their non-discrimination policies, it was a challenge finding men who were willing to talk openly about their experiences. By using Sanlo's (1999) study as a guide, however, it helped me to overcome this challenge. For those brave men who spoke out, I am grateful because their stories turned out to be invaluable to me and they might, someday, instigate the promotion of positive change for gay teachers in this area.

Chapter 3

Method

Introduction

This study employed qualitative research methodology and was exploratory in nature. Therefore, any facts presented are fluid, subjective, and given from the perspective of the participants and based upon their understandings of their lived experiences. In this chapter, the reader will find information about the participants, the sampling characteristics employed to locate these participants, and the interview format used to extract data from them. The chapter closes with an in-depth discussion of the qualitative procedures I used to collect and analyze the data. Although I was able to identify eleven potential informants using the methods described below, there were only seven informants who participated in this study to its conclusion. Two of the four men who did not participate failed to return phone calls and electronic mail messages after they made initial contact with me and a third simply told me that he had changed his mind about being in the study. He cited lack of time for his inability to participate. The fourth individual was willing to participate in the study, but he made contact with me after the final analysis of data had begun, and therefore it was too late to include his input. The seven participants who saw this study to its end were interviewed in person and contacted by phone and/or electronic mail. The primary source of data collection, however, was the hour-long personal interview.

Participants

The participants for this study all came from the West Central region of Florida. Because the nature of this study was potentially highly controversial for the participants involved, the names of the schools where they teach have been purposefully concealed, and I assigned each informant a pseudonym that in no way reveals their true identities. In fact, I assigned names randomly using the first seven letters of the alphabet. I alphabetized the informants by their given first names, and then matched a new name that began with the letters A through G. My sample of gay, male teachers represent the following counties: Hernando, Hillsborough, Pasco, and Pinellas. They all teach in public or private secondary schools, grades 6-12. For the purposes of this study a participant's age, race, ethnicity, or years of teaching experience did not exclude him from the study. The diverse group of men who participated in this study ranged in ages from 26 – 54, and they have various amounts of teaching experience, ranging from one year to thirty-five years. Three of the participants were Latinos and the other four were White, but only their biological sex and sexual orientation were significant for purposes of selection for this study. Additional biographical information on each informant is found in Chapter 4.

Using a network-sampling scheme identified by Miles and Huberman (1994), I identified eleven potential participants for this study, of which seven participated throughout the duration of the study. As I had hoped, this number of informants allowed me to obtain a manageable amount of information given the time and resource restraints I had endured over the course of this study. In order to obtain data saturation, I communicated with these seven participants using multiple modes of communication, including person-to-person interviews, telephone conversations, and electronic mail

messages. The phone conversations and electronic mail messages were used mainly to make arrangements for the personal interviews and to clarify questions or themes that occurred during the interviews. I also used electronic mail to send the informants copies of the transcribed interviews after they had been converted into Word document format for member checking purposes. I successfully achieved data saturation with the seven informants as a result of using these various modes of communication, which took place between November 2004 and April 2005. Given the controversial nature of the topic and the conservative atmosphere in which the study took place, I considered myself fortunate to find the seven participants who were willing to share their insights and who saw the study through to its conclusion.

Sampling Characteristics

In order to locate potential informants for this study, I initially identified and contacted two reliable sources, Kelly and Martha, who have frequent contact with the teachers who work in the secondary schools located in Hillsborough County. Both of these contacts are current teachers in Hillsborough and hold leadership positions: one at the district level and the other at her school site. Both of these women are members of the Fall 2002 doctoral cohort in Social Science Education with me at the University of South Florida. From the very beginning they assured me that they could contact male teachers in the Hillsborough district who fit the criteria for my study. As cohort members and friends, I trusted that they would deliver on their assurances. In addition, an openly gay graduate student in a separate program at the University of South Florida informed me that his two roommates were gay teachers in the area. Therefore, the sampling was

purposive and had no characteristics of randomness. Armed with my electronic mail addresses, my telephone numbers, and a rudimentary understanding of the proposed study, Kelly, Martha, and the male graduate student identified and spoke directly to potential informants. Each distributed my contact information, and I waited to hear something back from the targeted individuals who were at that time unknown to me.

For two weeks, I heard nothing from those targeted teachers, all of whom worked in the Hillsborough district, but in the interim, I gave a presentation at the annual meeting of the Florida Council of the Social Studies, which took place in Sarasota, Florida, in October 2004. At the end of that presentation, I announced that I was seeking informants for a study on gay male teachers in West Central Florida. To my surprise a young male teacher from Pinellas County approached me saying that he was interested in participating in the study. In addition, a young female teacher from Hillsborough told me that she knew of two potential informants who worked at her private school. I gave them both my contact information and waited to hear back from them. The following week, I heard back from the young male teacher from Pinellas, and he enthusiastically agreed to be an informant. With that contact firmly established, I then relied on the Network Sampling technique to locate other participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It was my belief that the men who contacted me would know of other male teachers who met the given criteria for this study. As it turned out, I was correct. The indirect contacts yielded eleven potential informants, seven of whom completed the process and saw the project to its conclusion. If this procedure had been unsuccessful, I would have turned to professional organizations to locate potential informants. The organization I had in mind

was the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), which has a local chapter in both Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties.

For the purposes of my study, I am pleased that the Network Sampling worked. I believe that teachers who belong to organizations such as GLSEN are more open about their sexuality than the average gay teacher. In order for my study to reflect the diversity of gay teachers from the various districts, it was important to identify teachers who fell along various points of the spectrum of openness; from completely closeted to completely out. Certainly, the Network Sampling technique did not guarantee such an outcome, but I assumed that that procedure had a higher probability of yielding my desired sample than only using gay male teachers brave enough to belong to gay-affiliated organizations. In this way, I also believe my sample was more representative and a truer reflection of the gay teachers who work in West Central Florida schools, rather than a sampling of the more activist gay teachers who belong to organizations.

At the point of first contact with the informants, which generally occurred by phone or electronic message, I began the process of earning trust. Several of the informants wanted to know about my interest in gay and lesbian studies and asked about my specific interest in gay teachers. I told them about a past project on gay and lesbian students I was involved with in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2002. As a graduate student at the University of Virginia, I did a study on the only Gay-Straight Alliance found in the public schools of Albemarle County. I also shared with them that I am a former gay male teacher who has taught in public, secondary schools. Many of the issues and challenges I faced as a closeted, gay teacher from 1995-2001 continue to inspire me to ask questions and think about the factors that impact classroom decision-making, curriculum, and the

overall lived experiences of fellow gay teachers. I strongly believe that because I am gay and a former teacher, the informants were more willing to open up to me and share their thoughts, insights, and experiences.

This common trait, however, may have also resulted in a form of bias that I had not heretofore considered. Bernard (1994) described what is known as the *deference effect*. This phenomenon occurs when “informants tell you what they think you want to know in order not to offend you” (Bernard, 1994, p. 231). The deference effect is usually associated with race or ethnicity, but I believe that it is plausible for one’s sexual orientation to create favorable conditions for this phenomenon as well. It is indeed possible that the perceived sincerity and honesty of the informants may have been influenced more by the deference effect than by the trust I believe was created. At the same time, it is also plausible that, if present, the deference effect could have presented itself in a manner such that the informants actually felt more compelled to be open and honest with me because they were, in fact, *deferring* to our shared status as sexual minorities. There is no way of attaining one hundred percent clarity on this issue, but I believe that sharing this common trait with the informants, particularly given the sense of isolation felt by many gay teachers, was more of a help than a hindrance during the interview process.

With trust established, I scheduled individual interview times with each informant. Most of the scheduling took place over the phone, but on rare occasion, I scheduled a meeting time and place via electronic mail. I wanted to be assured that we met at times and places that offered the informant the highest level of comfort. With that in mind, I let each of them decide where the hour-long interviews would take place. The meeting

places included individuals' home residences in three instances, a private office at the College of Education at the University of South Florida in three instances, and a public coffee shop in one instance. In each case, I briefed the informant on what he might expect from the interview and provided him with a copy of a consent form that each individual signed and returned to me. I also gave each informant a copy of the interview schedule. I answered any lingering questions and assured each individual that his identity would be kept confidential. In addition, I asked each individual for his permission to be audio-taped during the interview; all informants graciously agreed. Once the audiotaped interview was complete, I invited each informant to contact me via phone or electronic mail if they wanted to add something that had not come to mind during the course of the interview. Equally important, I thanked each informant for his time, both at the end of the interview and later, via electronic mail.

Qualitative Instruments

The only instrument used for this study was the interview schedule. As the sole developer of the questions that were used, there was no need to train any other administrators. I believe the questions on the instrument elicited appropriate responses from the informants particularly given the trust that I previously established with each informant. As each question was asked, some new questions emerged as the individual interviews unfolded. Every informant received that same interview schedule, but each interview varied in minor ways depending on the flow of conversation and the level of sharing that took place.

Interview Format

As stated previously, each informant was asked to sit for an hour-long interview at a private location of his choice. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, but during each session, questions and issues emerged that were unplanned. The interview process began on January 8, 2005 and ended on April 3, 2005. Before, during, and after those specific dates, I also engaged the participants in informal telephone conversations and electronic mail messages so that their insights and/or thoughts not shared during the formal interview sessions could also be recorded. All of the reported data came from personal interviews because the phone conversations and electronic mail messages centered mainly on scheduling issues, relationship/trust building, information clarification, and member-checking.

After each interview was recorded on audiotape, the researcher transcribed the tapes paying special attention to change names and schools sites if they were mentioned during the course of the interview. In two cases, an outside person was hired to transcribe an interview because of the labor-intensive nature of the task and the ensuing time constraints. In both cases, I contacted the appropriate informant and received permission to have the third party transcribe his taped interview. I also reviewed those transcriptions and made some additions to the text where the third party could not understand what was said. Once this process was completed, I sent an electronic message to each informant with a Word document attached that contained the transcribed interview text. They had the opportunity to make additions, deletions, or changes to the text before any formal analysis began. Only one of the informants returned his transcribed interview text with corrections, both of which were minor. An informant who currently teaches Spanish in

Pasco County had mentioned the name of a Spanish writer who was gay. Because I do not speak Spanish, I had misspelled the person's name in the transcribed text. This same teacher also clarified the order of events from the text to make sure that I had understood that he had told the story about two challenging students out of chronological order to maintain his focus on one specific theme/question. After making and verifying those minor corrections, the analysis phase began.

In order to address the major research questions of this project, the following interview schedule was used.

Research Question #1

How do gay male teachers describe the role their sexual orientation plays in their classroom decision-making about content?

1. How familiar are you with gay figures in your field of study?
2. How familiar are you with modern-day gay men and lesbians or gay organizations that impact our society?
3. How might you incorporate gay historical figures, where they fit in your curriculum, in order to promote diversity and awareness among your students?
4. How do you feel when students ask about current events that center on gay issues? (i.e. marriage, gay athletes, adoption, etc.)
5. Are there known (gay-themed) issues that you purposely avoid? Information about individuals that you purposely leave out?
6. Are there known (gay-themed) issues that you purposely include in your teaching?
7. Do you have access to resources that provide information on gay themed topics – either historical or current events?

8. How might outside resources be used to enhance the current curriculum or raise awareness among your students?

Research Question #2

How do gay male teachers describe the effect of their sexual orientation on classroom management decisions?

1. Do you have any openly gay students in your classes?
2. If so, how would you describe your relationship with them?
3. How does that relationship compare with the relationship you have with your perceived heterosexual students?
4. Has a student ever “come out” to you?
5. How might you/did you react to that scenario?
6. What discipline measures do you typically use?
7. What strategies do you use to keep students on-task?
8. How might knowing that a student is struggling with his/her sexual orientation affect the discipline measures or strategies you use?
9. What do you do when someone makes an anti-gay comment in your class?

Research Question #3

What barriers do gay male teachers perceive that prevent them from addressing anti-gay or homophobic language uttered by their students or colleagues?

1. Do you ever hear homophobic slurs at school?
2. If so, what are some examples of the slurs that you hear?
3. How often and where do you hear them?
4. How do you react when you hear these slurs?
5. How do you feel when you hear such language?

6. If you choose to correct or address homophobic language, how do you do it?
7. What does the often-used term “that’s so gay” mean to you?
8. How does your reaction to homophobic slurs differ when hearing them from fellow colleagues or adults at school?
9. Do you perceive any barriers in your classroom that prevent you from addressing homophobic language?
10. Do you perceive any barriers in your school that prevent you from addressing homophobic language?
11. Do you ever feel scared of being “outed” when you address homophobic language?
12. Do you believe addressing homophobic language reveals or exposes your sexual orientation?

Research Question #4

What barriers do gay male teachers perceive that prevent them from revealing their sexual orientation to their colleagues and students at school?

1. How open are you at work about your sexual orientation to your students?
2. Describe, in general, the relationship you have with your colleagues at school.
3. How open are you at work about your sexual orientation to your colleagues?
4. If you are “out” to your colleagues, how does that relationship differ from your less open relationships at work?
5. If you are not “out” at work, describe how you keep your sexual orientation secret.
6. Describe how you manage your degree of openness at work. What is your support network?
7. If you are “in the closet” would you ever consider “coming out” at school? Why or why not?
8. Would you like to be more open at work?

9. What are the perceived benefits of being “out” or “closeted” at work?
10. What are the perceived risks/consequences of being “out” or “closeted” at work?
11. Do you perceive a difference between your experience being gay at “blank school” and the larger teaching profession? How do they differ?
12. Do you perceive more or less acceptance/support in terms of the atmosphere at your school and the larger teaching profession?

In addition to the above interview schedule, the researcher posed several open-ended questions to the informants as well. Those questions are found below.

Open-Ended Questions

1. Describe a personal experience when your sexual orientation conflicted with the accepted norms and attitudes at work.
2. Do you know of any gay colleagues who have faced a similar scenario? Describe that experience.
3. Do you know of anyone who has successfully managed the tensions between his sexual orientation and his workplace? In other words, do you have any positive examples that serve as a model for you?

Procedures

Given the nature of this study, the primary focus was on qualitative procedures. I am fully aware of the pragmatist paradigm and the mixed-method procedures that follow (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998); they were considered but never employed given the questions that were asked and the data that were collected by the researcher. Tashakkori & Teddlie (1998) endorse a mixed-methods procedure even for studies that lean heavily toward qualitative. They believe it is *pragmatic* to include descriptive statistics, at the

very least, to more fully support any qualitative observations the researcher makes. They also believe that when a researcher employs a mixed-methods procedure, the end results have more legitimacy than purely qualitative or quantitative procedures. Given the nature of this particular study with its limited number of participants, I believe that qualitative procedures alone were sufficient.

The research paradigm within which this study falls is the transformative-
emancipatory paradigm (Mertens, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). From this research perspective, the researcher views the participants in this study as marginalized by society, but their lived experiences take center stage. Further, “the transformative paradigm frames gender, race/ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and other bases of diversity from the perspective of a social, cultural minority group such that the defining characteristic [in this case sexual orientation] is viewed as a dimension of difference and not a defect” (Ibid, p. 144). As such, the gay teachers in this study were not perceived or portrayed as victims, but instead as capable individuals with unique talents and perspectives on education. In addition, this study offered area gay teachers an opportunity to discuss their challenges and triumphs in the classroom, which may lead to a greater sense of empowerment and thus *transform* the way they teach students or interact with colleagues at school. This perspective recognizes that the voices of gay men in education have largely been ignored, and this is borne out by the dearth of literature on the subject. This study encompasses the tenets of transformative research, but does not include the characteristics of auto-ethnography. Even though I am a gay male who taught for six years in a secondary school classroom, my insights, thoughts, and memories, while ever-present, are not included directly in this study. That does not guarantee a diminution of

bias, but it does free the reader from having to navigate the murky waters of my memories and from differentiating my voice from the voices of the informants.

In accordance with the University of South Florida's policy pertaining to the use of human subjects, International Review Board approval was obtained before any data were collected to further protect the informants and to ensure the overall ethical nature of the study. This multi-layered process required me to complete several readings including the *Belmont Report*, the *Declaration of Helsinki*, the code of federal regulations, and the *Policies and Procedures Manual* supplied by the university. In addition, I completed the CITI Basic Course in the Protection of Human Research Subjects, one of two such courses found online. Once the readings were complete and the course was passed, I successfully completed an application for initial review, which included the appropriate informed consent forms, a detailed research plan, the method of participant recruitment, a statement of anticipated risks and benefits, safety monitoring procedures, a signed statement of confidentiality, full disclosure of investigator [monetary] interests, the principal investigator's statement of assurance, and all the appropriate department signatures (University of South Florida Office of Research, Division of Research Compliance, 2003). It was determined that there were no known risks for participating in this study given my heavy emphasis on confidentiality. The participants were informed in writing that they had the right to leave the study at such time that they felt unsafe or unsure about the study and/or its purpose.

In order to verify the information given by the informants, member checking took place at several different phases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Once each interview was transcribed, it was returned on a Word document via electronic mail to each informant so

that he could check for accuracy of the written statements. At that time he was given the opportunity to delete information or add information to clarify any statements made earlier. Later, the informants were given the opportunity to view the ten thematic categories created by the researcher to check for accuracy. At the end of the process, all participants were given hard copies of the results of the study and properly debriefed, which included giving them information on available counseling services at the University of South Florida. In addition, any lingering questions were answered as one last check for reliability.

Qualitative Analysis

The analysis of the qualitative data was exploratory in nature and employed a constant comparison procedure (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Constat, 1992). The ten categories that ultimately emerged from the data were initially specified in no particular order because new information from the participants continuously modified the categories and the contents of the categories throughout the entire procedure. Only after the categories became more solid, did I place them in their current order. As a means of solidifying both the categories and the contents of those categories, I produced a series of analytic notes while reading the data as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). In fact, this was accomplished by typing *italicized* notes directly in the text of the transcribed interviews. In addition, I used **bold** text to highlight important themes or phrases in the transcriptions. Once this process of creating analytic notes was complete, I employed a color-coding scheme to identify recurring phrases or themes. I used red, blue, black, and yellow throughout this process to highlight the following themes: Red print was used to

indicate themes one and two; blue print was used to indicate themes three, four, and five; black print was used to indicate themes six and seven; and yellow, highlighted print was used to indicate themes eight, nine, and ten. These colors were chosen randomly and employed as a matter of convenience. I identified the themes that shared the same color by writing a number in the margins of the transcriptions in the specific color that I used. For example, I used a “red 2” to indicate examples of the theme labeled “Interactions with Students Perceived to be Gay” and a yellow-shaded 10 to indicate examples of the theme labeled “Informants’ Perceived Special Talents of Gay Male Teachers.”

During the analysis phase, I also participated in scheduled “data workshops” with various committee members. At these workshops, committee members scrutinized both the categories and the data placed in them. This process encouraged me to reflect upon my decisions about category formation and data placement so that the best possible fit was created. This process also served as an additional check for confirmation bias. At the point of data saturation, the categories became more solid. In the end, ten categories emerged from the data that were identified by the authority of the researcher, but were also influenced by the dissertation committee, the literature, and the informants themselves (Constas, 1992). Continuous member checking with the informants justified the existence of the categories as they become more solid over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I contacted the informants via email, for example, once a particular category became more self-evident to see if they agreed with the contents of that category. I shared with individual informants specific items pulled from their transcriptions that I believed fit in a certain category. The informants were given the opportunity to disagree with my assessments, but none did. There were, however, times when I did not hear back from an

informant. In those cases, I assumed that the silence was tacit consent to move forward. Given the small number of informants for this particular study, no qualitative software was used in the analysis.

Chapter 4

Results

Introduction

After several months of conducting informant interviews, which resulted in hundreds of pages of transcribed text, follow-up telephone conversations, and exchanges of electronic mail messages with the informants, formal analysis of the data began. Informal analysis, which included becoming familiar with the text of the interviews, started on January 8, 2005, the day I began to transcribe the first audiotaped interview. The formal analysis included creating analytical notes and writing memos to myself as described by Miles and Huberman (1994), and it also included engaging the data using a complex color-coding scheme, which is detailed in Chapter 3 of this manuscript. In addition, the process also entailed making several decisions about which data fit together and was therefore useful for this study, and which data would have to remain unused for this study because they were unrelated to the four research questions. Strict attention to the purpose of this study, the expertise of dissertation committee members, and the authority of the researcher, as stated by Conastas (1992), influenced those decisions.

In the end, ten themes emerged from the data and further determined which informant responses would be reported. Those ten themes are: (1) the introduction of gay themes in classroom discussions and/or the presence of gay themes embedded within the curriculum; (2) informant interaction with students they perceived as gay; (3) the

separation of the informants' private lives from life at school; (4) the informants' perception of what constitutes proper conduct for a gay male teacher at school; (5) the challenges and problems faced by the informants at school; (6) the informants' understanding of how students used homophobic language at school; (7) the informants' use of humor in class; (8) informant relationships and interactions with colleagues at school; (9) the informants' perception of the acceptance of gay men in the classroom at three distinct levels; and (10) the informants' understanding of their perceived special talents as gay male teachers. The chapter closes with some of the informants' general commentary about the overall conditions faced by gay male teachers in West Central Florida and beyond. These reflections indicate what improvements have been achieved and the challenges that still lie ahead.

Participant Biographical Data

The seven participants in this study all currently teach in school districts in West Central Florida. This area includes Hernando County, Hillsborough County, Pasco County, and Pinellas County. Each informant teaches in a secondary school, and all of them reside in the Tampa Bay area as well. Insisting that the participants' identities be protected, I changed the participants' names, and the specific schools where they teach are never mentioned by name. In order to give the reader a more complete picture and a better understanding of the informants *and* their lived experiences at school, the participants' biographical data are included below.

Adam is a veteran teacher in the Hillsborough County School District. At his current post, he teaches Advanced Placement Psychology and Psychology I & II. Now, in his 31st year in the classroom, this 54-year-old White male has also taught other social science classes including U.S. History. Adam has also taught other secondary grades over the span of his professional career. In fact, he taught middle school social studies in Hillsborough County before coming to his current school site.

Ben is a 29-year-old Mexican American male who teaches in the Pinellas County School District. He teaches Psychology to 11th and 12th grade students at a private school. Ben is currently in his third year of teaching and works at the school site from which he graduated high school. Prior to this teaching job, his first with students, Ben taught adults in a Continuing Education Program for five years.

Chris is a veteran teacher of theatre who has taught at his current school in the Hillsborough County School District for the past eleven years. A 46-year-old White male, Chris previously served as the Director of Education for a theatre company. Chris is a former actor in the Tampa Bay area and now teaches students at the middle and upper divisions of his private, Catholic school.

Donald is a 26-year-old White male who is a first-year teacher in the Pinellas County School District. A native of Pennsylvania, he teaches both 10th and 11th grade students at

a private Catholic school in St. Petersburg, Florida. The subjects he teaches are United States History and World History.

Eric is a 54-year-old ESE teacher of Puerto Rican descent. He currently teaches an English SLD class at a public school in the Hillsborough County School District where he has been for the past three years. A native of New York City, Eric is currently in his 35th year of teaching. Before coming to the Tampa Bay area, he taught emotionally handicapped (EH) children in Palm Beach, Florida. His current position is his first as a high school teacher.

Frank is a 33-year-old White male who currently teaches Spanish I, II, III and Advanced Placement at a public high school in the Pasco County School District. This is his first year teaching at the high school level. For the past two years, he taught Spanish to 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students in a public middle school in the Hernando County School District. A native of New York City, Frank moved to Florida in 1989.

Gary is a 32-year-old Latino who teaches math in a Juvenile Detention Center in the Hillsborough County School District. He teaches in an all-male facility in a multi-grade level classroom, grades 6-12. Gary is in his third year as a full-time teacher for the county. Prior to that, he taught in a program for high school dropouts from migrant backgrounds based at the University of South Florida. Gary also served as a teaching assistant for five years before he became a full-time teacher.

Figure 1.

Summary of Critical Informant Data

<u>Name</u>	<u>School District(s)</u>	<u>Subjects Taught</u>	<u>Years of Experience</u>
Adam	Hillsborough	AP Psychology Psychology I & II	31
Ben	Pinellas	Psychology	3
Chris	Hillsborough	Theatre	11
Donald	Pinellas	United States History World History	1
Eric	Hillsborough	English SLD	35
Frank	Pasco (current)	Spanish I, II, and III AP Spanish	3
	Hernando	6 th – 8 th grade Spanish	
Gary	Hillsborough	6 th – 12 th grade Math	3

The Participants' School Districts

In order to give the reader a better understanding of the school districts where the participants in this study teach, I have provided some general information about the districts and the public schools located there. Even though some of the informants teach in private schools, the general demographics of the various districts will give the reader some indication of the make-up of all the schools in the areas, both public and private.

Again, no school names are mentioned in order to protect the identities of the informants, and it is in this spirit that specific information on private schools is excluded in the district overviews.

Hernando County School District

Located at the northern most geographic position of the four counties included in this study, Hernando County is approximately 45 miles north of downtown Tampa and 50 miles west of Orlando (Hernando County Government, n.d.). It is a rural county covering 478 square miles. Of the estimated 143,449 residents who live in Hernando County, 89.2 percent are Caucasian, 5 percent are Latino, 4.1 percent are African American, and the remaining 1.7 percent are Asian, American Indian or multi-racial. The median household income for these residents according to the 2000 census is \$32,572 (U.S. Census Bureau: Florida Quick Facts, 2005). Within the county's borders is housed ten public elementary schools, three public middle schools, and three public high schools. The Nature Coast Technical School, the STAR Education Center, and the Gulf Coast Academy of Science and Technology are three other educational institutions located in Hernando County, the latter being the county's only charter school (Hernando County School Board, 2002).

Hillsborough County School District

Hillsborough County represents the largest of the counties covered in this study. It has a land area of approximately 1,048 square miles and 24 square miles of inland water for a total of 1,072 square miles, and has a population of over one million residents (Hillsborough County Government, 2004). Within Hillsborough County are three

incorporated cities: Tampa, Temple Terrace, and Plant City. Of the people living there, 63.3 percent are Caucasian, 18 per cent are Latino, and 15 per cent are African American. The other 3.7 per cent of the population includes Asian Americans, American Indians, Native Hawaiians, and persons who identify as multi-racial. As of the 2000 census, the median household income in Hillsborough County is \$40,663 (U.S. Census Bureau: Florida Quick Facts, 2005). Within the borders of this mostly urban county are 193 schools, grades K-12. There are 126 elementary schools, 40 middle schools, 4 schools service grades K-8, and 23 high schools. In addition, there are 65 other educational centers in the county including charter schools, early childhood centers, and adult education centers (School District of Hillsborough County, n.d.).

Pasco County School District

Sandwiched between Hernando County to its north and Hillsborough County to the south lies rural Pasco County. It has a land area of 745 square miles and its population is just under 389,000 residents according to the 2000 census. Of the counties represented in this study, Pasco is the most homogeneous with 89.9 percent of its residents identifying as Caucasian. Only 5.7 percent are Latino and a mere 2.1 percent are African American. This leaves only 0.3 percent of Pasco's population who identify themselves as Asian American, Indian American, or multi-racial. The median household income for the county is \$32,969 (U.S. Census Bureau: Florida Quick Facts, 2005). Within the borders of Pasco County are 37 elementary schools, 11 middle schools, 13 high schools, and 5 charter schools. According to the Pasco County website, the district offers a number of other educational programs and services including Title I and Migrant Education,

Dropout Prevention Programs, ESOL Programs, and ROTC (Pasco County Schools, n.d.).

Pinellas County School District

Situated at the westernmost geographic location of the four counties in this study is Pinellas County. Covering only 280 square miles, Pinellas is by far the smallest county in terms of land area, but it is second only to Hillsborough in terms of population, boasting an estimated 926,146 residents. In fact, this urban district is the seventh largest in Florida and the twenty-second largest in the United States, serving over 113,000 students, K-12 (Pinellas County Schools, 2004). Of the nearly one million residents, 82.8 percent identify as Caucasian, and unlike the other three districts in the West Central Florida area, African Americans outnumber Latino Americans 9 percent to 4.6 percent. Asian Americans make up 2.1 percent of the population, and the remaining 1.5 percent includes a smattering of American Indians, Native Hawaiians, and persons who identify as multi-racial. The median household income for these residents is approximately \$37,111 (U.S. Census Bureau: Florida Quick Facts, 2005). Of the 145 public schools in Pinellas County, 86 are elementary schools, 27 are middle schools, 21 are high schools, and there are a number of Exceptional and Adult Schools as well.

Qualitative Research Questions

The following qualitative research questions served as the catalyst for the data the informants produced:

1. How do gay male teachers describe the role their sexual orientation plays in their classroom decision-making about content?
2. How do gay male teachers describe the effect of their sexual orientation on classroom management decisions?
3. What barriers do gay male teachers perceive that prevent them from addressing anti-gay or homophobic language uttered by their students or colleagues?
4. What barriers do gay male teachers perceive that prevent them from revealing their sexual orientation to their colleagues and students at school?

From these data, ten subsequent themes emerged.

Theme 1: Gay-Themed Materials in the Classroom

All seven informants indicated that gay-themed issues were discussed in the classroom, but each reported different degrees of depth and breadth. The most common gay-themed topic mentioned was same-sex marriage. Frank informed me, “gay stuff seems to come up once in a while in the classroom, but only when we’re talking about literature or when the students do presentations. One of the students did same-sex marriage, and she did a great job” (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15,

2005). ESE teacher, Eric, echoed similar sentiments saying, “Last year, there was a big issue on gay marriages and the school put something into the school newspaper and interviewed students about their feelings on gay marriages. So, I used the topic as a topic for debate in my English class. And it was very interesting. A lot of the kids that I thought would not be tolerant were tolerant” (Informant Eric, personal interview, February 4, 2005). Both Adam and Ben, the two informants who teach Psychology, mentioned that gay themes come up as part of the curriculum and Ben elaborated saying, “The subject comes up in the content because as sort of an introduction to abnormal psychology, we talk about it. We talk about what’s abnormal and what’s dysfunctional behavior. As part of that introduction, we talk about how homosexual behavior used to be diagnosed as abnormal behavior” (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005). Chris mentioned that discussions about Matthew Shepard’s death took place in his theatre class, and that he had performed the Laramie Project last year, but he “stuck to the facts of what was going on and what the news was presenting to the community” (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005). As a teacher of middle school aged students, he was careful not to let the discussion get too personal, but in previous years as a high school teacher in theatre, he had “no problem bringing up the gay topic.” Said Chris, “In high school, I talked more about how it [the Shepard case] affected the gay community” (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005).

Of all the informants, however, Donald shared the most detailed accounts of how gay-themed issues impact his World History and U.S. History classes. When I asked him about examples of gay themes in his World History class, he said:

Already this year in my class the subject has come up. And actually, surprisingly, some of the students seem to be interested in topics that involve homosexuality at various times, for example, Alexander the Great. The topic came up during the second week of school when some of the students asked about his bisexuality. They actually mentioned it in a little snippet in the textbook. So, that sparked conversation and led to debate, which was actually good, and then the movie came out and the students got even more interested in it. Some of them actually did it for their project and included it using historical perspectives on like was he gay or was he straight or was bisexuality pretty much normal for that time period in history in that culture during that time. But also during the Renaissance and Reformation, some of the students brought up Shakespeare and they were like, 'We heard that Shakespeare was gay.' So we talked about that for a while and maybe some issues on that area, but specifically focused on the gay issue. I don't make it a topic of study. When the issue comes up and the students ask about it, of course I elaborate on it more and discuss it (Informant Donald, personal interview, February 2, 2005).

Despite his claim of not making gay themes a topic of study, it is clear that Donald initiates discussion on the topic when it fits into the curriculum. When I asked him about how gay themes impact his United States History class, he said:

Well, if there's a time when I feel that it is important, like for example, my students will be going on a field trip to the Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg.

They do a section at the Holocaust Museum on homosexuals that were killed in torture chambers also. And the students already know about that and we've gone over that in the classroom. In addition, we have this weird activity period day, and there are only 30-minute classes, so I did a preview of the Holocaust. And one of the things we talked about is that it wasn't just Jews. There were also Gypsies and Poles and homosexuals killed in the Holocaust as well, and the students actually found it very interesting. And we talked about the experiments that were done to homosexuals and twins and things like that. So, I would include it [a gay-themed topic] if I felt that it was definitely content necessary like an issue like that (Informant Donald, personal interview, February 2, 2005).

Clearly, gay-themed topics and discussions take place in the classrooms of these gay male teachers who work in West Central Florida. In each case, these teachers connect the theme to the topics covered by the official, mandated curriculum. Interestingly, these gay themes evoked a variety of emotions from the informants, but none of these gay male teachers reported avoiding these topics. Commenting on the hurt feelings he experienced during discussions spurred by oral presentations in his Spanish classes in the Pasco County School District, Frank said, "Some of the stuff I heard was a little off the wall. I really didn't want to interrupt it because they were doing most of the conversation in Spanish, and since it was the target language, I let it go. But hearing things like, 'I'm mentally ill' or about someone who 'changed because he is [now] a Fundamentalist'" does not sit well with Frank. "But," he continued, "it's like people still think this way and you can't seem to be able to escape that even in academia. I go into this [class

presentations] knowing that some aspects may sit uncomfortable with me, but that's just part of the deal" (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005). Indeed, some informants reported having to endure hearing stereotypes and/or myths about gay people since they felt uncomfortable openly refuting them in class, or just chose not to do so. When students stated that homosexuality was a mental illness, for example, or that a gay person could be converted into a heterosexual by performing various religious rituals, this was alarming evidence that various people still hold some misguided beliefs.

The other informants echoed this sentiment of teaching appropriate, gay-themed topics despite how these topics might affect them personally. After one particularly intense conversation in his Psychology class about whether or not being gay was a choice, Ben remembers "in my head I was sort of rolling my eyes and thinking, 'Oh, no. I've got some of *them* in my class.'" Despite that memory, however, he concluded, "We've got a curriculum and a curriculum guide and there's content that's got to be covered. And I have a responsibility. If there's something that I don't like or something that I might personally feel uncomfortable with, it's part of what we have to go over and the material needs to be included. I think it would be unfair to the student if we did not include that" (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005). Clearly, all of the informants reported that gay-themed topics sometimes come up in the classroom. At times the issue is sparked by current events and at other times by events embedded within the mandated curriculum. In either case, the gay male teachers in this study address the issue, just as they would address other topics that come up in class.

Theme 2: Interactions with Students Perceived to be Gay

Just as all of the informants discussed experiences with gay-themed topics, they all shared encounters with students who they perceived to be gay or questioning their sexuality. Some of these encounters resulted in a student revealing his sexual orientation to the teacher, while at other times nothing was confirmed. Indeed, each encounter was different but in most cases, the teacher extended himself to the student in a caring and understanding manner. Sometimes caring meant pulling the student aside and giving him or her a friendly word of advice or caution, while at other times it meant watching over the student with a protective eye from afar.

Chris, who described himself as “the only visible gay person on campus,” employs the watchful eye approach. For years, he has noticed the need for some type of safe zone, an area designated as gay-friendly, for the students struggling with their sexual identities. Often safe zones are indicated by the presence of pink triangles, rainbow stickers, or the Human Rights Campaign insignia. Each time he mentioned this need to school administrators, however, the idea was “shot down” and the “many cries for help” have gone unanswered (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005). At another high school in the Hillsborough County School District, Adam has observed many young girls over the last ten years that he perceived as lesbian. Unlike in years past, however, he currently knows of “at least two and maybe three or four guys that are open” two of whom have prompted him to take action in terms of looking out for their well being at school. Adam remembered,

I thought about whether I should do this for a long time. But after school, these two guys would wait in front of the school for someone to pick them up and the one will sit on the other one's legs and they'll hold hands and hug and that kind of stuff. Well, they walked by me once on the way to the car and – I don't know if this was a wise thing to do or not – I just told them that they needed to be careful and that there were a lot of crazy people out there. I didn't go into anything explicit, but I do worry about them being some place with the wrong cracker at the wrong time. I think they needed an adult to tell them, but I don't know. I think I felt better when I said something" (Informant Adam, personal interview, February 2, 2005).

Like Chris and Adam, the other informants recall encounters with students they perceived as gay or questioning their sexual identities. In those cases, they responded to the students in similar ways. When these teachers met students who officially "came out" to them, however, they displayed a different level of concern and this prompted a greater array of responses. Frank and Gary chose to engage in personal interaction with the students, giving them advice, while closely monitoring the students in the halls and in the classroom setting. Gary recalled that while teaching in a special program at the University of South Florida designed to help high school dropouts attain their General Education Diploma, one of his male students gradually "came out" to the other students in the program:

Little by little, he started acting more and more flamboyant. He started getting comfortable, getting to know the girls. I guess he finally admitted it to the girls,

and the girls accepted him. He just went off! And the rest of the kids were clueless about how to treat or act around a gay person, and it was very distracting to them. They did not know how to treat that kind of person because they felt like he was pressuring them to accept him that way. They just wanted to be left alone. They did not want him bringing up what he had done last night. They did not want to know who he thought was good looking. So, I had to set him aside. I told him that it was ok that you have accepted yourself and 'outed' yourself, but don't push it on other people because you don't know if they're comfortable with it. You just can't assume that everybody's going to accept it. I told him he had to be mature and responsible about it, and [right now], you're not being mature or responsible. If I see or hear of something that I think you should handle differently, I will let you know. And that's how I handled it. He was the most interesting student that I had, and I was grateful that he was there. I was very proud of him because he came out. He taught them [his classmates] a lot about gay people (Informant Gary, personal interview, February 9, 2005).

Gary chose to sit down with the student, give him advice, and monitor the behaviors of the young man who had revealed to his classmates that he was gay. Frank made similar decisions with one of his middle school students in the Hernando County School District. After hearing the rumor around school that Kenny was gay and "letting it go" for a few days, it was later confirmed that Kenny had come out of the closet. When this happened, Frank contemplated having a closer relationship with Kenny and decided to keep a watchful eye on him. "I basically told him to please be careful about who you tell

because like everyone knew in like two days and I said, that's great but what if you accidentally tell the wrong person? Not everyone is as accepting as the people here who are your friends. Please be careful" (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005). Later that year, Frank was deeply moved by a note he found in his mailbox that he assumed had been written by Kenny, which read, "Dear Mr. _____, I want to thank you for letting me be able to express myself and for all your help and guidance. You're one of my favorite teachers" (Ibid, January 15, 2005).

Ben and Donald chose a more complicated approach to the students who revealed to them their sexual orientation because the circumstances presented were a bit more complex. While he has not had a student come out to him at his current school in Pinellas County, Donald has had two previous coming out experiences during his teacher preparation process. As an undergraduate student at the University of Pittsburgh, Donald was required to observe teachers in the field prior to his student teaching assignment. He recalls:

What we had to do was like go and observe a teacher four separate times and when I was doing that I got to teach a couple of lessons on certain days. On one of the last four days, I had a student come up to me and basically come out, and he said he was afraid because his parents were very much against it. And being in that position as young as I was made me feel almost uncomfortable. And so what I did was refer him to a guidance counselor that I knew. I referred him to the guidance counselor because I didn't think that I was a good authority to talk to on this issue as young as I was, and I knew this guidance counselor was open-

minded. I figured this would be a good person for him to talk to (Informant Donald, personal interview, February 2, 2005).

Because of his youth and inexperience, Donald chose to refer the student to a guidance counselor, following the protocols set forth by the school. A few years later as a graduate student conducting his final internship as part of the teacher education program at the University of South Florida, Donald had another experience with an openly gay student. In this case, the student sent Donald an electronic mail message and asked him if he was gay. A bit startled, Donald remembers:

I basically just didn't answer the email at first because I was interning. The teacher I worked with was actually very conservative, so I didn't want that to be an issue. And so I waited until the end of the semester and replied to the email just to say 'I'm sorry I didn't respond to you earlier, but, yes, I am gay.' This student was a senior. He was 18 and he was actually taking classes at USF at the same time. One of the reasons this made me uncomfortable is because this student actually sent this message to my USF mail while I was finishing my degree there. So, I didn't want him to think for a second that I viewed him as anything but a student. I kind of got the impression from his interactions with me in class like he might be sort of 'interested' in me in that way, so I didn't want to respond to it until the end of the semester (Informant Donald, personal interview, February 2, 2005).

Given that Donald told me that he sensed some form of attraction from this student and because of the perceived conservative nature of the cooperating teacher, Donald chose to ignore the openly gay student's message until such time that he was no longer a student in Donald's class. This does not indicate a lack of caring, but instead demonstrates a high level of prudence given his age, the student's age, and their common designation as college student.

Ben's interactions with openly gay students also exemplify complexity, but for reasons unrelated to similarity of age or student crushes. For Ben, the type of interaction depends on the role he plays in the student's life and on whether or not the revelation about a student's sexual orientation occurred at school. During his years in the classroom, Ben has had interactions with two or three students that he perceived to be gay, but none of those perceptions were confirmed while the students were in high school. He does, however, have a plan in place should a student ever come out to him at school:

I would ask about how they feel. You know, I don't know if they're telling me because they're upset. I don't know if they're telling me that because they're happy. I don't know if they're looking for help, so I would sort of let them lead the conversation. 'Why are you telling me this?' So, I'd let them explore that. 'How do you feel? So, what now? Have you told your friends? Have you told your family' Sort of exploring those issues and then I would leave them with some resources that are available. 'Here are some websites. I know some groups. We even have a GSA [Gay-Straight Alliance] at our school.' So, I'd be like, 'Have you heard of that? Do you know that they meet? Or, what do you want to

do?’ I would listen – sort of classic Psyche stuff – I would listen, I’d reflect, and then provide them with some resources (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005).

Ben indicated that as a school employee, he did not feel any particular duty to help students who may be questioning. On this issue, he commented, “I have to be careful I think. Just because it conjures up sex. It conjures up inappropriate contact. I would treat someone coming out to me just like they would treat someone saying they’re being abused at home or ‘I’m addicted to drugs.’ Like I hate to group it with all these other things, but there’s a procedure and I feel like I have to follow that procedure” (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005). While clearly indicating the need to follow school protocols, Ben quickly commented that outside of school, “it would be different. I might share my stories or I might tell them, ‘Look you have to read this book.’ If they were no longer a student, it would be different” (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005).

Evidence of Ben’s differentiated behavior can be seen during the volunteer work he did in local organizations in the gay community. Meeting at a local church, Ben recounted the night a 12-year-old boy came out to him:

This particular night there was only like ten kids. Some had already come out. Others would just come and sit and listen. We don’t ask for labels. We don’t ask you to identify [your sexual orientation]. If you want to, you may, but otherwise we were just talking about whatever issues everyone wished to talk about. This one day, everyone was talking and sharing, and we were watching a movie and

talking about kid stuff like Brittany Spears and Madonna, you know, stuff like that. Later on as we were sort of wrapping up, this one kid comes over and he was like, 'Hey, Ben.' And I was like, 'Hey, what's going on? How did you like it? Is everything all right? Are you making any friends?' Stuff like that and he was like, 'Yeah, I think I'm going to come back. This is the first time I've ever felt comfortable saying it ... that I'm gay. I'm gay.' I'm so glad we created an environment where he could say that, and I invited him to come back the following week and bring somebody if he wanted to (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005).

To a greater extent than the other informants, Ben indicated how each individual situation dictated his response to a student perceived as gay or one that came out, revealing his or her sexual orientation. Whether it meant pulling students aside, giving students advice, watching over perceived gay students with caring eyes, or following strict school protocols, each of these gay male teachers responded to perceived gay or openly gay students in a manner they believed to be the most appropriate.

Theme 3: Separation of Informants' Private Lives from Life at School

The men in this study reported various levels of separation between their private lives at home and their professional lives at school. For some of them, it is important to be perceived as heterosexual, especially by their students, because this helps them maintain the separation they desire. Eric commented that his students are convinced that he is a heterosexual man, and he believes that it is important that they maintain this perception

of him. “They think I’m a player, that I’m from New York and that I have women like crazy! They try to set me up with female teachers. I think if I wasn’t perceived as straight and seen as gay, I don’t think I’d be as effective as a teacher because many of the students I teach need a male figure. That’s what they are lacking in the home, and by me coming across straight, I can be that male figure for them. I deal with a lot of behavior issues and so being perceived as straight [means] I can be that male figure that most of them need” (Informant Eric, personal interview, February 4, 2005).

For other informants, the separation between their professional lives at school and their private lives at home is not so strongly connected to, or dependent upon, students’ perceptions of their sexual orientation. Instead, the separation exists because of the teachers’ professional dispositions, how they conduct themselves in class. Stated differently, it makes no difference how the informants’ students perceive them because their professional demeanor and behaviors remain intact regardless of those perceptions. In fact, every informant other than Eric commented that some of his students have openly questioned the teacher’s sexual orientation at times or they believe, at a minimum, that some students have wondered about it among their friends. On this issue Gary commented, “I had some that assumed that I was gay but were not sure, and they did not want to ask me about it. I had some that it didn’t cross their minds. They were like ‘this is Mr. _____, he’s a good teacher, he’s going to teach me, he’s a math teacher who is going to help me pass the tests.’ And there were some who were little busy bodies who wanted to figure out stuff. They ask you questions like, ‘Are you married? Do you have a girlfriend? Do you have any kids?’ They finally want to get to the point and find out what their teacher is all about. But I only let them get so far because I have to maintain this

professional relationship between myself and the students” (Informant Gary, personal interview, February 9, 2005). So, even though some of their students perceive them as gay men, the informants maintain professional behaviors in the classroom, not allowing personal issues to invade that space. In fact, those professional dispositions displayed in class enable these men to keep separate their personal lives from life at school.

Whether the teachers in this study were perceived by their students as straight or gay, See Figure 2, I believe that the strict separation between the teachers’ personal lives and their professional lives explains the relative ease with which they managed gay-themed topics and interactions with students they perceive to be gay. None of the informants described any major discomfort or hesitation in discussing gay-themed issues even if they were only indirectly related to the standard curriculum. In fact, some of these gay teachers purposefully inserted gay themes where they fit into the curriculum and invited discussions on gay topics. None of the informants described feeling that gay-themed topics somehow reflected back on them or in any way revealed their sexual orientation. And even though all of the informants described a willingness to assist students who they perceived as gay or struggling with their sexual orientation, none believe that other students or colleagues view his actions as unusual. After all, teachers are supposed to help students in need. In the end, the separation of private life from life at school allows the perceived-straight, gay teacher to interact more freely without being questioned about his sexual orientation or being “outed” at work. At the same time, this separation and professionalism act as a protective shield, perhaps against accusations of improper conduct, for those gay male teachers perceived as gay by members of the faculty or students.

Figure 2.

Student Perceptions of Informants' Sexual Orientation as Perceived by the Informant

<u>Openly Gay</u>	<u>Perceived Gay by Many</u>	<u>Perceived Gay by Some</u>	<u>Perceived Straight</u>
Chris	Donald Frank	Adam Gary	Ben Eric

Theme 4: The Informants' Perceptions of Proper Conduct by a Gay Male Teacher

If professionalism acts as a protective shield for those gay teachers who are actually perceived as gay, it may also allude to a perception of what is the proper conduct for a gay male teacher at school. According to one informant, "I want to support being out [at school], I want you to feel comfortable with yourself, but if it starts to distract from the students, then we've gone overboard. I guess there has to be a balance then. You have to be out, you have to be comfortable." This same informant continued, noticeably pained by what he was about to say. "But then I don't know if you want to be – I don't know if you want to be *flaming* or real dramatic. I don't know if I like this because I want someone to be out and comfortable, but then I hear myself saying, 'But don't be too comfortable. You still need to *straighten up*. You're a guy. You need to talk deep and dress like a guy.' Wow, it hurts me to say this" (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005). Clearly, this informant had ambivalent feelings about what he reported and his views indicated a degree of torture in terms of judging how a gay male teacher *should* act at school.

Other informants weighed in on this issue of gay teacher conduct as well, and some indicated a rationale for this mode of thinking based upon personal experiences from the past. When commenting on his perception of the acceptance of gay male teachers in general, Gary said, “I don’t think that we are accepted that much. I mean, I think we [would be] if we are in the closet or if we do our best not to show any kind of signs that we are gay” (Informant Gary, personal interview, February 9, 2005). When pushed on the meaning of his words, Gary agreed that “not showing any kind of signs” meant that gay male teachers had to avoid a certain type of walk, talk with a deep, masculine tone, and avoid having “limp wrists.” In addition he commented that gay male teachers should avoid “not [having] the ring on or having no pictures of a woman” on his desk in the classroom (Ibid, February 9, 2005). These sentiments clearly indicate the perception that gay male teachers still need to practice what Rita Kissen (1996) called “covering.”

Agreeing with both the sentiments that Ben painfully shared and with similar sentiments given rather matter-of-factly by Gary, Eric shared two experiences from his past to explain his opinions on this issue. “I had friends of mine in college and they were what we call ‘nelly’ [stereotypically feminine acting]. You know, I’d say to them, ‘I don’t know how you’re going to make it out there. You can’t wear your make-up to school.’ Well, they did, and they didn’t last. Many of them changed careers and some of them didn’t even make it past their student teaching” (Informant Eric, personal interview, February 4, 2005). Later, Eric shared this story about his first teaching job in New York, which to this day influences his behavior at school and cemented his views on how gay men should conduct themselves in school:

When I first started working in the schools, I got a job and a girl that worked there – she went crazy over me! She liked me and I was 20 and she was like always crazy about me. I went into work and then the teacher who I was assigned to said [to her] ‘he looks like a fruit.’ Then and right there, I remember that today. She told me that and I didn’t like that. So, I started watching how I walked, and how I act, you know. I felt that if I’m going to be a teacher, I don’t want to be perceived that way. I don’t want to be the object of discussion in a negative way (Informant Eric, personal interview, February 4, 2005).

Influenced by the experiences of his fellow gay classmates whom he considered “nelly” and based on an early experience in the classroom, Eric decided what for him constitutes proper behavior for gay male teachers in the classroom.

Like the other informants, Chris also has a perception of how gay male teachers should act in class. But unlike the others who stressed caution or who encouraged more perceived masculine behaviors, Chris, the only openly gay teacher in this study, offered an alternative point of view. He believes that gay male teachers should openly celebrate who they are without “covering” or hiding behind a façade of masculinity. Reflecting on his days being taught in a Catholic school, Chris shared,

I think back to when I was a young, gay boy in school. And the gay teachers that I knew were these mean, horrible, perversions of people. And most of them were alcoholics. They were basically emotionally imprisoned, and I always looked at them as these really sick, sad people. But there was this one gay brother, and I of course don’t know for sure that he was gay, but he was extremely flamboyant, and

I remember he taught religion and he played Beatles music during class, and he would talk about Beatles music. And he changed my life because he was loving and he was understanding. And I knew that he was like me, but he wasn't one of those perversions, you know, all tied up in a knot and hating themselves. He liked who he was and he knew who he was and celebrated it. And even though I just imagined all this in my head, I guess I felt that there were some gay teachers that could be productive and who [enjoyed] learning and that could teach. And that could be examples to other gay students (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005).

Unlike the other informants, Chris supports a more revealing posture for gay male teachers to adopt, one that entails less hiding or covering. Like his fellow gay teachers, however, his views do not appear in a vacuum, but instead have been shaped over the years by his lived experiences. This, I think, is the larger lesson. It is not so important that the informants define one proper code of conduct for fellow gay male teachers, but instead, what remains significant is that they all have some idea of what is appropriate for them based upon their personal lived experiences. This teaches us that many codes of conduct exist and that gay male teachers may choose which one works best for them given their setting and with the understanding that there will be consequences for the choices that they make.

Theme 5: The Challenges and Problems Faced by the Informants at School

One of the most consistent themes reported by the gay male teachers in this study centers on the daily challenges they face currently or have faced in the past. While I have

no desire to focus solely on the negative experiences faced by these informants, I must nonetheless acknowledge them in order to present the most realistic and balanced portrayal possible of gay male teachers' lived experiences in West Central Florida. In the end, I hope that the challenges reported will enlighten readers and help them understand both the trials and the triumphs faced by these men.

All teachers face challenges from students at various times over the course of a year at school. In the secondary classroom, and in middle schools in particular, students often test teachers to see how far they can push the teacher before he or she reacts to them. When students perceive that their teacher is gay, they are sometimes willing to test those behavioral boundaries beyond the "normal" limits. This has been the experience for most of the teachers in this study who are perceived as gay by a majority of their students. Prior to his coming out at school, one teacher reported, "There were some incidents, not harassment, but some gay bashing that was real. Students that were bothering me would change the way that they spoke in my class, like [take on] an effeminate, homosexual tone in their voice, things like that. They did very clever things that I really couldn't get them for" (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005). Now that the administration allows him to be out at school, Chris's situation has improved. But for other teachers perceived gay by their students, the negative experiences continue, as revealed by other informants in this study.

At a middle school in the Hernando County School District, Frank reported having some problems with some 8th graders during his first year teaching there. "They raised their hands but they could not get my attention because I was talking to someone else. While my back was turned and I was writing on the board, I heard one of them yell, 'Mr.

Fag.’ And I turned around and just yelled, ‘Get out!’ so loud that I thought the windows were going to break. I couldn’t identify who said it, but it was one of these three boys who would give me hard time. And sometimes those three kids would get together in a group with three or four other kids, and they would start with little comments. I would hear it. Sometimes, I would pretend like I didn’t hear it and I was like, ‘I can’t wait for this year to be over’” (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005).

Unfortunately for Frank, this type of behavior was not limited to a small group of students at a middle school in Hernando County. Later, while he taught in a high school in the Pasco County School District, another incident took place as he walked in the hallways. “There were these three or four kids – I was walking this way, they came from the other way. I almost bumped into one of the kids, and I said, ‘Oh, excuse me’ or something like that. I didn’t think anything of it. Well, as I was walking away, I heard, ‘Oh, excuse me!’ [in a mocking, high-pitched tone] and they were flailing their arms and being all feminine and stuff. Well, I don’t remember having reacted that way. So I turned around and my New York accent turned on and I said, ‘Do you have something to say to me? If so, come over here and say it to my face!’ You know, they were either going to beat me up or I was going to write them up or something. They were bigger kids, and they just kept going and walked away. And then it was over with and I went home depressed that day” (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005).

In addition to the mocking behaviors endured by some of the informants in this study, some have been confronted by questions about their sexual orientation directly from students, and in two cases, a student actually accused an informant of inappropriate behavior because the accuser perceived his teacher was gay. Reflecting on his teaching

experiences, Gary remembered, “At one point, one of my favorite students came up to me and said, ‘Do you like men?’ And I said, ‘Why are you asking me this?’ And she was like well I’m hearing from other students and they’re like saying stuff” (Informant Gary, personal interview, February 9, 2005). In this particular incident, the informant believes the student asked an inappropriate question without any malicious intentions. In other scenarios, however, the students’ intent was quite different. According to another informant,

The kids were able to figure out that I’m gay. They asked, ‘Are you married?’ and I said, ‘No.’ They would do things like hold up pictures of girls and say, ‘Do you think she’s hot?’ I would pretend like I was distracted and not see it [the image of women torn from magazines] because if I said, ‘Yes’ they would giggle and think that I’m lying. You know, it was that kind of thing that they would do. And there were a few [other] things they would say like, ‘Do you watch the Man Show?’ And at first, I didn’t even know what that was. And then one girl came right out and asked me and all I said was, ‘Do you think that would be an appropriate question for me to ask you?’ And she said, ‘No’ and so I said, ‘So what makes you think that’s an appropriate question for you to ask me’ (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005).

Unfortunately for this informant, his response verified to the students that he was in fact a gay teacher, and according to Frank, other more serious events soon occurred. These events centered on one particularly challenging student named Caesar.

Well anyway, Caesar was a very homophobic kid and you would always hear him like when we would do conversations in class. Because he was a native speaker, he'd always make it [his comments] gay themed. Like for example, we were learning to express likes and dislikes and they had to talk to another person in front of the room and ask like, 'do you like doing this?' And he asked, 'Do you like other men?' He was asking the other person in his group being silly, making fun of me, making a joke. But one day, he was a discipline problem too. He was chewing gum in the classroom. In high school, you ignore it, but in middle school it was against the rules. Well, they have a planner, and if you check the planner three times for chewing gum, get detention. I said, 'Could you please give me the planner?' Well, for some reason, he's sitting there chewing his gum and it was taking forever for him to give me his planner, so I raised my voice. 'Give me the planner now!' So, I initialed it and checked off the box and handed it to him. Well, we then moved on and I didn't think anything of it.

So a couple of periods later, the principal comes up to me and he says, 'I need to talk to you about a situation. Caesar says you hit him with his planner.' I was just dumbfounded. I didn't hit anybody. Well, the kids have these forms called 'what really happened' so that when kids have a fight, they can submit them to the guidance counselor. Well, he [Caesar] had his friends fill out a 'what really happened' form saying that I assaulted him with his planner. So they had to call the sheriff and they had to notify the mother. I called the mother myself, and she said, 'Don't worry about. I think it is a lie and even if you were to have hit him, you might have been frustrated and just slapped him on the hand with it.'

He's a big boy and he can handle it.' And I'm like, OK, but THAT didn't even happen (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005).

After enduring further questioning from the principal and continually denying any wrongdoing, Frank left the principal's office in tears and Caesar was called in to tell his side of the story. Later, the principal told Frank what happened in the office with the accusing student.

Caesar flip-flopped on the story a little bit, but because of the fact that the kids helped him, the principal asked, 'Why do you give Mr. Teacher such a hard time?' And his response was, 'Well, it's because I think he's gay!' And he's like why's that? [Caesar replied] 'Well at school sometimes, he has some feminine characteristics.' And THAT was part of the conversation. So, Caesar left and the principal told me that he knew this didn't happen, but he had to follow the guidelines because an investigation was launched. The principal said, 'I have to suspend you, and this goes in your file. You're suspended with pay. Don't come back until you hear back from me. But personally, I believe this is one big lie. Consider it a day at the beach on me or a day at the mall. I'm sorry you're going through this. This is how I lose my good popular teachers.' So, I went home, but then he [the principal] called me up at four o'clock, and said, 'Come in tomorrow because the deputy just laughed' [when he heard Caesar's story, indicating that the student's accusations were a joke]. So, I came in the next day, and I refused to go in the classroom because Caesar was there. What if he says some nonsense like 'he touched me' or whatever else might be brewing in his head? So I just stood in

the hallway and the guidance counselor secretary came and got him out and they dropped him from my class (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005).

Accusations from students not only haunted those gay teachers perceived as gay, but they also affected one of the teachers in this study perceived as heterosexual by his current students. ESE teacher and Vietnam War veteran, Eric, described the following incident that occurred during the winter of 1998 in a nearby school district. As Eric remembers, “I was suspended from school because one of the students went home and told his parents that I had told him that I had a license to kill because I served in Vietnam, and that I would put them in a time out room, make them pull their pants down, and I would paddle them. He went home with this story! After the investigation, it was unfounded, but it was a horrible experience. I thought my teaching career was dead because, you know, I’m gay and right away I thought the worst” (Informant Eric, personal interview, February 4, 2005). When I asked Eric if he thought the accusation had sexual overtones based on this student’s perception of him, he replied, “Definitely!” and he added, “I thought my career was over. I thought they were going to find out about me – that I was gay. And I didn’t know who to turn to. [I was afraid] that they wouldn’t understand that I’m okay, and I’m a human being. Just because I’m gay does not make me a bad teacher” (Ibid, February 4, 2005). Clearly, some of challenges faced by gay male teachers, even those perceived as straight by the majority of the students, include verbal harassment, the threat of students’ accusations, and the mental and emotional strain that accompanies those accusations.

In addition, gay male teachers must confront a number of stereotypes while negotiating their daily lives in the classroom. Frank's accuser, Caesar, justified his actions because the teacher displayed some "feminine characteristics," which verified in his eyes that his teacher was gay and, therefore, deserved to be accused of an assault. Similarly, Eric's accuser alluded to the stereotype that gay men are pedophiles when he told his story about the alleged threat of "having his pants pulled down and being spanked." Even those informants who have never faced an accusation and who perceive positive relationships with their students are ever mindful of this stereotype. One informant lamented, "Oh it just drives me crazy! I think almost every straight person that has some kind of hatred for gays, also thinks we're pedophiles. I mean, there's no straight man out there that doesn't see a precocious, attractive 13-year-old girl and not think, 'Oh, she's attractive' but he's still not considered a pedophile" (Informant Adam, personal interview, February 2, 2005). Agreeing with Adam, Chris indicated that he is "never alone with a student in his classroom" because he, like other gay colleagues, has to "protect" himself. He said, "I know one other openly gay teacher from another school and he's extremely sensitive to his environment. I think he's paranoid, as well as I am. You know, it just takes one student to accuse you of saying something wrong or whatever it might be. And I have to say, I do not touch or come close to being in a room alone with another male student. I make certain that I get out of the room. I'm protecting myself" (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005).

First-year-teacher Donald, who reported the most pleasant – almost utopian – atmosphere among the informants, commented,

The students basically care that you are a good teacher or that you care about them. They don't always necessarily care about whether you're gay or not. Of course, they're interested, but I don't think it's been an initial problem for me. And I think that that goes along with the fact that our department in our school is very open-minded, and we take the initiative with doing student events and things like that. So, the students like us because we are on their side. And plus I'm lucky because our school is more open-minded and the principal is more open-minded in that respect too. He cares about if the teacher is a good teacher and not what's going on in the teacher's personal life (Informant Donald, personal interview, February 2, 2005).

But even he acknowledged that despite the positive atmosphere created at his school by "open-minded" students, departmental colleagues, and the principal, he could not totally discount or ignore this stereotype. Donald reflected, "I think that [gay] people are more closeted down here just because I think it is more conservative overall. And people have a more close-minded view toward homosexuality. And especially in the field of education, where there are children involved, people still have this ridiculous view that gay people are child molesters and maybe that's why they go into education. Even though if you look at statistics, gay people are much less likely to molest a child than straight people. But you still have these ridiculous people who have radio talk shows and other things that try to skew the actual statistics" (Ibid, February 2, 2005).

So, while some of the informants described verbal harassment, unfounded accusations of misconduct, and the ever-present stereotypes that follow gay men such as displaying

feminine behaviors and uncontrollable pedophilia, other informants discussed additional challenges faced at school like feelings of isolation and the subtle sting of heterosexist bias and its concomitant assumptions from their colleagues. Commenting on his work environment, Ben reported, “I don’t feel tension. I work in a nice environment. My colleagues are smart, my students are smart, and I don’t know that it’s not there [the tension] but again, my environment can be very isolated. Like I didn’t even know this Gay-Straight Alliance was happening. There are things happening in the school that I don’t even know about because I’m sort of in my own pocket” (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005). Echoing this theme, but taking it to a more personal level, Frank commented, “I wish there had been another gay teacher there [the middle school where he previously worked] that I could at least be buddy-buddy with or be able to ask ‘what do you think about this?’ But nothing! And I felt like I was in my own little oasis in a way. I was just doing my own thing. I was on an elective team, but we didn’t deal with each other. We had different budgets - we had nothing to do with each other” (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005). Chris agrees with Frank’s sentiments but has a more optimistic outlook about the possibility of change adding, “I am the only visible gay person on our campus, [but] I have high hopes that in the next year or so another teacher or student will come out” (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005). Chris actually knows about the existence of three other gay teachers at his school, but they are only out to him and a few other select faculty members.

The feelings of isolation described by the informants, while significant, pale in comparison to the subtle, yet piercing, effects of heterosexism found at school. Even though he believes his current principal is gay-friendly and a fair man who would not use

his sexual orientation against him, Frank made the following observation. “My partner and I went over to the principal’s house to pick up a tree [for Christmas]. He’s really cool and this and that, so I know it’s okay. But I still think, ‘sure it’s ok but if you’re straight, that’s even better.’ Because [then] you can talk about ‘I’m getting married’ and the kids will make you little cards or whatever. But I couldn’t enjoy that. I couldn’t share that aspect of my life. It feels like there’s a double standard. And I think no matter how good you are, there’s always someone else better than you just because of that. You can’t share life events with your kids, and your kids are like your family” (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005). Heterosexist norms and expectations about marriage certainly impact the life of this gay teacher who desires to share significant events with his students like other (straight) teachers do.

These norms and expectations also impact gay teachers in other ways as well. In the course of any given year, a teacher may have to request days off to take care of family issues. In their absence, sometimes other members of the faculty are asked to cover classes, especially if a substitute is not available. Ben reflected on this common practice at his school, and offered some thoughtful insights on it. “There are some faculty who are married with kids. And then, if they’re going to be absent, I get asked, ‘Ben, could you cover their class this period because we couldn’t get a sub?’ I don’t know, but it seems as if some of them tend to be absent a lot because they have got to take their kids to the doctor, or their spouse is in the hospital, whatever. I understand. Let’s be a team and let’s help out. But I don’t have any kids and maybe I want someone to cover one of my classes, you know what I mean” (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005). In this system, Ben, the other informants, and the other gay teachers in this area cannot

take advantage of this informal procedure that fosters a sense of teamwork on faculties because their partners, and possibly, their children are not recognized or known. Again, heterosexist assumptions and norms impact gay teachers in a negative manner.

Sometimes the challenges faced by gay male teachers are far less subtle than the scenarios described above. In fact, all of the informants recalled incidents of outright homophobia at their schools, either in the form of language or more direct, serious actions. No other informants endured being called “Mr. Fag” like Frank, but all of them reported hearing homophobic slurs from students like ‘homo,’ ‘faggot,’ or the casual use of the word ‘gay.’ In fact, one of the informants reported hearing the term ‘faggot’ being used by colleagues at his Hillsborough County District high school. He calls this term “the last acceptable slur you can use” (Informant Adam, personal interview, February 2, 2005). More commonly, however, the informants reported hearing less abrasive, but still offensive, language from their colleagues. Calling it “the most disparaging comment I ever got,” Chris recalled the following interaction with a fellow colleague at school. “I remember the day – it was after the day I came out, and the psychology teacher, who is Republican and Christian, came up to me and she goes, ‘Well, I have to say, I hate the sin but I love the sinner.’ And to me, that’s a big slap in my face. And I really had to step back and I thought, ‘I can’t talk to this person right now because that’s such an insult.’ It just seems like it’s a big ole wall. It’s not about understanding people. It’s about some law or something, some dogma, that’s been put on your shoulder” (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005).

The informants clearly hear a variety of homophobic language that offends them, but the actions witnessed by one informant at his school speak far more loudly than any

spoken words ever could. After directing a version of the Laramie Project, Chris recalls, “There was one particular faculty member brave enough to challenge us religiously about what was going on. He asked, ‘Why isn’t anybody talking about the fact that homosexuality is an abomination and that this is a sin against God’s laws?’ And he presented that via e-mail throughout the school and of course I became irate” (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005). But the actions taken by this one faculty member are not unique at this school. A few months after the email incident and long after Chris became known as an openly gay teacher at the school,

The football players at our school decided to come to school dressed gay, and they called it ‘Gay Day.’ Kids came on campus dressed ...so they were successful in the sense that, you know, how they dressed because I liked what they were wearing. But when that happened, I decided to go up to one of the football players, and I told him about how I felt. I had these hurt feelings, so I told him that. And I had known that this particular football player had a gay uncle. And I said, ‘how do you think this would fly with your uncle? Your family is very accepting of gay people and yet you did this. I don’t understand. You’re making fun of gay people.’ So, they did come to school dressed that way and they played gay music at lunch. And so it was a fascinating day for me because I thought, now what if someone came to school and it was ‘Black Day?’ It just wouldn’t be tolerated now. Or ‘Jew Day?’ I mean, you would be horrified! And yet with this [gay day] it was interesting how my school dealt with it (Ibid, February 1, 2005).

Chris informed me that the school's administration took no official action against the leaders or the participants in 'Gay Day' and, in fact, he agreed with that decision. When the administration came to him for advice on what to do, Chris "got like Gandhi on everybody and said 'I don't want them to be punished.' Why punish them? All that would do is make them more angry towards gay people" (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005).

The students' extreme display of homophobic behavior has not been fully resolved. In the end, the organizers of 'gay day' wrote a letter of apology to the school newspaper where they claimed their true intentions were misunderstood. As Chris lamented, "the letter that came out was just unbelievable. There was no apology anywhere in that letter" (Ibid, February 1, 2005). As a result of the lukewarm sentiments and the seemingly insincere commentary of the letter, Chris decided to take further action on his own. He went to one of the upper division administrators with an idea for a film that he and his class would produce and show to the entire school. The film highlighted the experiences of a bear living among a group of zebras, and the fateful decision of one little female zebra that decided not to ostracize the lone bear as others were doing. "We used quotes from historical figures like Gandhi and Buddha about apathy and about love and about understanding. It was my way of saying what we should be doing as opposed to punishing the kids" (Ibid, February 1, 2005).

Just before the showing of the film, another homophobic act occurred at the school that deeply troubled Chris. An individual or group of students had altered a yearbook photo of three males together and combined it with "something on the Internet where it was showing two gay men having anal sex. And on the side of one of the little boys [in

the photo] it read ‘Josh is a fag.’ I was just blown away” (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005). The student who had found a copy of this picture turned it in to the office with a note attached that read, “So you thought this was all over? Think again.” This student’s clear reference to the fallout caused by “gay day” and the non-apology that followed finally prompted the administration of the upper division to take a stronger stance. On the day Chris’s film was shown, the Dean of Students addressed the entire student body of the Upper School, and according to Chris’s recollection, “He as very graphic about it. He used the word ‘fag’ which they normally don’t use. They say that, you know, there were some homophobic remarks on the paper. Well, instead, he said that this student was called a fag on this letter and then he said – and you could have blown me over with a feather – ‘We will not tolerate this kind of behavior at [name of school] and if I find out who created this picture, you will no longer be at our school.’ And then I thought, well, we have turned a corner here”(Ibid, February 1, 2005). Unlike the official response to ‘Gay Day,’ the Dean of Student’s response to the homophobic letter was direct and more forceful signaling, perhaps, a change of direction away from the apathetic course usually followed by school officials on this issue.

Theme 6: The Informants’ Understandings of How Students Use Homophobic Language

As stated earlier, the informants in this study report hearing a variety of homophobic words and phrases from both students and colleagues at school. One term in particular deserves closer analysis because of the frequency with which it occurs. The term “that’s so gay” has become commonplace in schools around the country, and every informant in this study reports having heard it multiple times at his school site. Indeed, Eric summed

up the sentiments of all the informants when he stated that he hears this particular term, “Oh, all the time! It’s part of their slang of the time. Everything is ‘oh, that’s so gay!’ That’s how it is nowadays” (Informant Eric, personal interview, February 4, 2005). Its frequent use is unquestionable, but what I hoped to better understand is the meaning(s) attached to this phrase and how the gay teachers in this study responded to hearing it. Further, I was curious to learn what were the perceived psychological or emotional effects endured by the teachers in this study after hearing “that’s so gay” repeatedly in the classroom.

According to the informants’ understanding(s) of the term, most of the students they confronted intended no malice toward gay people when they said, “That’s so gay.” During the ordeal with “Gay Day” at his school, Chris had the opportunity to question one of the participating students on the meaning of the term and its effect on him as a gay man. He shared with the student, “well, you know, that phrase identifies me, so when you are saying that, it’s identifying all my people. It encompasses gays and lesbians, and that means that you’re saying we’re ugly, stupid, you know, whatever the [connotation may be] in that particular context. But in response, the student said, ‘ No, that’s not how we use it. Mr. _____, that is just an adjective. We don’t see it the way you’re seeing it.’ And so that was pretty eye-opening for me because I always imagined that they were using it against me” (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005). Adam assessed the use of the term in much the same way saying, “I don’t think it has very much at all with being gay. I think it has to do with being different, not being cool. I tell them I don’t like it, but I don’t make a stink. Now, with other slurs, I make a stink. You know, I get this straight-looking, mean face and say that’s not appropriate in this or any other

classroom. But I don't do that with that, and I think it's because it's so universal. But, you know, I don't think there's much viciousness in most of it" (Informant Adam, personal interview, February 2, 2005). But then he quickly added, "But that certainly doesn't make it any easier for some 16-year-old gay person that's sitting in the classroom" (Ibid, February 2, 2005). Here one gets the sense that while the use of the phrase "that's so gay" may not often have malicious intentions, it can certainly have a negative effect on those who hear it.

In their Hillsborough County classrooms, both Eric and Gary hear the phrase and, like Adam, let it go because there are bigger battles to fight. Gary, in fact, gave me a mini-lecture on the word "gay" saying, "Well, gay is used two ways with teenagers these days. I'm not sure if you're familiar with that, but one is to say that someone actually is gay in terms of sexuality, and well the other is to say, 'oh, your shirt is gay' or your shoes are gay' meaning they don't like your shoes. That's how they [students] use it. But I've learned that it's better to leave them be and to teach them by example" (Informant Gary, personal interview, February 9, 2005). Therefore, Gary is careful not to use the phrase in front of his students, and on rare occasions will question students about the meaning of the term when they use it. For Eric there are just too many other issues with which to contend in his ESE classroom to allow this phrase to consume valuable time. "I'll show a movie about what I'm teaching and they will say something like, 'Mr. _____, that's so gay!' You know, I just don't give a [the informant stopped short of cursing] because that's a remark that's not made against gay [people]. It means 'corny'. In my day, the term was 'square.' You have to pick your battles" (Informant Eric, personal interview, February 4, 2005).

While the informants in this study may agree on their students' intended meaning of "that's so gay," there is strong disagreement on the effects its use may have on others. Therefore, some informants react more strongly when they hear it. When Donald hears the term, he asks the student, "Well, what's so gay about it? What do you mean by 'gay'?" You know, I'm like, 'explain yourself.' And then I call them on it and make them think about why they're actually saying that. And then they realize that our society is so homophobic that that is just a normal part of our society. That's just how people their age talk. In class when it's used in a negative way or if they're making fun of another student, I don't put up with it"(Informant Donald, personal interview, February 2, 2005). Frank also senses the negative effects of the term. Although he realizes that the students often equate it with "stupid" and is therefore able to "ignore it a few times," he is ultimately compelled to respond. "I ask the students, 'how can something be gay?' I guess one reason I do that is that I'm dropping a hint like you might be hurting somebody's feelings by saying that. Other people don't interpret it your way. You know, this is just not cool. And I do take it moderately personally, not enough to be upset, obviously, but just enough to bring attention to it so that it's not going unnoticed" (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005).

Perhaps the most eloquent reflection on the term "that's so gay" came from Ben, who, on some level, agreed with the other informants when he said,

They [the students] mean that it's lame or that it's uninteresting. I think that's what they mean as in 'Yeah, did you see that movie? It was so gay!' for example. Again, I don't think it's out of malice but out of ignorance and maybe a lack of sensitivity for the people around them. Someone in the class may be gay and that

just pushes them further into whatever closet or darkness because [they may think] ‘Oh, God, I can’t come out because they used that term disparagingly so think how I would feel if that label was put on me.’ So in the smaller microcosm of the classroom, we should be aware [and not use the term] because of who might hear that comment. In the greater macrocosm, [one should not use the term] because when you put it out there, it’s just bad energy. We need to start cleaning. We need to take better care of ourselves, and part of that is [monitoring] language. I just think that we, collectively as a people – not just WE as gay men – we have a responsibility to discontinue the perpetuation of some of these terms because language is powerful. And part of my responsibility being a teacher is educating [people] beyond the classroom, not just because the book says we have to learn [something]. It’s about life-long learning and life skills that will serve you better (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005).

Ben then shared the following extended metaphor to further illustrate his point on the power of language and the importance of addressing all negative terminology, including the often-used, “That’s so gay.”

We’re like a bucket of water and every individual is a drop of water. Here’s our world with all this water. One little drop can be polluted and the more polluted drops we have, the more tainted that water is. Now, I can’t change all the water, but what I can change is my own little drop. I want to try to be pure and the more pure drops we have, the cleaner the water and the more truth. Everybody can

drink from that water because there's no fear (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005).

So, by bringing attention to the phrase, Ben hopes to educate his students on lessons that go beyond the confines of his classroom space. He hopes to open his students' eyes to the power of their words so that they might be more mindful of how they use them.

Certainly, Ben does not stand alone in his desire to appropriately address homophobic terms that may hurt students. Even though some teachers in this study chose to ignore the phrase "that's so gay," they took action when they heard what they perceived to be more insulting words or phrases like 'fag' or 'dyke'. The teachers in this study did not communicate the same level of seriousness on the issue, but every informant weighed his options and responded to homophobic language in a manner best suited to his students' needs in his particular school setting.

Theme 7: The Informants' Use of Humor in the Classroom

One of the most often used tools by the informants in this study to counter the challenges they face in the classroom and to combat homophobic language is humor. Holding firm to the idea that students will remember important life lessons when they are accompanied by a hearty laugh, one of the informants had this to say when a student responded, "this is so gay" to a worksheet he assigned for homework. "It's a worksheet. How is it gay? It likes other worksheets? Giggles in the classroom, you know. So, I even do that in the high school. They would have a rule or an announcement about the behavior in the cafeteria that if it didn't improve, they would not sell snacks. One kid

yelled, ‘Well that’s gay!’ And I said, ‘Well, how can snacks be gay? Are they pink or are they wrapped up funny? I mean, it’ an inanimate object, how could it be gay?’ I know that’s not what they meant, but I would say that because that’s the only way that I would address it – make it funny. But it’s just really stupid. It really is. It’s a dumb thing” (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005).

The informants in this study not only use humor to deal with problems, but also as a general classroom management tool. And in some cases, they use it to mask deeply buried, hurt feelings that sometimes surge to the surface. For Eric and Donald, they incorporate humor for the purpose of strengthening the relationships with their students, which defuses many management issues in the classroom. Even though he usually does not “mix business with pleasure,” Eric commented, “And even with the relationship with my students, I can fool around with them, play with them, joke with them and everything. But when it’s time for business, they know it’s Mr. _____” (Informant Eric, personal interview, February 4, 2005). Donald concurred, saying, “I tend to use comedy and humor with students to show them the lighter side of my personality. There’s a time to be serious and there are times when we might have a little free time at the end because they had a good class. They’ll be talking, and I’ll show them a different side of my personality. And I think that comes across to my students and they tend to be more accepting” (Informant Donald, personal interview, February 2, 2005). Even Ben mentioned that he sometimes comes across as a “ham” and acts “silly” going around the classroom “clapping hands and being loud, and telling goofy stories” as a means of expressing himself in a humorous way (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005). But for Adam, his biting sense of humor and outright sarcasm comes from a

different place. When he shared how he responded to overhearing a colleague use the word 'faggot,' his immediate, gut response was, "Asshole!" Quickly apologizing while at the same time laughing, he reflected, "But I mean, I deal with everything with humor, I always have. That's the way I teach. That's the way I deal with colleagues. Ever since I was in junior high and somebody commented that I had bigger breasts than most of the girls. They didn't *say* that, but I remember being called 'queer' in junior high. Ever since then, I've had a nasty tongue that has kept people in line" (Informant Adam, personal interview, February 2, 2005). Indeed the informants' use of humor came in many forms and served many different purposes, including deflecting criticism in order to keep it at a distance.

Theme 8: Informants' Relationships and Interactions with Colleagues at School

Only one of the gay male teachers in this study is out as an openly gay person to his entire school, to both students and faculty members alike, but all of them have chosen to come out to their colleagues to varying degrees. This means that for some of them, only one or a few select colleagues know about their sexual orientations, whereas in other cases, the entire faculty is fully informed or at least wonders about it, thus creating a complex set of relationships between the informants and their many colleagues at school. Overall, the informants perceive guarded, cordial relationships with their colleagues, where professionalism and teamwork, combined with privacy and discretion, have become the norm at school. Certainly, some of those relationships are better than others, but only rarely did an informant report a poor relationship with colleagues or, conversely, refer to his colleagues as friends.

In the rare case where an informant referred to colleagues as friends, he attributed his exceptional relationship to having a particularly open-minded department chair and their shared belief in student-centered pedagogy. About his colleagues and the relationship he shares with them, he said, “Pretty much across the board, I get along with them very well. I guess my colleagues are pretty friendly. I think it also could be part of a sense of unity on the part of my department. My department head is pretty awesome! Also, the people I work with in the department, we’ve become such good friends over the last year. We’re so close that we help each other, and the students know that we care. We go to their sporting events. We go to their basketball games, football games. We chaperone dances. We chaperone the prom. I think that really makes a difference” (Informant Donald, personal interview, February 2, 2005). Unfortunately, this ideal relationship shared by Donald and the members of his department was not the norm described by the other informants in this study.

At the other extreme of possible relationships a gay male teacher may expect to have in West Central Florida is the one Gary endures in the Hillsborough County School District. Having recently moved from one educational facility where he described his relationship with fellow teachers as “excellent,” he now describes the relationship at the current facility as “rocky.” He justified his current feelings saying,

I have two co-workers that are female who – they just want to know all my business. And since I was always in my office, and according to them I was anti-social, there was a problem. And one day we were all sitting in one of the classrooms and gay issues came up. And what brought it up was something like,

‘Oh, did you know [the rumor] about Richard Geer and gerbils?’ And another teacher added, ‘Did you hear the Rod Stewart story?’ They were trying to see – I think they were trying to put me on the spot. It was these two female teachers, and later I picked up on the fact that they were just trying to get me to say that I’m gay (Informant Gary, personal interview, February 9, 2005).

The scenario described above escalated and after the two women engaged in more explicitly sexual conversation designed to expose him, Gary told me that he turned the conversation back at them causing one of the female teachers to storm out of the room because her efforts had been thwarted. Gary then described other evidence to support his belief that certain colleagues were determined to know his personal business. The following exchange between he and two teacher aides sheds light on a reason, perhaps, why his new colleagues have not embraced him.

But anyway, since I started working there, I have two teacher aides who are African American, and I share an office with them, and they talk to me. And so any questions I have concerning curriculum or anything – like problems I might have – they knew the answers. But the other teachers were having a problem with that. Because I was not going to them, so then they [the other teachers] were talking all this junk about me ... adding the fact that I’m gay. And then, one of the teacher aides goes, ‘Do you know that the other teachers think you’re gay?’ I said, ‘You know what, if they do, I don’t care. I really don’t care,’ I said, ‘because my sexuality has nothing to do with my professionalism and what I’m here for.’ She

was like, 'Amen! You're right' (Informant Gary, personal interview, February 9, 2005).

After learning that some of his colleagues were asking questions about his sexual orientation behind his back, Gary decided to confront one particular person he identified as a ring leader to describe his feelings on the matter. He shared that experience, saying, "And so, you know, I confronted one of the teachers and said, 'Look, if you want to ask me about my sexuality, ask me. Don't assume. Don't ask other people. Go to the source. I'm not going to bite. You know, I will tell you yes or no. Simple as that'" (Ibid, February 9, 2005). Because Gary chose not to share certain aspects of his personal life with his new colleagues right away and because he sought advice from non-traditional sources, he perceives resentment from his colleagues. From his perspective, that resentment fueled inappropriate conversations about him and his sexual orientation. As a result, the relationship that Gary has with colleagues is, indeed, "rocky" much unlike the friendships Donald described at his school. Even though both men have colleagues who perceive them as gay at their new work environments, the relationships with colleagues they described exemplify the two extremes.

Somewhere between the polar-opposite work environments and colleague relationships Donald and Gary outlined above, lays the norm described by the majority of the informants in this study. One of the informants who is officially out to his administrator, but not to members of the faculty, described his colleague interactions in the following manner. "It [being out to faculty] has never presented itself. And I don't know if it's because some of them already know because nobody ever asks me. Nobody

is ever like, 'What did you do this weekend?' Or maybe they don't want to go there" (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005). When I asked Ben how close he felt to his colleagues, he responded, "They're colleagues. They're not friends" (Ibid, January 8, 2005). Ben indicated that many of his colleagues are much older than he and some were, in fact, his former teachers. This could explain some of the professional distance he feels at work.

Other informants sought opportunities to promote collegial ties with their fellow faculty members in an effort to combat feeling isolated. During his second year of employment in Hernando County, Frank had a chance encounter in the media center that allowed him to come out to a faculty member for the first time. "There was a conversation that I had heard while I was coming to Xerox some stuff and this lady was talking about her friend who had just told her she was a lesbian. The conversation was going on when I came into the room" (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005). Previously, Frank had sensed that some other teachers were curious about his sexual orientation, so he took this opportunity to come out once he sensed that the teacher aide in the copy room was an ally. Later that year, Frank, experienced another chance encounter while working with a group of teachers at a district training session. This time, he came out to a male gym teacher who, himself, was perceived as gay by some of his students because he was "young, right out of college, and unmarried." Given the positive response he received after coming out from the other individuals with whom he was working that day, Frank concludes, "But no one cares. The teachers don't care" (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005). The next memory that Frank shared, however, centered on a particular science teacher who taught in the classroom

next to his during his first year teaching at the Hernando middle school. Frank described her as “a very Evangelical Right Wing Christian” who was “nice” and with whom he “could kid around a lot,” but, said Frank, “I don’t think I would’ve told her” (Ibid, January 15, 2005). Clearly, Frank made conscious decisions about who would officially know his sexual orientation, which calls into question his belief that “no one cares” at his school about that issue. Indeed, Frank’s decisions have led to a complex array of faculty interactions and relationships for him at school.

Unlike some of his younger gay colleagues, Adam feels no need to seek relationships with fellow faculty members. Now in his thirty-first year as a teacher, he feels “fairly well accepted and respected” by the teachers at his school and insists, “I don’t have any trouble with colleagues. I don’t worry about being gay and teaching, and I don’t worry about whether the kids think I’m gay or not. I mean it just almost never enters my mind” (Informant Adam, personal interview, February 2, 2005). After reflecting on this issue for a few more minutes, however, it became quite clear to me that the perceptions of Adam’s sexual orientation are certainly on his mind and, to this day, they influence the kind of interactions and relationships he has with fellow faculty members. With some, like Kelly, a trusted colleague and department chair at his school, he openly uses the name of his long-time companion saying things like, “Boy does this and boy does that,” but he has never taken “Boy” to a faculty party, even those held at Kelly’s house “where the rest of the faculty is going to be” (Informant Adam, personal interview, February 2, 2005). So despite the comfort Adam feels with some colleagues, he still refuses to socialize with the majority of them, and he offered this explanation. “The fact that I don’t socialize with the rest of the faculty is probably due mostly to the fact that I wouldn’t feel comfortable. I

don't trust some of them" (Informant Adam, personal interview, February 2, 2005). Like many of the other informants, Adam does not face open hostility from his colleagues at school, but at the same time, he does not wish to interact with them like friends. As one of the other informants so succinctly stated about the people with whom he works, "They're colleagues. They're not friends" (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005).

Theme 9: Informants' Perceptions of the Acceptance of Gay Male Teachers

Regardless of how the informants perceived the relationships they share with their colleagues at work, they all had strong, varied opinions about the level of acceptance they perceive for gay male teachers in secondary classrooms. Of interest, however, is that each participant reported feeling a higher level of acceptance at his school site than he perceived for gay male teachers in general. Gary, who teaches math in a Juvenile Detention Facility, was the lone informant who did not *initially* seem to have a strong sense of the general level of acceptance for gay men because he has not been in the "regular" high school setting for a long time. But then he stated, "Thinking back to when I was in high school, I had a gay teacher and even though I was gay, I was pressured to make fun of this teacher. But this teacher acted feminine, you know what I mean?" (Informant Gary, personal interview, February 9, 2005). After having that reflection about the feminine behaviors he perceived from a former teacher, Gary concluded, "Yeah. I don't think we're accepted that much" (Ibid, February 9, 2005). And then he curiously switched pronouns when he went into more depth on this issue saying, "*They* [emphasis added] would be [accepted] ... I mean – I think *they* are [accepted] if *they* are

in the closet or if *they* do their best not to show any kind of signs that *they* are gay” (Informant Gary, personal interview, February 9, 2005). Gary, who is perceived as a straight man by most of his students and colleagues, clearly links the level of acceptance of gay men to their demonstration of perceived masculine characteristics. Indeed, being a gay man in the classroom is acceptable, from this perspective, as long as one does not display perceived feminine characteristics. At his particular site, he reported feeling somewhat safe and accepted, but his feelings had more to do with the type of students he teaches rather than his sexual orientation. When I asked him to give me a number between one and five to describe his perceived level of acceptance, he responded, “I’d probably say 2.5” (Ibid, February 9, 2005). While not a glowing endorsement of his perceived level of acceptance as a gay male teaching at his educational site, it is certainly better than his notion of the overall picture for gay men teaching in secondary classrooms.

Other informants more confidently stated their opinions of the general level of acceptance for gay male teachers. Very bluntly, one informant said,

There is none! I say that for Florida because I’ve worked in other counties. I’ve worked in Pasco County, I’ve worked in Hillsborough County, and I’ve worked in Palm Beach County. And it’s the same thing, and I’m talking about two different parts of the peninsula. And I think it’s true all across the state. I’ve dealt with Tallahassee. It’s all across Florida. It’s just not that they’re not ready, it’s that they’re not tolerant on homosexual issues. And so, you know, it would be a losing battle. So rather than go there, just avoid it. Avoid being caught up in a situation

like that. Because if you push, you're going to make the press, but you're going to be the negative end of it (Informant Eric, personal communication, February 4, 2005).

Like Gary, Eric insinuates that acceptance of gay men in the secondary classroom is tied to how they are perceived by others. Although not stated as directly as Gary's comments, Eric's advice to "avoid being caught up in a situation like that" and his warning against "pushing" the issue indicates to me that he believes gay male teachers are more accepted if they stay closeted and quiet about their personal lives. In essence, he subtly hints that gay male teachers should endeavor to be perceived as straight, like he is.

Echoing similar sentiments about the general level of acceptance for gay male teachers, Chris lamented, "I would like to think that at least there's some level of acceptance, but I don't have very much trust. Maybe it's the political climate right now. It's very reminiscent of like a Fascist state, where there's all this fascism around, you know. I'm seeing American flags and religion and I'm the enemy. I'm not very trusting of the world in general" (Informant Chris, February 1, 2005). But even though both men sense a lack of acceptance for gay male teachers at the macro-level, they both indicated a more positive perception of their individual schools. Eric who perceives no acceptance for gay men in general called the acceptance level at his high school in Hillsborough County "50/50." When asked why the improved set of conditions exist at his school site, Eric laughed and said, "I don't know. Nobody [at school] has ever questioned me about it [his sexual orientation]. Nobody has ever made a big deal of a [perceived] gay teacher. The administrators are accused of being gay by female [students] and I hear things like, 'Well, you know, so what, he's gay'" (Informant Eric, personal interview, February 4,

2005). And Chris, who does not “trust the world in general” called his school a “family.” He said, “I’m really dedicated to my school. It’s my family. And even though it’s a very dysfunctional family, I feel [like] part of my school community” (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005).

Adam, who is nearing retirement in the Hillsborough County School District, noted that he senses a “barrier to career advancement” for gay male teachers. Calling it a glass ceiling, he commented, “I think it continues to be there. And I don’t see much in the way of anybody breaking it down because the only way you can really break it down is by coming out. And that’s real risky. I mean - I perceive that it’s risky” (Informant Adam, personal interview, February 2, 2005). Unlike both Gary and Eric, who strongly believe that gay men should remain closeted to gain acceptance, Adam endorses coming out as a means of breaking down barriers and gaining acceptance. But he then stated this opinion about administrators’ acceptance of gay male teachers in Hillsborough County: “I don’t think most of them really care, one way or the other. I think they’d probably care if they perceived us as more than five percent [of the general teaching population]. I don’t think they perceive the [actual] number of gay people teaching” (Ibid, February 2, 2005).

First year teacher, Donald, who teaches at a private school in the Pinellas County School District reported high feelings of acceptance at his school despite being perceived by many students and teachers as a gay man. He said, “I feel that my school as a religious environment is pretty welcoming and very comforting in a lot of ways. So, I think that overall, it’s a pretty good environment for me so far – especially it being my first year there. So, I’m pretty happy with it” (Informant Donald, personal interview, February 2, 2005). But like the other participants in this study, Donald seemed less positive about the

general acceptance of gay male teachers across Florida. Comparing life in Florida to his experiences in Pennsylvania, he reflected, “I think that most gay people in my experience here in Florida are much more closeted, in general, than they were when I lived in Pennsylvania. So I think from that standpoint, it [teaching] would be much more of a challenge for some gay men” (Ibid, February 2, 2005). Once again, an informant made a connection between the level of acceptance of gay men in the classroom and the degree to which a gay teacher chooses to reveal his sexual orientation. He did not indicate whether or not a gay teacher *should* come out, but the connection was made nevertheless.

But Donald’s comments on this issue did not stop there. He extended his commentary on the acceptance of gay men in the classroom and alluded to an opinion shared by other informants that centers on teacher performance. He said,

But I also think that if you are a good teacher, and you’re charismatic and the kids know that you care about them, in general, then I think you should be able to overcome it [the challenges] as a teacher. And if not, I think that you should look for a different job because I’m sure there’s somewhere where you would have a better fit or a more comfortable environment. I wouldn’t think that they should just give up teaching altogether. Because I don’t assume that the environment is the same in every single school (Informant Donald, personal interview, February 2, 2005).

Speaking as if he was an administrator in the Pasco County School District, Frank shared similar sentiments saying, “Generally speaking, if you have the credentials, if you have a degree, you have the good evaluations – fine, we don’t care if you’re gay or not”

(Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005). Ben agreed with Frank saying, “I think that the longer that I’m here and I show that I’ve got my shit together – that I know what I’m doing, then I think that the administration and other colleagues would be okay. [pretending to be an administrator] ‘He’s got scores and feedback and it looks good, let’s leave him alone’ (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 15, 2005). Like Donald, these two gay male teachers perceive a strong connection between the acceptance of gay male teachers and their performance in the classroom.

But even though Ben and Frank understand the possible mitigating effects of a gay male teacher’s strong performance in the classroom, they both warn that the overall lack of acceptance of gay men in secondary education remains apparent, and that it is evident given the existing laws. Ben stated, “I want to say no [there is no acceptance of gay men in education district wide] only because it shows itself in policies about insurance coverage or in the state of Florida, you can be fired for being gay, unless it’s a private organization that sets its own policies. So, without explicitly saying so, these non-verbal cues sent the message that it’s not alright” (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005). Frank’s insights neatly complement Ben’s commentary as he warned, “But if you share too much about your life, or if [they] have that certain perception, the story might change. You still hear in the media about teachers who are fired because they are gay. You know, Florida has no non-discrimination policy [for gay teachers]. My county has no non-discrimination policy [for gay people]. They could fire me tomorrow” (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005).

The question of acceptance of gay male teachers is complex for the many reasons indicated by the informants in this study. Even though they all feel a certain sense of

security and acceptance where they work, they all believe that the overall acceptance of gay men in secondary classrooms is low. Connected to issues that include a gay teacher's demeanor, his degree of openness about his sexual orientation, and his performance in the classroom, a gay male teacher's acceptance remains a case-by-case scenario and is strongly influenced by individual, community standards and mores. Factor in the realities of the law and the lack of legal protection, and it becomes a slippery slope. Indeed, this uncertain terrain is one that the informants in this study, and gay male teachers in general, must navigate every day at work.

Theme 10: Informants' Perceived Special Talents of Gay Male Teachers

All too often, it is assumed that groups of people who are branded with minority status must overcome some kind of challenge or problem in order to reach the status of the majority group. This assumption translates into women fighting for equal pay with men, African Americans struggling for the same respect shown to Whites, or Muslims working to gain the same recognition for their religious holidays enjoyed by Christians' holidays. Today, the quest for gay rights in the form of marriage, insurance benefits, power of attorney -- those rights that heterosexuals often take for granted -- is broadcast over the news weekly, if not nightly, when some brave group of people challenges conventional ways of thinking. Without a doubt, there are challenges associated with minority group membership, but what often goes unnoticed are some of the benefits or talents that accompany minority status. The seven gay male teachers who participated in this study did not allow me to ignore the special talents they perceive having as a direct result of being a sexual minority. According to them, these talents greatly improve their teaching

performance in the classroom. In essence, these men believe that their perceived talent would not exist to the same degree if they were heterosexual.

One of the special talents perceived by the informants is a heightened awareness of diversity. On this issue Frank stated, “I think that because I’m gay, I have more of an appreciation of diversity than some other people. I have an appreciation for other cultures and languages. Someone who is a Buddhist is as equally valid in my book as a person who is a Jew or a Muslim or a Christian or an Atheist or whatever else - because I think that’s all part of diversity. I also think that I can help the gay student who might be struggling with their identity because I know what that was like. I can appreciate others because I’d love for that same courtesy to be extended to me” (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005).

What Frank labels as an appreciation for diversity parallels what other informants perceive as having a greater generalized sensitivity for others or empathy. Reflecting on his struggle growing up as a gay kid, Ben realized,

Everyone has their own issues and their own struggle. With some it’s ‘textbookish’ and with others it’s drama! I know that my struggle growing up was my own alienation and feeling different and all that stuff. So, I know I’m more sensitive to it now. Some of my kids who look different or dress differently or [who] are not affluent – or whatever makes them different – I want them to know that it’s not like that forever and that there’s something to value in being different, not just sort of this homogeneous, white, milktoast classroom that we have. What makes you different, makes you beautiful, and I know I’m more sensitive to it

because of being gay – yeah, I’m just more aware of that (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005).

Had Ben not grown up gay, he believes that his appreciation for difference would not exist now.

Both Frank and Ben perceive that they have ownership of a more generalized appreciation for diversity and a heightened sensitivity to difference. Donald also shares enhanced sensitivity, but his perceived special talent specifically targets women’s issues and civil rights. According to Donald,

I think that gay men, in general, just by their nature are more sensitive to women’s issues or women’s topics, and I tend to highlight women more in my classes. You know, women are skipped over most of the time in history, except for maybe Queen Elizabeth I or other extremely dynamic figures like that. And I think that I tend to highlight feminism, and I did highlight it in the last chapter when I discussed Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony and the whole Women’s Rights Movement. I tend to be more open towards that – sort of push them into the curriculum because I always felt like when I was in school and had male teachers, they never covered women’s issues or stuff like that. I think there’s an added sensitivity and need to include that. I think that I am more inclusive of minorities, and especially minority women in my classroom, and I bring in primary sources and documents (Informant Donald, February 2, 2005).

Donald continued and stressed, “I feel that being gay, you are a minority, so to speak, and you’re almost like the last frontier of civil rights. Because gay people don’t necessarily have equal rights in our country, I think that makes us more sensitive to those issues of civil rights when we talk about civil rights with regard to African Americans, the whole slavery issue, women’s rights, the Women’s Movement, suffrage – and so I think that that sort of makes us want to highlight that, or think that out more for them [his students]” (Informant Donald, personal communication, February 2, 2005). Donald believes that his status as a sexual minority helps him to identify with other minority groups more closely than if he were straight. Therefore, he believes he highlights minorities’ struggle for rights more intensely when he is teaching.

Clearly, some informants perceive that having greater generalized sensitivity, an acute awareness of issues of diversity, and an enhanced appreciation for difference as special talents of gay male teachers. Another informant perceives his special talent as having an increased knowledge of self or introspection, which has led to a high degree of self-improvement. Adam reflected, “That’s one of the things that coming to grips with being gay in the classroom has done for me. I am only selectively sarcastic now and much less insulting of students or harsh on students. I think I’m more sensitive, and I put more thought into what I say. I mean there were times early in my career when I would say something to a kid, and then just realize that that kid was devastated because I said that. And humor – I like making people laugh [now]. I don’t think I’d be nearly as funny if I was straight” (Informant Adam, personal interview, February 2, 2005). Unlike the other informants, Adam’s perceived talent does not necessarily help him focus on external

matters like increased empathy or sensitivity to women's issues, but instead it magnifies internal matters like knowledge of self and self-regulation.

The final special talent that one informant shared with me could also be characterized as a benefit of having an openly gay teacher on a school's campus. In fact, the following scenario can be replicated only if the students are privy to a gay teacher's sexual orientation. Chris, the only openly gay teacher in this study shared the following story:

I remember one kid coming up to me and saying, "You know, Mr. _____, you're the first gay person I've ever met, and I never thought of you that way, and my perception of you never changed afterwards." He went to a summer camp this past summer, and it was a theatre camp. There were a lot of gay students there from other schools. And he said he was interested in meeting them and getting to know them, and that it wasn't a big deal because he had known someone who was gay. So, it was important for him to know that. And I think it's always important for [students] to know that there are gay people out there who aren't crazy, drug addicts, putting on dresses and lip-synching, which you know, that's the perception through the media (Informant Chris, personal communication, February 1, 2005).

Surely, there are significant differences between perceived talents connected to being gay and the potential benefits of being an openly gay teacher. But because Chris is the only openly gay teacher represented in this study, I decided to include his input. He certainly believes that all gay male teachers should be completely out at work like him, but his opinion is not the majority opinion. Therefore, mentioning only one benefit of being out

alongside the more numerous perceived talents, gives the most representative account of the informants' reflections and beliefs.

Informants' Final Thoughts and Reflections

To close out this chapter, I have decided to present some of the closing thoughts the informants provided me at the end of their interviews. Often poignant and filled with emotion, these reflections, at times, give direct access to how these men understand their daily experiences, both in the classroom and in the larger community. At other times, the reflections center on the improvements that have taken place with regard to the realization that gay male teachers exist and that they experience triumphs and tribulation just like other teachers in area classrooms. These men remind me that each individual has a unique story and that while many classroom situations present challenges, they also provide opportunities. Such is the nature of teaching.

Adam

"I'm afraid of the direction that the county is going when it comes to being different in any way, shape, or form. The Patriot Act scares the hell out of me. It's only been in the last three or four years that I actually – in the far reaches of my imagination – could see being trundled off to some internment camp some place. I don't expect it to happen -- I know it's not going to happen, God forbid – but I think the atmosphere of society and the country as a whole scares me more than it used to. The Right Wing scares the hell out of me. And, I mean you go to school and the teachers that vote that way and talk that way

and the kids who come from homes who talk that way. I don't think it's the best of times" (Personal interview, February 2, 2005).

Ben

"You've got to be there for other people, and I could be tired and wishing I could go home, take off my shoes and fall asleep, but for them – for the next couple of hours, I've got to pretend or at least show that I'm interested in what they're saying. Sometimes, you just have to go through that, and so I think that when you have all these other issues like internalized homophobia or not being comfortable to come out – that's just this weight upon your energy. It's stifling you, and just think about how much more powerful a teacher and educator you could be if that energy just came out. And not just in teaching, but think about how much more fulfilling your relationships could be ... maybe you take up skydiving or whatever it is" (Personal interview, January 8, 2005).

Chris

"You have to be open, you have to be openly gay. You've got to come out to everybody despite the risks – despite the risks. I think it's more important than ever, especially for a young, gay teacher...but I can't force anyone to come out. I didn't think that I'd be so emotional about this. I'm still really saddened by this. I have a deep, dark sadness about this. The shame is gone; the anger is gone. It's just more about sadness than anything. I'm sad that we're heading toward where we're heading. I had hoped that AIDS, and after so much, you know, heartache, that people would understand us more, but it seems like

people are more – we’re more misrepresented and more misunderstood than ever”

(Personal Interview, February 1, 2005).

Donald

“I had good teachers that stood out as far as that goes. My second grade teacher still sends me birthday cards every year. She’s not gay or anything, but she stood out to me and made me want to be a teacher, but nothing from like a gay standpoint, like I never really had that, and I know that that has always been in the back of my mind. I think that is one of the reasons why I decided I could go into education and really make a difference – especially for gay students who might have extra added pressure and issues to deal with at such a young age. You know, maybe if I did have that gay teacher, maybe I would have come out earlier and not waited until I was in college. Perhaps I would have felt more comfortable with myself if I had had someone to look up to” (Personal interview, February 2, 2005).

Eric

“Of course go into it with an open mind. Find what makes you comfortable. Lose the tie and roll up the sleeves. Get comfortable. Don’t do anything that will make you uncomfortable. Find what works for you and then you’ll find what works for the kids because then you’ll be better apt to teaching; you’ll be more effective. But you have to be comfortable with yourself first. And that first year is going to be tough, no matter what. It’s going to be tough because you’re going to have to deal with administrative issues that are new to you and students are different every single day. And don’t tell them you’re

gay. They'll figure it out and get the courage to ask you, and then you take it from there – decide whether you're going to tell them or not. And look for that kid, that student who is having trouble with his sexuality and just watch him and be there, like you know, when he falls or when he's having trouble. You can help him. Just watch him and be there” (Personal interview, February 4, 2005).

Frank

“When I was 13 or 14, I attempted suicide because I didn't want to be seen as this gay freak. I don't want my kids to do that or cause someone else to go through that. And we need to pass laws, do things and let things be discussed. I just want to see students safe from being harassed – teachers from being harassed – Something! You know, something saying that you cannot be harassed because you're gay. And some of our kids are so young that they have not figured out what their sexuality is. They just know that they're different. Some of them already know, but regardless, I think that teachers and students alike should be treating themselves as equal. And it's an ideal. I hate to say that it's only an ideal because I'd like to see it as a reality, and it's not. We live in a very politically hostile climate right now. The last election proved it, and I'm scared for the future of my kids. But I also hope that the next generation after me will be better – you can't stand in the way of progress. What was an issue when I was in middle school is not now. Things are getting better slowly, but I just want to see my kids able to be themselves. I can't be myself. I just want to see something done for the kids” (Personal interview, January 15, 2005).

Gary

“I’m cautious, but now I don’t care if my co-workers, or administrators, or my students know that I am gay. It doesn’t matter to me because when it comes down to it, if they want to jeopardize my job, they’re going to have a hard time doing that. I strongly believe that I’m there for one purpose and that purpose is for their betterment – to teach them something and it’s not necessarily math. It could be manners. It could be anything. So, I think now that I’m open; it’s not that bad. But there are still some things that I need to be careful about. I think I speak for educators in general when I say if you care - if you love what you’re doing – you don’t say that ‘Oh, I’m a math teacher,’ you just say, ‘I’m a teacher or a mentor or a guide’ because the students can come to you with anything for anything. It can be about sex or anything. And you have to be prepared for all of that”
(Personal interview, February 9, 2005).

Chapter 5

Discussion

Method and Data Summary

The research reported for this study focused on the lived experiences of gay male secondary teachers in West Central Florida. Specifically, this study examined the participants' responses to an interview schedule that centered on four major research questions. They were:

1. How do gay male teachers describe the role their sexual orientation plays in their classroom decision-making about content?
2. How do gay male teachers describe the effect of their sexual orientation on classroom management decisions?
3. What barriers do gay male teachers perceive that prevent them from addressing anti-gay or homophobic language uttered by their students or colleagues?
4. What barriers do gay male teachers perceive that prevent them from revealing their sexual orientation to their colleagues and students at school?

After locating eleven participants for this study using the Network Sampling technique described by Miles and Huberman (1994), I interviewed seven of them over a span of four months. The other four individuals are not included in this study for various reasons.

One of them, a high school teacher from the Hillsborough School District, declined to be a part of the study citing time constraints as his primary reason. Two other individuals simply did not get back to me after initially showing an interest in the study; they did not indicate why they changed their minds. The fourth individual was located too late in the process to be included in this study, but I conducted the interview in the interest of obtaining what might be valuable insights for a future study. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, which allowed me to conduct a thorough analysis of the collected data.

The analysis of the data was exploratory in nature and employed a constant comparison procedure as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Conastas (1992). As I transcribed each audiotaped interview, I produced a series of analytic notes by typing them directly within the text of the transcriptions (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This served as the initial analysis. I continued this process of note taking and added bold print to the text of the audiotaped interviews to indicate themes that began to emerge from the collected data. Next, a color-coding scheme was used to identify recurring phrases and themes found in the data. Over the course of four months, the themes became more solidified and were verified using the member-checking technique described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and by a workshop technique that occurred between committee members and me. In the end, ten themes emerged from the data. They were:

1. Gay-Themed Materials in the Classroom
2. Interactions with Students Perceived to be Gay
3. Separation of Informants' Private Lives from Life at School
4. Informants' Perceptions of Proper Conduct by a Gay Male Teacher

5. Challenges and Problems Faced by the Informants at School
6. Informants' Understandings of How Students Use Homophobic Language
7. Informants' Use of Humor in the Classroom
8. Informants' Relationships and Interactions with Colleagues at School
9. Informants' Perceptions of the Acceptance of Gay Male Teachers
10. Informants' Perceived Special Talents of Gay Male Teachers

In the interest of accurately reflecting the perceptions of the participants as closely as possible, the following discussion remains closely connected to the research questions and the themes derived directly from the given data. At times, however, I will change the trajectory of the discussion by connecting participants' thoughts to themes from the current literature and past research as well. In this way, the informants' voices are preserved as larger issues are introduced and confronted.

Sexual Orientation and Academic Content

The seven informants in this study all reported discussing gay-themed topics in their classrooms at appropriate moments. At times, current issues in the news, such as same-sex marriage, prompted such discussions allowing the teachers to take advantage of teachable moments. Eric, an ESE teacher in Hillsborough County, told me that his school's newspaper reported the results of an opinion poll conducted at school on gay marriage. Therefore, he used the topic for a debate in his English class. Similarly, some students chose to discuss this issue while giving oral reports in Frank's Advanced Placement Spanish class conducted in a high school in Pasco County. At other times the

discussions came up because the issue of homosexuality was embedded within the mandated curriculum. Both psychology teachers in this study reported that gay themes are included in what used to be referred to as abnormal psychology. As such, they discuss how homosexual behavior was diagnosed as abnormal behavior in the past. When Donald teaches about Greek culture and the Renaissance in his World History class in Pinellas County, the students discuss homosexuality, especially as it pertains to well-known figures like Alexander the Great and William Shakespeare. In his American History class, Donald tells his students about Hitler's persecution of homosexuals during the Holocaust. And, finally, Chris actually had his students in Hillsborough County perform the Laramie Project, which chronicles the life and 1998 death of Matthew Shepard, an openly gay college student from Laramie, Wyoming, who was a victim of a hate crime.

In each case, the participants in this study willingly discussed gay-themed issues as long as they pertained to the curriculum in some way. In most cases, it was also important to the teachers for the *students* to initiate the conversations, especially in those classrooms where gay themes did not emerge from the mandated curriculum, but instead were prompted by current events issues. This scenario contrasts strongly with Ronni Sanlo's (1999) findings in a study conducted in northeast Florida just a few years ago. She discovered that the sixteen participants in her study were uncomfortable teaching about gay and lesbian people in history and further that the teachers were unable to teach such content because they were unfamiliar with significant gay people and events (Sanlo, 1999). The men in this study were certainly cautious not to introduce gay themes where they did not fit, but they did not shy away when an opportunity presented itself.

In fact, I was surprised by the relative ease with which the informants reported teaching gay-themed materials. My assumption coming into this study was that gay male teachers in West Central Florida would shy away from such themes because they might, in some way, indict them as gay men. But in each case, the teachers in this study openly discussed gay themes regardless of their level of openness at work. Walling (1996) finds that the most common method of teaching about gay and lesbian people is by simply mentioning that certain famous people are/were gay. The men in this study certainly did some of that, but they reported going far beyond mere mentioning as well. So, clearly, my initial assumption was incorrect. Despite working within school atmospheres that are often hostile to the inclusion of gay-themed topics in academic discussions or activities, these men have discovered spaces where gay-themed issues can be openly discussed and investigated without having them automatically raise suspicions and/or curiosity about their sexual orientations.

Addressing Homophobic Language at School

One of the key indicators of the level of insensitivity and hostility directed toward gay and lesbian people at school is the continued use of homophobic language. Words like “faggot,” “dyke,” “queer,” and the derogatory phrase, “that’s so gay,” are uttered all too often and easily by students and teachers alike. Sanlo (1999) found that “a kid can call another kid a faggot or queer and nothing is said. But if they [the offending students] call them [the targeted students] anything else, like a racial slur or anything like that, then they [teachers and administrators] really deal with the problem. So the message is this: It seems to be quite alright for kids to use that kind of language, faggot, queer, dyke, that

kind of thing” (p. 107). The teachers in this study concur with Sanlo’s assessment agreeing, collectively, that “using the terms ‘faggot’ or some other things like that [is] the last ‘acceptable’ slur you can use” (Informant Adam, personal interview, February 2, 2005). And when one considers the term, “that’s so gay,” it is part of the “slang of the time” used commonly by students at school (Informant Eric, personal interview, February 4, 2005).

Despite the universal agreement that students and teachers use homophobic language, however, there are distinct differences in how gay teachers choose to address that language. And often, the teachers’ course of action is influenced by the specific word or phrase being used at a particular time. Two of the men in this study, for example, hear “that’s so gay” from their students and choose to ignore it because they feel that there are bigger battles to fight. This is particularly true because many of the teachers explained how they have come to understand their students’ meaning of the phrase. According to some informants, they believe that when students say that something is “gay,” they mean that the object is different, corny, or in some way out of step with the norm. As Gary informed me, “If a student says that your shoes are gay, it means he doesn’t like your shoes” (Informant Gary, personal interview, February 9, 2005). Clearly, some of the gay teachers in this study sought out and tried to understand the intent of the phrase before making decisions about how to address the behavior.

For other teachers, however, the use of homophobic language, in any form, is unacceptable in their classrooms and they address it immediately. They bring attention to the use of language because ignoring it gives tacit consent for its continued use. They understand that when other students hear homophobic language, it promotes negative

stereotypes and allows the offending student to label a group of people because ‘gay’ may mean ‘stupid’ or ‘different’ in a specific context, but ‘gay’ also refers to homosexual people in the larger context. As Chris, the openly gay teacher in this study who teaches in Hillsborough County, reported telling one of his students, “Well, you know, that phrase identifies me, so when you are saying that, it’s identifying all my people. It encompasses gays and lesbians, and that means that you’re saying we’re ugly, stupid, or whatever the connotation may be in that particular context [when the phrase is used]” (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005). In addition, the majority of gay teachers in this study understand that when homophobic slurs go ignored, it indicates that the classroom space or the hallways at school are unsafe places for students who may be questioning their sexual orientation or for those students who may be sympathetic to gay people because they have friends and/or family members who are gay. As one informant thoughtfully commented, “I don’t think there’s much viciousness in most of it [using homophobic language], but that certainly doesn’t make it any easier for some 16-year-old gay person that’s sitting in the classroom” (Informant Adam, personal interview, February 2, 2005).

There is clearly no uniform, and agreed upon method of how and when to address homophobic language at school. But the gay teachers in this study do not sit by idly, allowing the use of homophobic slurs to go unchecked. Just as each of them is able to discuss gay-themed topics in class when appropriate, they also address homophobic language when they hear it, albeit to different degrees, and depending on individual situations. There seems to be a parallel between the teachers’ use of gay-themed topics and their willingness to address homophobic language. The gay teachers in this study do

not hesitate to address anti-gay language because they fear it will somehow expose their sexual orientation, but instead, some of them fail to respond only when they do not perceive the seriousness of the language use or if they detect no malicious intent. Just as these gay teachers in West Central Florida teach gay-themed issues because it is a part of the curriculum or because they are taking advantage of teachable moments, they address homophobic language in an appropriate manner because it is the right thing to do. Fear is not the overriding issue; good classroom practice dictates their actions.

Reaching Out to Students Perceived as Gay

In the past, some researchers have been highly critical of gay teachers because they allow their fear of being exposed as gay to override their ability to support openly gay or questioning students at school. In fact, Rofes (1989) maintains that one of the barriers to helping gay and lesbian youth is the lack of courage from adults in school. In apparent agreement with Rofes, Kissen (1996) found that gay and lesbian teachers would sometimes sit silently and watch as gay and lesbian students endured unjust treatment because of their own fears of being exposed. Other researchers have been more sympathetic, citing specific reasons why a gay teacher may not be able to speak out in support of a gay student. Indeed, Sanlo (1999) reported that “although all the participants in [her] study expressed a desire to be advocates [for gay youth], they all said they were morbidly afraid of losing their jobs and unable to speak out” (p. 101).

Each of the seven gay teachers in this study reported having had interactions with students who were openly gay at school or with students who they perceived to be gay or questioning. In each case, the teacher chose an approach that he deemed most appropriate

at the time. Adam, Chris, and Gary, all Hillsborough County teachers, and Frank, who teaches in Pasco County, all choose to personally engage students who they perceive as gay or questioning, giving them advice, and/or closely monitoring them in the halls and in the classroom setting. Donald, who teaches in Pinellas County, chooses to employ school protocols, referring questioning students to the school guidance counselor. To some researchers, Donald's actions may reflect a lack of desire to directly attend to the needs of his gay and questioning students. It is important to note, however, that Donald's rationale for his actions is centered on his relative youth and inexperience as a first year teacher and based, partially, on an incident from his recent past. When he was a student teacher, an openly gay senior in the high school where he taught displayed a perceived physical attraction for him. For that reason, Donald continues to be extremely cautious.

Of all the teachers in this study, only Ben hinted at the fear of advocating for gay students that is so prevalent in the literature. In fact, as a school employee, he said that he did not feel any particular duty to help students who may be questioning their sexuality. On this particular issue, he commented, "I think I have to be careful. Just because it conjures up sex. It conjures up inappropriate contact. [Therefore], I would treat someone coming out to me just like [I] would treat someone saying they're being abused at home or addicted to drugs. I hate to group it with all these other things, but there's a *procedure*, and I feel like I have to follow that procedure" (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005). Ben quickly added, however, that outside of school, he would be far more personally engaged with any student who came out to him or who asked him for advice concerning self-discovery about one's sexual orientation.

In the end, the gay teachers in this study all reported some level of engagement and interaction with openly gay students or with those students perceived as gay. Even Eric, the Hillsborough County teacher who most clearly described the importance of appearing straight and who, I will later argue, is the most severely closeted teacher in my sample, said that he would talk to any student that came to him for guidance about his/her questioning feelings or about the decision whether or not to come out at school. Citing what his father did for him as a struggling gay youth, Eric commented, “If they come to me, I will talk to them. My father made me realize that there’s nothing wrong with me. When I was struggling with it, he told me that its ok not to like baseball and stuff like that. He said that I’m alright and that I’m a good person” (Informant Eric, personal interview, February 4, 2005). Clearly, none of the teachers in this study described the fear of losing his job as a reason not to help gay and/or questioning students. The one teacher who hinted at fear as a mitigating factor for his actions at school did not cite fear of losing his job as the cause of his actions, but instead indicated his fear of being accused of inappropriate (sexual) contact with students, a common stereotype of gay men.

Being Out at School

Griffin (1992) found that gay teachers managed their identities at school by employing various strategies that allowed them some degree of personal privacy. In fact, she created the Identity Management Strategies Model to describe how gay teachers presented themselves at school. Gay teachers who wanted colleagues and students to perceive them as heterosexual were categorized as *passing*. These teachers unashamedly lied about their sexual orientation and gave no indications that they were gay. For other gay teachers, I

found that they “were not trying to lead others to believe that they were heterosexual,” but instead they wanted to prevent people from perceiving them as gay (Griffin, 1992, p.176). While this distinction is subtle, it was significant enough to warrant a separate category within Griffin’s model called *covering*. The next category of gay teachers Griffin described included those who are *implicitly out*. These teachers do not lie about or cover their sexual orientation, but they do not confirm it either. They often talk openly about their relationships and let others come to their own conclusions (Ibid, 1992). The final category in Griffin’s model includes teachers who are *explicitly out* or who are openly gay at school. These teachers directly open up to trusted individuals and are perceived gay by most teachers and students at school.

The seven participants in this study all fall somewhere along the spectrum included within the model described by Griffin. But there is one important distinction to make between Griffin’s model and the level of openness described by the informants in this study. Some of the informants fall into different categories depending upon whose perception is being used: a student’s perception may be considered or the perception of adults at school may be taken into account. For the one teacher in this study who is openly gay, Chris, the distinction does not matter because he is out to both teachers and students alike. For all the others, however, one must consider whose perception is being considered. For Donald and Frank, they consider themselves to be perceived as gay by many students or implicitly out. Adam and Gary believe that only a few students perceive them as gay, and they fit into the covering category, while Ben and Eric maintain that students perceive them as heterosexual men. For Eric, this perception of heterosexuality is important and he uses it, whereas Ben does not. Therefore, only Eric truly passes as

straight according to Griffin's model when one considers the perceptions of students only.

When one considers the perceptions of the adults at the various schools in West Central Florida where these men teach, a different scenario emerges. Unlike Griffin's (1992) findings and Sanlo's (1999) reporting, every informant in this study was out to at least one colleague at school and in most cases more than one. Therefore, none of the participants fall into the passing category when one considers the perceptions of the adults because none of these men openly lied about their sexual orientation to all of their colleagues. It is fair to say that only Donald and Frank are implicitly out, while Adam, Ben, Eric, and Gary all engaged in a good amount of "covering" while at school.

Barriers to Coming Out at School

Even though the teachers in this study report openly discussing gay-themed issues in class and do not, as a group, participate in directly lying about their sexual orientations; they are still hesitant to completely come out at school. One of the main reasons cited for this hesitancy was the fear of losing effectiveness as a teacher. As might be expected, the one teacher who is the most deeply situated in the workplace closet, Eric, spoke most directly on this issue. He said, "I think if I wasn't perceived as straight and seen as gay, I don't think I'd be as effective as a teacher because many of the students I teach need a male figure" (Informant Eric, personal interview, February 4, 2005). Clearly, Eric believes that the male figure his students need must be masculine and perceived as heterosexual rather than one perceived as feminine or gay. In essence, it is acceptable for male teachers to be gay as long as they are not perceived as having feminine qualities.

Griffin (1992) comments on this fear of losing effectiveness in her study as well, but what I found to be surprising is that even the informants who were not perceived as straight by many teachers and students hold similar sentiments. Ben wants to support being out at school but does not believe it should be a distraction to students, and therefore, he does not come out completely. Donald, who does not try to hide his sexual orientation by pretending to have a girlfriend, does not believe the parents of his students would approve of his coming out, and so he remains only implicitly out. Many of his students and most of the faculty at his private school in Pinellas County perceive him as a gay man, and yet he will not confirm those beliefs.

The same holds true for Frank, the Spanish teacher in Pasco County. Students, while in class, have clearly indicated their belief that he is gay, but Frank has not come out completely because he believes that the existing stigma that surrounds him is already difficult enough to bear without confirming students' suspicions, which, he believes, would only make matters worse. About this stigma, he commented, "Throughout my teaching career, I'm always going to be known as the gay teacher. I'm always going to hear whispering" (Informant Frank, personal interview, January 15, 2005). But more than the stigma attached to being a gay male teacher, Frank is unique in that he is the only informant in this study who mentioned a fear of job loss if he officially came out at school. In the past, gay teachers' fear of losing their jobs if their sexual orientation was revealed was a prominent part of the literature (Griffin, 1992; Harbeck, 1992; Juul & Repa, 1993; Kissen, 1996; Rofes, 1989; Sanlo, 1999), but this particular barrier did not come up repeatedly for the teachers in this study. In fact, one of the informants boldly stated, "I've been at it [teaching] long enough so that I'm no longer worried about losing

my job” (Informant Adam, personal interview, February 2005). The laws in the state of Florida have not changed. The laws within the school districts that make up West Central Florida have not changed. Sexual orientation is not a part of the non-discrimination policy for teachers or other district employees, and yet the fear of losing one’s job based upon one’s sexual orientation seems to have dissipated.

There are no definite reasons why this apparent lack of fear was such a prominent theme among the gay male teachers in this area. However, it is possible that this change in the teachers’ perspective has been caused by cultural changes that have occurred over the past several years. Much of the research that suggested that gay teachers feared losing their jobs if their sexual orientation was revealed was conducted eight years ago or more. In addition, it is plausible that various school sites within the Tampa Bay area have a more progressive attitude toward gay teachers than do *some* other areas in Florida or where the previous research was conducted. Certainly, the overall atmosphere for gay teachers in West Central Florida remains tenuous, but some change has occurred over time. It is also plausible that the particular individuals who participated in this study have overcome their personal fears based upon their performance in the classroom or simply because of the particular site where they are employed. So, while barriers to coming out at school still exist for gay male teachers, the fear of losing one’s job cannot fully explain what keeps gay male teachers from being openly gay at school. Something more fundamental and subtle is taking place.

The “Appropriate” Male Performance

For the men in this study, the fear of losing their teaching job cannot fully explain why the majority of them cannot completely come out at work, even though most reported having a desire to do so. The larger barrier keeping these gay teachers confined is related to what Connell (1995) calls hegemonic masculinity and what Buchbinder (1994) labels the dominant model of masculinity. This form of masculinity is characterized by various character traits such as assertiveness, confidence, aggressiveness, and competitiveness. To fully understand this concept, however, one must consider what hegemonic masculinity is not: sensitivity, emotionality, and other perceived feminine qualities. In fact, many people assume that those “dominant masculinity traits” are the appropriate qualities of a “man.” In a study of teenage boys in England reported by Mac an Ghail (1994), these traits were found in the group of boys labeled “Macho Lads.” I am not suggesting that the men in this study consciously adopt and act out these traits in the most extreme form, but given their responses to various questions about how they believe a male teacher should act, about their perception of the level of acceptance for gay men in the classroom, and about the advice they give to openly gay students, I believe that schools encourage, and in some ways demand, the tacit acceptance of this form of masculinity.

When I asked the informants to describe what they believed to be the proper conduct for a gay male teacher at school, the majority of them made comments that alluded to dominant masculinity characteristics. Ben, a high school psychology teacher in Hillsborough County, said, “I want to support being out at school, but I don’t know if you want to be *flaming* or real dramatic. I want someone to be out and comfortable but you

still need to *straighten up*. You're a guy. You need to talk deep and dress like a guy" (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005). Although it pained him to say these words, the implications are clear: Ben strongly believes that a gay male teacher must be perceived as a masculine man, the type of man described by Connell (1995) and Buchbinder (1994) as assertive, aggressive, and competitive.

Gary, another Hillsborough County teacher, made comments that indicate that he is in full agreement with Ben. When I asked him about his perception of the acceptance of gay men who teach, he said, "I don't think we are accepted that much. I think we [would be] if we [remain] in the closet or if we do our best not to show any kind of signs that we are gay" (Informant Gary, personal interview, February 9, 2005). When I asked Gary to more fully explain what he meant by "not showing any kinds of signs," he gave me a list of behaviors for gay male teachers to avoid while at school. He said that male teachers should avoid a certain type of walk, they should avoid having "limp wrists, and that they should talk with a "deep, masculine tone" (Ibid, February 9, 2005). Interestingly, Gary's apparent acceptance of hegemonic masculinity characteristics for gay male teachers influenced the advice he gave to an openly gay teenager where he works who he described as flamboyant. He said, "So, I set him aside. I told him that it was ok that he had accepted himself, but 'don't push it on other people because you don't know if they're comfortable with it.' You just can't assume that everybody's going to accept it" (Ibid, February 9, 2005). Gary's advice to this teenaged boy was essentially to assimilate and act more like his classmates expected him to act – like a "boy."

Unlike Gary, Frank did not offer any advice to his openly gay middle school student to assimilate, but he did advise him to be careful about to whom he chose to reveal his

sexual orientation. And Frank, unlike Ben, did not directly say that he believes gay male teachers need to “straighten up,” but sometimes actions speak much more loudly than words. Reflecting back to his days as a middle school teacher in Hernando County, Frank recalled, “I was so colorful, you know! I wanted to be this crazy, fun [teacher]. I went out to bus duty with a sombrero and maracas. I really am just that kind of crazy, ‘out there,’ fun foreign language teacher” (Informant Frank, January 15, 2005). When Frank described himself today at his high school in Pasco County, he said, “I act a little differently [now]. I’ve calmed down a little during my third year of teaching. I don’t dress the same way. I’m very monochromatic. I don’t project myself as the cool teacher anymore” (Ibid, January 15, 2005). Some would argue that Frank’s change of behavior is a result of losing that first year teacher excitement combined with the change from teaching at a middle school to teaching at a high school. Certainly, there are antics that middle school students appreciate more fully than high school students, but I believe that something more is occurring. I believe that the current atmosphere found within secondary schools actually suppresses behaviors in gay male teachers that may be considered flamboyant or non-masculine. Therefore, hegemonic masculinity is promoted and reproduced in school when gay male teachers feel compelled to act more like a stereotypically masculine man. This form of masculinity is also encouraged when these gay male teachers advise their openly gay students to behave in a similar manner or to assimilate to expected norms of behavior. This scenario, I believe, is the biggest barrier facing gay male teachers in West Central Florida, and perhaps elsewhere, preventing them from coming out at school.

Further evidence of this “school effect” on gay male teachers can be seen in the response one of the participants gave concerning his approach to students who may come out to him. Earlier, I reported that Ben felt no particular duty to help questioning students *at school*, and that there are procedures in place that he feels compelled to follow. Outside of school, however, Ben reports that he would respond to such a student in a different manner, offering a variety of resources and sage advice. Ben said, “It would be different. I might share my stories or I might tell them, ‘Look, you have to read this book.’ If they were no longer a student [at school], it would be different” (Informant Ben, personal interview, January 8, 2005). There is a clear difference between the way Ben reports that he would behave in school and how he would behave outside of school in reaction to a student coming out to him.

But perhaps it is Eric who best exemplifies the effects of hegemonic masculinity and the way secondary schools promote the enactment of its characteristics. Eric firmly believes that he must be perceived as a straight, masculine male at school. About how his students perceive him, he said, “They think I’m a player, that I’m from New York and that I have women like crazy! They try to set me up with female teachers. I think if I wasn’t perceived as straight and seen as gay, I don’t think I’d be as effective as a teacher because many of the students I teach need a male figure” (Informant Eric, personal interview, February 4, 2005). When Eric uses the term “male,” he clearly means the type of male described as the dominant male (Buchbinder, 1994) or the hegemonic male described by Connell (1995). Eric’s beliefs were formed over years of lived experiences, and two of them stand out, in particular. He reported that as a young teacher, an older colleague told a female friend of his that “he looks like a fruit.” About this incident, Eric

said, “I remember that today. She told me that and I didn’t like that. So, I started watching how I walked, and how I act, you know. I felt that if I’m going to be a teacher, I don’t want to be perceived that way” (Informant Eric, personal interview, February 4, 2005). Around the same time, Eric had college friends whom he considered “nelly” that “didn’t last” in the teaching profession. Eric commented, “Many of them changed careers and some of them didn’t even make it past their student teaching” (Ibid, February 4, 2005). As a result of these past lived experiences, Eric to this day monitors how he acts, walks, and dresses at school. This same man who proudly admits that he wears “daisy dukes,” tight-fitting shorts that are most commonly worn by women and almost never worn by straight men, when he goes out to clubs is very careful to “act like a man” at school. I believe the school effect combined with his past experiences explain why Eric continues to display those characteristics of the hegemonic or dominant male.

This discussion of a gay male teacher’s appropriate performance must include one additional element to be complete. Earlier in this manuscript, I discussed the potential, indirect influences that I, as the researcher, might have on the results of this study. The informants’ reporting of the appropriate male performance for a gay teacher may be one of those areas that I unwittingly affected. Because I consciously position myself as a straight-acting, masculine male figure, the informants may have felt some degree of pressure, if only on a sub-conscious level, to answer my questions so that they aligned neatly with my persona. Whereas I cannot verify this thought, it is important to recognize this possibility even if said influence only affected the informants’ responses slightly.

The Possibility for Difference: A New Male Performance at School

The hegemonic or dominant male role appears to be the preferred role for gay male teachers to play in the West Central Florida secondary schools in this study. Even if the atmosphere at many schools promotes such a portrayal, however, I believe there are other alternatives that should be considered. Just as Mac an Ghail (1994) describes several varying performances of “maleness” in the male students they studied in England, I believe that gay male teachers should have a choice in the type of male performance they give. Chris, the only openly gay teacher in this study provides an example of how one of those potential, alternative performances would appear. Thinking back to his childhood as a boy in a Catholic school, he remembered, “There was this one gay brother, and I of course don’t know for sure that he was gay, but he was extremely flamboyant. I remember he taught religion and he played Beatles music during class, and he would talk about Beatles music. And he changed my life because he was loving and he was understanding. And I knew that he was like me, but he wasn’t one of those perversions, you know, all tied up in a knot and hating [himself]. He liked who he was, and he knew who he was and he celebrated it” (Informant Chris, personal interview, February 1, 2005). Certainly, the teacher Chris describes as *loving* and *understanding* does not fit the description of the hegemonic male. Chris now teaches from a similar perspective and offers us a counterexample to the dominant male described by other teachers in this study. I believe that his model of teaching offers another choice in how gay male teachers may position themselves while teaching at school.

All of the men in this study reported that it is extremely important to be seen as a proper role model for their students, both straight and gay alike. In fact, each one of them

believes that he is doing what is best for his students when he behaves as he does and when he offers certain lines of advice. Sanlo (1999) laments “an opportunity for all students to learn and understand about diversity to its broadest extent is lost when lesbian and gay people and events are not included in the curriculum” (p. 102). Similarly, much is lost when gay male teachers feel compelled to act in restricted and limited ways at school. I am not suggesting that all gender norms be discarded in the hopes of promoting an appreciation for diversity and freedom of expression. But I do believe that there is room for more than one expression of masculinity for gay male teachers, especially given that the chosen, hegemonic form limits them in so many ways. If we truly want our students to better understand those who are different from them and appreciate diversity, then we must consider the knowledge that can be gleaned from understanding differences among people. Because Chris is an openly gay teacher who freely expresses himself at school, I believe he is a living example of the possibilities that exist for other gay male teachers in terms of their enactment of masculinity at school. Accordingly, I believe he represents an opportunity for students to experience diversity first hand. Chris reported that he was the first openly gay person one of his students had ever met. That same student later thanked him for being out because by knowing Chris, he had been better able to fit in with some of his gay and lesbian peers at a drama camp. Frank reported that his openly gay middle school student wrote a letter of thanks to him for allowing him to express himself in class. These two incidents would not have been possible if Chris and Frank had only displayed hegemonic male characteristics. While I truly believe that every teacher in this study has positively influenced the lives of their students in various ways,

none of them reported such incidents, an indication, perhaps, of the limitations inherent in the hegemonic male performance.

Moore (1994) warns, “individuals who challenge or resist dominant discourses on gender and gender identity frequently find that this is at the expense of social power, social approval, and even material benefits” (p.65). Most teachers have no expectations of accumulating vast material benefits and few wield social power. It is not an easy road for any individual to travel, but perhaps the collective enactment of various male performances and a joint effort to help our students gain a more authentic appreciation for diversity is worth the risk of losing some degree of social approval.

Recommendations for School Officials

Based upon the insights I gained from the informants in this study and the review of the literature, I make the following recommendations to administrators and faculties of secondary schools in West Central Florida and the various Colleges of Education throughout the state:

1. School principals should provide mandatory, on-site, diversity training for all faculty and staff members, annually, paying particular attention to those issues centered on sexual orientation.
2. Faculty and staff need to promote a school atmosphere of acceptance for all members of the school community including faculty, staff, and students. I suggest the establishment of “safe zones,” gay-straight alliances, and diversity clubs to foster the desired atmosphere.

3. Faculty members in all subject areas should be encouraged to initiate and teach gay-themed materials when they relate to the school's mandated curriculum. Further, faculty members should be encouraged to facilitate discussions initiated by students regardless of the potential, controversial nature of said discussions.
4. Principals should promote acceptance of all forms of diversity among faculty members and provide a place for questioning, gay, or lesbian teachers to share professional concerns.
5. Principals, faculty members, students, and concerned community members should petition local school boards for the inclusion of sexual orientation on district non-discrimination policies and encourage statewide adoption of said policies.
6. School libraries should include among its volumes age appropriate literature that centers on gay and lesbian issues among teens.
7. Schools of Education must require all pre-service and Masters level teachers to enroll in a semester long course that covers information on current gay and lesbian issues like the coming out process for students, the pressures/obstacles faced by gay and lesbian teachers, the creation of safe zones and gay friendly clubs at school, and other related topics.

Future Research Directions

Clearly, mine are not the last words on this topic and there is much more that needs to be done in this area of study. From the onset, I recognized that as a regional project this study lacks a level of generalizability that many researchers and scholars hope to see. But

for a topic such as this, where one gay male teacher at one school site may have experiences that are far different from another gay male teacher who works at a site only a few miles away, I believe that smaller-scaled, micro-studies are needed to truly understand all the nuances of experience that gay male teachers endure. As such, I believe that there is a strong need for case studies at various, individual school sites in a wide variety of settings and communities to gain a better understanding of those factors that affect the gay male teaching experience. Certainly, if one desires a more macro-view of the daily, lived experiences of gay male teachers, other regional studies, like this one and Ronni Sanlo's (1999) *Unheard Voices*, need to be conducted as well.

Whether future researchers choose local case studies or larger regional studies, I believe there is room for a greater variety of perspectives concerning gay teachers. I chose to write about the perspective of the gay male teacher himself, but another study could examine the lives of gay teachers through the eyes of the students they teach, the colleagues with whom they work, the administrators for whom they work, and the parents of the students they teach or other parents in the community. I suppose a study such as this would be most applicable for teachers who are completely out, like Chris, but it would also be interesting to see if some of the more closeted teachers are as successful at appearing straight as they think they are.

In addition to considering the perspectives of others besides the gay male teacher himself, there are certainly other research opportunities to consider in terms of gay teacher demographics. In my study, I limited the research pool to men who teach in secondary schools because I believe there are enough significant differences between the gay male teacher experience and the lesbian teacher experience to warrant separate

research projects. The same holds true for those individuals, both male and female, who work in elementary schools; only a separate study can reveal the differentiated life experiences of teachers in both school settings. Some of the participants in this study made comments that indicated that they have a similar perception based upon what they have witnessed at schools throughout their teaching careers. But future researchers will be in a better position to verify assumptions like this by actually conducting studies that include both men and women who teach at the elementary and secondary levels.

In addition, it would be appropriate to investigate the effects of one's race and age in terms of the gay teacher experience. In my study, there were no African Americans, for example, among the participants, and I wonder if I would have uncovered additional themes to consider had that population been represented. There was a wide range of ages in my study, 26-54, but none of my research questions were geared toward seeking difference of experience based on the age of the gay male teacher. I believe there is a study that needs to be done in this area as well.

Moving beyond issues of location, perspective, and simple demographics, I also believe there are larger issues that require further research concerning gay teachers. Even though one of my informants stressed the importance of being an openly gay teacher, I believe that there is so much more to be said about that issue. Many gay teachers across Florida and around the nation continue to live closeted or double lives because they are deathly afraid of the potential consequences of coming out. More research needs to be done on "out" teachers and about their journeys so that others might be empowered to follow a similar path. I strongly believe that gay teachers bring a unique presence to the classroom and a perspective on life that is beneficial for all students, but when so many

of them are afraid to show that side of themselves, the potential benefits are lost. The students miss out and, as other researchers have shown, the closeted teacher suffers as well.

At the same time, however, I also believe some future research projects should focus on the perceived benefits of being closeted or what could be called the *benefits of hiding*. I am confident that many gay teachers do not reveal their sexual orientations based not on their fear of being victimized, but because of privacy issues and personal life choices. Indeed, much of the current literature on gay and lesbian people does not view them as victims, but as survivors and/or empowered individuals who make choices and live with the concomitant consequences like everyone else in society. But since so many gay teachers remain closeted, I believe they must perceive some benefit to their actions that go beyond the fear of losing a job. Perhaps if we as researchers could attain a better understanding of why many gay teachers stay closeted, we may be in a better position to help them eventually come out, if they so choose, and live a life at school that is closer to complete freedom of expression.

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