

April 2023

## Instruction, Identity, and Inclusivity: What can Teacher Preparation Programs Learn from Gay Male Teachers in the South

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### Repository Citation

Jones, J. R. (2023). Instruction, Identity, and Inclusivity: What can Teacher Preparation Programs Learn from Gay Male Teachers in the South. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 22 (1). Retrieved from <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo/vol22/iss1/4>

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## Instruction, Identity, and Inclusivity

### What Can Teacher Preparation Programs Learn from Gay Male Teachers in the South?

*Joseph R. Jones*

#### **Abstract**

Presently, there is a political attack on LGBTQ+ individuals, especially in southern states. In 2022, six southern states (Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Texas) enacted laws that prohibit discussing LGBTQ+ students or issues within P-12 schools. These laws perpetuate heteronormativity and create intolerant and unsafe educational spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals, especially students. Teacher preparation programs must begin addressing the challenges these laws present to P-12 schools. Therefore, in this article, the author discusses a qualitative research study that examined southern gay male teachers' beliefs about the intersectionality of sexuality, gender identity, and pedagogy in secondary classrooms. The author utilized queer theory as the theoretical framework. For this discussion, three important themes emerged from the data analysis: instruction, identity, and inclusivity. The study utilized individual unstructured interviews, unstructured focus group interviews, classroom observations with field notes, and a research journal. The findings offer suggestions for teacher preparation programs to consider when preparing teacher candidates for the profession.

#### **Introduction**

There is, presently, a political attack on LGBTQ+ individuals, especially in southern states. In 2022, six southern states (Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Texas) enacted laws that prohibit discussing LGBTQ+ students or issues within P-12 schools. In Arkansas and Tennessee (also Montana and Arizona), teachers are required to notify parents of LGBTQ+ curricula and

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allow parents to opt out of the lesson. These laws create school climates that perpetuate heteronormativity, which can be detrimental for a number of LGBTQ+ individuals within schools. Further, these laws force teachers to allow intolerance to prevail in schools and in their classrooms because of fear of legal ramifications and job dismissal.

In the latest data from GLSEN (2019), a national surveyor of school climates, 59.1% of LGBTQ+ students felt unsafe in their schools, 32.7% missed at least one day from school because they were scared to attend, 68.7% were verbally assaulted because of their identity, and 25.7% were physically assaulted. Other data (Jones, 2017) posits that LGBTQ+ students who are harassed in schools believe college will be the same and choose not to attend. Further, the suicide rates for LGBTQ+ students are astronomical when compared to their non-LGBTQ+ student counterparts. I posit these numbers will increase in southern states because of these laws.

In 2017, I left higher education and returned to the secondary classroom in a southern state as a special education teacher in a co-taught English classroom. As a returning “new” teacher, I discovered the intolerance towards LGBTQ+ individuals had not decreased significantly over my 15-year absence. Specifically, I heard the homophobic slurs heaped at students, faculty, and staff on a regular basis (Jones, 2019). I witnessed students physically accosting LGBTQ+ students in the restrooms and in the hallways. Indeed, the intolerance for these students was as prominent as the intolerance towards non-heterosexual students during my first year of teaching.

Additionally, to better frame this discussion, it is necessary to explore teacher involvement in combating heteronormative actions that take place in schools. GLSEN (2016) reveals data from another national survey that depicts LGBTQ+ teachers and their attempts to create safe learning spaces, “LGBTQ+ teachers are more likely to engage in affirming and supportive teaching practices.” In fact, 74.5% of LGBTQ+ teachers implemented at least one affirming practice. That being said, only 43.9% of LGBTQ+ teachers displayed a visual sign of support, only 21.7% of LGBTQ+ teachers advocated for inclusive school and district policies, and 31.5% included LGBTQ+ topics in the curriculum. It should be noted that the GLSEN (2016) data is significant because it reveals that non-LGBTQ+ teachers are not as invested as LGBTQ+ teachers in creating safe environments. The survey reveals, only 10.3% of non-LGBTQ+ teachers displayed a visual sign of support, 7.8% advocated for inclusive school and district policies, and only 14% of non-LGBTQ+ teachers included LGBTQ+ topics in the curriculum. For all of the categories, non-LGBTQ+ educators were below their counterparts’ percentages for attempting to create a safe and affirming classroom spaces, which supports Taylor’s et al. (2015) postulations that LGBTQ+ preservice teachers are the main proponents of addressing intolerance within their classrooms because they are more aware of the hatred that their students are facing.

The above data suggests teacher preparation programs must continue addressing this challenge. As such, there are numerous recent research studies that examine how teacher preparations programs are attempting to address this challenge; however, most of the literature focuses on how heterosexual identities can create tolerant spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals. Additionally, there are several recent studies examining LGBTQ+ new teachers' experiences within schools, but according to Sapp (2017) there are "very few studies that research the experience of queer people who are in the process of becoming teachers" (p. 13). This is especially true for articles published within the previous five years. A few of these recently published studies are worth mentioning. Tompkins, Kearn, & Mitton-Kukner (2019) examined the experiences of new Canadian LGBTQ+ teachers and how those teachers became LGBTQ+ trainers in their respective schools. That being said, the study also revealed that school climate impacted the new teachers' ability to be their authentic selves.

Another study of music education majors revealed interesting findings concerning preservice LGBTQ+ individuals. Taylor et al. (2020) examined the experiences of 95 music education preservice majors, and one surprising finding revealed that most of the preservice students felt comfortable supporting broad topics of social justice and inclusion; however, less than half felt they were able to support students with questions concerning gender identity and sexual orientation. Taylor et al. (2020) also revealed, "most music education majors who identify as LGBTQ+ were unsure how to negotiate personal identity in the classroom or handle issues that might arise one day with their own P-12 students who identify as LGBTQ+ (e.g., coming out to other students in class, transitioning gender identity, bullying)" (p. 20). This finding is significant because, as teacher educators, it is necessary to examine how our pre-service teachers' beliefs impact how these LGBTQ+ teachers' experiences will influence their pedagogical practices.

Similarly, Shannon-Baker and Wagner (2019) discovered that most LGBTQ+ preservice teachers do not feel prepared to address heteronormativity within schools. In fact, a number of their participants felt overwhelmed when discussing possible intolerant acts and methods to address those acts, which appears to be a common theme in the most recent literature.

Though the findings of all of these studies are important to the overall academic discourse exploring teacher preparation in regards to preparing new teachers to address heteronormativity, there is a deficit in the recent literature because a majority of the research examines new teachers or preservice teachers' experiences, mainly from a heterosexual identity attempting to improve inclusivity.

I postulate it is important to conceptualize how gay male teachers with varying years of experience may utilize their past experiences to impact their pedagogical decisions. Moreover, it is also advantageous to examine gay male teachers' beliefs about the intersectionality of sexuality and pedagogy in secondary classrooms, and how that intersectionality impacts the creation of safe and affirm-

ing educational environments for their students. This data could influence how teacher preparation programs infuse LGBTQ+ topics into curriculum and clinical experiences. We must remember that teachers (regardless of sexuality), “bring with them a portmanteau of gender-based understandings that, in many cases, are invisible to them” (Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999, p. 58). The individuals who are teaching are one of the most important critical aspects of instruction because teachers are constantly negotiating with their surroundings. Teaching is not simply content and strategies. Therefore, I argue it is beneficial to examine how gay male teachers’ beliefs about gender and sexuality influence their classroom environment and their instructional choices. Moreover, an examination of this population may provide implications for teacher preparation programs as they attempt to prepare preservice teachers to address heteronormativity within schools.

Additionally, I posit it may be advantageous to examine southern gay male teachers’ experiences creating safe and affirming classrooms because such an examination may provide valuable information to combat the recent political attacks against LGBTQ+ individuals in southern states. As more states pass laws, teacher education programs will need to combat these attacks.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how gay male secondary teachers’ personal lived experiences as gay males may or may not influence their current classroom practices. This was important because there is a lack of literature that explores the possible influence of gay male teachers’ identities and beliefs about sexuality on their professional decisions and instructional strategies. This study could add to the literature discussing how teacher preparation programs prepare all teacher candidates to create safe and affirming secondary environments.

Specifically, I chose ten teachers through a convenient sampling process, with a majority of the participants having two degrees of separation from the researcher. Once chosen, each participant engaged in an unstructured Zoom interview with the researcher. I chose to use an unstructured interview because of its connections to the theoretical framework for the study, queer theory. I also utilized unstructured focus group interviews, classroom observations with field notes, and a research journal.

I chose to use these methods because of their connections to the theoretical framework for the study, queer theory. There is a power dynamic that is inherent in the research process. Thus, to help dismantle the power dynamic, an unstructured interview and unstructured focus group interview releases more power to the participant because the participant has more control in the direction of the interview process.

## Queer Theory

Before discussing the findings of the study, it is beneficial to discuss briefly the theoretical framework for the study. Queer theory began gaining prominence

in the early 1990s when a feminist scholar (De Lauretis, 1991) coined the term and postulated that there were three major aspects to queer theory: disrupting heteronormativity, dismantling the unification of lesbian and gay studies, and re-examining the development of sexual biases.

Queer theory explores how society defines non-heterosexual and heterosexual identities according to the hegemonic structures that exist within society. It examines how the construction of knowledge about sexual identity and heterosexism is socially situated. As such, the theory seeks to dismantle the hegemonic constructions surrounding gender and sexual identity that exist in society (Jones, 2010). Thus, queer theory offers a way to define what it means to have a fluid definition of gender and sexuality. In other words, queer theory seeks to show that there is no innate gender or sexual identity, which disrupts the binary opposition that controls society's constructions surrounding gender and sexuality (Jones, 2010).

I should note, queer theory informed this study ontologically, epistemologically, and methodologically (Browne & Nash, 2016), which is a recent concept in qualitative research, one that has not proliferated social science research.

### The Teachers

Next, it is beneficial to discuss the demographics of the study. The participants live and work in a southern state in the United States. Traditionally, the state is a red state in national elections. Recently, the state passed a non-divisive law that bans teachers from teaching divisive concepts about racism. In essence, it was a law against critical race theory. 62% of the population identify as only white and 13% percent identify as only black ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)). The participants in the study teach in school districts across the state, which I discuss more in depth below.

In order to allow participants to maintain power and agency in the collection of data, I emailed each participant a “demographic form,” and I asked each participant to complete the form, which contained only questions. I did not offer identifiers from which the participant could choose. For example, each participant listed their own identifier for their race and gender. I chose this method because of its connection to the theoretical framework, which gives the participant the power to control parts of the data collection. It is important to allow the participants to retain as much power as possible. In addition to the form, I have also listed demographic information that emerged from interviews.

Jack teaches band at a middle school in a predominantly failing district, as determined by the state department of education, which is in one of the smaller metropolitan areas in the state. He graduated from a medium-sized state university. Jack is married, and he teaches in a school primarily populated by students of color.

Rob is the youngest teacher with whom I spoke. He is 23 years old, and is in his second year of teaching math. He identifies as a gay cis white male. He

revealed in our interview that he is out to his students, but he is not out to his administration or colleagues. He graduated with an undergraduate degree in middle grades education from a small private institution in the state. He teaches in the suburbs of a metropolitan city in the state. His school population is primarily composed of white/Caucasian students.

Eric is a 27 year old white gay cis male. He has taught science for four years at a socio-economically advantaged school, though his school exists within an overall failing district, as defined by state department of education. The district is in the top third largest districts in the state. He earned his undergraduate degree from a medium-sized state university. At this point, he has not plan to continue his education. His school population is divided equally between students of color and white/Caucasian students, though he believes that demographic is shifting to students of color.

Seth is a 35 year old gay white male who has taught English for 13 years. He has been at the same high school for his entire career. He earned an undergraduate degree from a private school, a master's degree from a large state university, and he is currently working on a doctoral degree from the same large state university. Seth is married, and he teaches in a smaller metropolitan city in the state. His school population is primarily students of color.

Mark is a 36 year old black gay cis male. He has taught high school science for seven years. He entered the teaching profession after a career in pharmaceutical sales. He earned his undergraduate degree from a large state university, and he completed a master's with teaching certification from the same institution. He teaches in a district within a metropolitan area of the state. His school population is primarily students of color.

Steve is a 38 year old gay white male who has taught high school English for 16 years. He teaches in a rural district, which contains one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school. He earned his undergraduate degree, his master's degree, and his educational specialists from a medium-sized state university close to his current school district. His school is a Title I school, and it is primarily populated by white/Caucasian students.

Michael is a 39 year old black male, and he has taught high school math for 16 years. He currently teaches in a large metropolitan area. He has taught in the district his entire career at three different high schools. He earned his undergraduate, his master's, and his educational specialist degrees from a large state university. His current school is primarily populated by white/Caucasian students.

Matt is a 40 year old white male who has taught English for 18 years. He also teaches in a socio-economically advantaged school, within a more affluent district. The district is one of the largest districts in the state. He has taught in three districts over his career, all of which have been in the state, and all of which have been socio-economically advantaged. His school is primarily populated by white/Caucasian students.

Jeff has taught high school Biology for 25 years. In his interview, he revealed a strong desire to retire in five years. He is 47 years old white male. He teaches in a school district in a rural community in the eastern part of the state. He has spent his entire career in the same district and the same high school. He earned his undergraduate, his master's, his educational specialist, and his doctorate from a large state university. His school is primarily populated by white/Caucasian students.

John is a 52 year old African American male who teaches history in a medium-sized school district. He has taught in the district his entire career, though he has been at several schools including two middle schools. His undergraduate and his master's is from a medium-sized state university. His school population is equally divided between students of color and white/Caucasian students.

From the analysis of the findings in the study, several themes emerged; however, for the purpose of this discussion, I will focus on three themes: instruction, identity, and inclusivity.

### Instruction

In examining how the participant's personal experiences impact their pedagogy, the theme of instruction emerged. By "instruction," I am concerned with the participants' epistemological construction of instructional practices and if those constructions were influenced by their own beliefs surrounding sexuality and gender.

When asked if his beliefs about sexuality informed his instructional decisions, Jack stated, "this wave of legislation that came out for against talking about transgender bathrooms, legalizing gay marriage, and then the kids all talk about it because their parents talk about it. But the kids are uneducated. So they're just copying what their parents are saying. And a lot of it is just backwards and just not respectful or conducive to a learning environment, because if we're all supposed to work towards an end goal of learning and building a positive educational experience, then yes, it needs to inform my classroom decisions. Otherwise, we are letting the ignorance win."

Similarly, Seth believes his classroom practices should be informed by his philosophical beliefs about education. He states, "I do not do it because I am gay. I do it because it is the right thing to do. I address hate language towards students of color and students with special needs because I believe it is the right thing to do. I believe schools are responsible for creating a more tolerant society."

Jack and Seth recognize the impact of hegemony on their students' construction of knowledge, and believe they must address their students' beliefs about LGBTQ+ individuals. However, both teachers view the challenge through a professional ethical dilemma that is not related to their sexuality. In this manner, they have separated their sexual identity from their professional responsibilities, which is similar to Steve's beliefs.

In the focus group interview, Steve shared his beliefs about his classroom



practices, “Although I have never allowed my sexuality to inform my classroom choices, I definitely would not do it in the political climate schools are in right now. I don’t stop reading a text with students to discuss a gay reference, unless it is necessary for the broader understanding of the novel. Part of that is probably because when I started teaching I could be fired for being gay. It was the culture of the south in those days.”

Later in the focus group interview, Matt made the following comment, “I do not want students nor administration to know that I am gay because I am not sure how they would respond. Can I be fired? Who knows with what’s going on in society. But, I have always felt that way. I grew up in a society where gay people were abused and killed. Maybe I have brought that into my professional life. But, that doesn’t mean that I can’t use curriculum to change the society. It will just take time. I just don’t think I should make it personal.”

For Steve and Matt, the current political regime dictates how they address issues surrounding sexuality in their classrooms. Both are afraid of retaliation from the district, even being dismissed from their teaching position. In essence, the regime has accomplished its intentions, to control these teachers’ treatment of gender and sexuality within schools.

Rob followed up with Matt during the focus group interview, “I can see where the political climate can impact your pedagogy, but we can’t let them win. I have a rainbow flag in my room. I talk about LGBTQ+ contributors to mathematics whenever it is feasible. I believe it’s important because students need to know that some of the important discoveries came from LGBTQ+ individuals. It helps them create a different identity.”

After Rob’s comment, I offered a follow-question, “So, do you think that it is teachers’ jobs to do that?” Rob fervently stated, “yes.” Matt responded, “as long as it is connected to the curriculum.” Similarly, Steve said, “no, we can’t privilege one difference over another. That’s why they claim we have a gay agenda. We can’t give them evidence for their beliefs.”

During my classroom observations, I visited Rob’s classroom. I noted in my field notes an incident that happened while I was there. “A student was sitting at his desk completing the assignment. His nails were painted blue, which his neighbor noticed. The neighbor fake whispered, ‘stupid fag’ to the student. I use the term fake whispered because he said it loud enough for the students close by could hear it, and he didn’t think Rob would hear it. Rob publically reprimanded the student and had a class discussion about kindness and language. Afterward, he removed the student from the room.” When speaking to Rob after the observation I learned that it is important to Rob that the student be present in the room for the discussion about kindness, and it was also important that the class witnessed the student’s discipline. He was not able to have a conversation without the consequences of his actions.

For Rob, who is the youngest teacher in the study, it is imperative to advocate

for LGBTQ+ individuals within his classroom. His statement, “we can’t let them win” establishes an us versus them binary, through which he is constructing meaning about gender and sexuality within schools. Conversely, the older teachers continue to construct a meaning that allows the power regime to remain in control.

It should be noted, I asked the following question in each individual interview, “Did your teacher preparation program prepare you to address challenges within the LGBTQ+ community in schools?” None of the participants received formalized training to create safe and affirming classrooms for this population. The state requires a diversity introductory course in education, but the course does not provide specific methods to address challenges surround LGBTQ+ youth.

The lack of preparation may have an influence in how these participants view their role as an LGBTQ+ advocate in their classrooms and schools.

For these participants, sexuality influenced their instructional decisions in various ways. Some participants advocated for complete dedication to LGBTQ+ issues, while others believe the instructional decisions concerning LGBTQ+ issues should be grounded in the curriculum. It is important to note, the differences of approaches tended to be generational.

### Identity

Next, the theme of identity emerged from the data analysis. “Identity” references the ways the participants constructed meaning about identity and how that construction impacted their classroom practices. Moreover, it is important to note that the participants’ own definitional parameters of “identity” are also important to examine.

Identity plays a tremendous role in these participants’ beliefs surrounding their classroom environments. Jack stated, “In the past five years, I’ve had kids come to me and say, I’d rather go by John rather than Lucy. I’d rather be called Lucy rather than John, like, they’ve decided that they’re transitioning or they don’t feel comfortable in their own skin. And they’d like to be called something different. And my response is always okay. Just have to make sure I’m on point with what you want to be called, because I want to respect your choice... we had a couple kids in class who were identified as transgender. And they said their friends said openly defending their friend, ‘no, they go by whatever they go by.’ You’re calling them by the wrong name now.”

Indeed, names play a vital role in Jack’s class. Later in the interview, he states, “we’re not going to call somebody outside of their name because it normally results in somebody using the N word or using faggot or gay or their new favorite thing is to call somebody fruity. And every time they use one of these words, that is not the kid’s name. I asked them the question I said, So could you replace that word with something else? What would you replace that word with? A student called somebody gay a couple times and I said, so if you need to replace the word

and he said fruity. And I said, what does that mean? Fruity? Can you define that for me? Can you change it again? What would you get? What would you say? Weird. Okay. So they're just weird. And that's appropriate to call somebody just weird randomly. You just get to know them or just ignore them all together. You don't have to be friends with them, but you also don't have to call them outside of their name." For Jack, identity was more than a sexualized understanding of someone. Identity, includes the basic core of someone's name.

For Matt, identity also included one's name. He stated, "I remember having a student, and I did not pronounce her name right the first time. She said, 'call me M.' I replied, 'but that's not your name. It is important for me to call you by your name.'" Eventually, I did pronounce it correctly because it was important for me to allow her whole self to be welcomed in my classroom." Similarly, Rob refuses to use one's dead name in his classroom.

For Steve, identity was a pivotal point in his philosophical beliefs about education. In the focus group interview, he commented, "all students come into our classes with an identity, whether that is Christian white football player or MTF trans. Identity matters. We all know that. I struggle with how supportive I should be. I don't want administration to believe that I am favoring one identity over another, so I attempt to value all identities. I don't think I do it well."

Matt supported Steve's belief in failure, "yes, I am the same way. I don't do it well. When I was in high school, I was a closeted gay male. There were not so many identities. You were gay or straight, lesbian or gay. No one in my education classes taught me anything about gay issues. I had to learn on the job. So, yes, I struggle with the identity thing. I am sure I am an epic failure. But, it was not my childhood experience."

To which Rob replied, "it's not that difficult. Teachers need to educate themselves on these topics. It's too important." Mark agreed with Rob, "it is too important. As a black male though, it is also important for teachers to educate themselves on the challenges of being a black gay male, or a black trans student. When black identity mixes with sexuality and gender identity, it is very different in my community versus the white community."

Throughout the data, it is apparent that identity plays a tremendous role in these participants' pedagogical practices. The data also illuminate the generational difference of these participants and their beliefs about sexuality and gender identity within their classrooms. Specifically, the veteran teachers are more traditional in their approach to addressing LGBTQ+ issues within their classrooms. Additionally, it is important to note that teacher preparation programs did not prepare these teachers, regardless of generation, to address challenges with identity.

It is also important to consider these teachers' treatment of sexuality and gender as it relates to instruction and to identity. Rob was the only philosophically consistent teacher in regards to these topics. Jack, Matt, and Steve were in favor of supporting students and their identity, but they held nearly antithetical beliefs

concerning instructional practices. In this manner, the individuality of the student is more important than a broad curricular or instructional decision that may impact other belief systems within the room. Therefore, the justification of action is premised on individualism not the collective.

### Inclusivity

In addition to instructional practices and identity, inclusivity also emerged as a theme from the data analysis. By inclusivity, I mean a purposeful attempt to increase or decrease inclusive practices within the participants' classrooms and their school buildings. In this capacity, a majority of the teachers believed that their classroom spaces were more inclusive than many of their counterparts throughout the building. For example, Eric stated, "I have found that many of the students that are part of the LGBTQ+ community have really felt comfortable in my class, like not using their dead name in class. For instance, in any other class, they might go by their dead name just to keep the teacher from feeling dissonance on what the roster says." Similarly, Matt suggested that a majority of his students were more expressive of their positive support for LGBTQ+ students. When asked if he believed LGBTQ+ felt safer in his room, he responded, "I do believe they feel safer in my room as compared to other teachers. I have a couple of trans kids who are very open about their identity in my room. During a department meeting, someone mentioned the student's name and a colleague indicated he had no clue the student was trans." The other teacher's statement attests to Matt's beliefs about how his student felt in his room compared to the other teacher's room. Matt also credits his desire to create an inclusive classroom as the conduit for this atmosphere.

For Eric, he makes some specific pedagogical decisions to address inclusivity in his classroom, but his choices attempt to address a broad definition of inclusivity, not simply the LGBTQ+ inclusion. Specifically, he states, "I've tried to structure my classroom and some of the expectations and some of the activities we do throughout the year towards inclusivity and understanding and checking your perspective. I try to stay away from privilege because it's a triggering word for a lot of people, but I call it checking your perspective, which is essentially the same thing, just a triggering word because I like to think of privilege as perspective driven by opportunity, and the opportunity part is where it starts to get triggering for a lot of people."

Likewise, Rob is an advocate for inclusive practices, "I think it is important that LGBTQ+ students who walk into my room feel welcomed and affirmed. They see the rainbow flag. I discuss my own sexuality with them, which I did receive a few phone calls from parents last year, but I teach in a super liberal suburb, so I knew my principal would support me. Students walk into straight teachers' rooms and see pictures of their spouses. Straight couples talk about trying to have a child. I have several straight colleagues who talk about date nights with their husbands. LGBTQ+ students need the same opportunities to have role models."

Conversely, three of the participants (who are the older participants) in the study did not purposefully change their instructional practices to create a safer classroom environment for LGBTQ+ students. John stated, “I am not going to change what I do specifically for one group of students. Everything I do in my classroom has to benefit the entire class. No one is allowed to hit another student, or to scream at another student. If someone calls another student a gay slur, I am going to address it the same way. I am not going to stop what I am doing to have a mini-lesson on the word. I have heard some faculty do that in their classrooms. I am going to treat it the same way as if I heard a sexist slur or a racial slur.” Similarly, Jeff made the following comment, “I am not going to let my sexuality cause me to treat hate language differently. My sexuality can’t define my classroom and how I teach my students. They have to be separate.”

In addition to the participants’ individual classrooms, the data analysis revealed findings concerning the inclusivity of the participants’ school buildings. When asked if his administrators know about his sexuality, Eric responded, “It gives me a weird level of anxiety in the same way that not knowing whether the kids know or what the kids think. I don’t care what the kids think, because that’s not my job. What the administration thinks of me is definitely an important thing...I wonder whether their preexisting biases of me and who I am will impact my job.”

Moreover, when I observed Eric’s classroom, there were no classroom paraphernalia that indicated anything about his sexuality.

Matt stated, “I don’t know who knows? I think the administration knows based on conversations I’ve had with some of the assistant principals, particularly one who is very I’d say he is very inquisitive. But I have never told anyone because I do not want them to know. We are in an important political climate. So, many things could potentially happen, and I want to hide behind my male Christian whiteness.”

As with Eric, I did not document any classroom décor that would lead one to believe Matt was gay or an ally. That being said, there were numerous posters of people of color discussing their contributions to literature. There were also numerous posters discussing women and their contributions to literature. When I visited his class he was lecturing on feminism. He stated, “So, we mostly make you read white female authors who committed suicide. Right. Virginia Woolf. Sylvia Plath. Charlotte Perkins Gilman. We are going to read a powerful author who is an icon in literature. Toni Morrison.” He continued with an autobiographical discussion of Morrison’s life. During the focus group interview, I asked Matt about the lesson. He commented, “students need to see themselves in the literature. They need to see that someone like them can do great things. For years, English classrooms have avoided the powerful woman writers who made an amazing impact on society. We don’t teach those women in schools unless you are in AP.”

For Matt, inclusivity is an important ideal in his pedagogy. From this statement and others, it is obvious that Matt values inclusivity in this classroom as long

as it can be connected to the curriculum, as he stated, “But, that doesn’t mean that I can’t use curriculum to change the society. It will just take time. I just don’t think I should make it personal.”

Jack remarked in his interview, “So, I’m married and husband’s great. Love him. We married five years ago. We were engaged six years ago. Instead of going to my graduation for my master’s degree, we went to Disneyland and got engaged or went to Disney World to get engaged. When I came back, all the kids noticed the ring on my finger. They’re like, So you get married. And I’m like, I’m getting married. That’s what the ring means. But I’ve tried really hard to not talk about that personal stuff with the kids. They don’t need to know that I’m married to a man. I have yet to say in front of my students, I’m gay. I have a husband. That sentence has never come out of my mouth. It’s not something that I still, I guess, don’t feel comfortable doing for the students because what business is it of theirs?”

For a majority of the teachers, inclusivity should not be connected to personal feelings about sexuality and gender. As such, a majority of the teachers did not discuss their own sexuality with their students, even though such actions improve levels of tolerance in educational settings (Jones, 2014). For these teachers, the hegemonic structures that marginalize LGBTQ+ individuals are also controlling these teachers’ classroom practices as they relate to inclusivity. Specifically, Matt must connect any practice that improves inclusivity to the curriculum, which in the south is derived by heteronormative power regimes. It is also interesting that Matt feels safer hiding behind his white Christian maleness; in doing so, the action attests to the power of heteronormativity within his beliefs and classroom practices. Similarly, Jack believes his students should not be privy to his personal life, specifically his marriage to his husband. His belief, as with the others, emerges from the heteronormativity that pervades society, especially southern culture and society.

For a majority of these teachers, inclusivity is important, but it must be premised within the power regime and structure of their community. As such, these teachers are perpetuating the heteronormativity that exists in society; thereby, their own marginalized status does not influence their classroom practices.

## Discussion

This study examined southern gay male teachers’ beliefs about the intersectionality of sexuality, gender identity, and pedagogy in secondary classrooms. For this discussion, three important themes emerged from the data analysis: instruction, identity, and inclusivity. Thus, it is important for teacher preparation programs to consider the findings from this study; so that, we can ensure our graduates are prepared to address the challenges that arise concerning LGBTQ+ students.

First, these participants did not receive training in their educational programs to address the challenges surrounding LGBTQ+ students within schools. I posit it is imperative for teacher preparation programs to examine how they discuss

LGBTQ+ issues in their curriculum. This is an important aspect to consider given the current political climate towards all forms of difference. As Jones (2019) and GLSEN (2019) postulate, the challenges surrounding LGBTQ+ students are rampant in secondary schools, and teachers are not adequately addressing the challenges.

Moreover, it is important for teacher preparation programs to focus on LGBTQ+ challenges because of the lack of support for LGBTQ+ students. The hatred against LGBTQ+ students is more damaging. If someone calls a student of color a slur, he/she/they can go home and most likely have familial support, which is less likely the case in situations of sexuality and gender discrimination, especially in southern states. Thus, in a majority of cases the harassed student must carry the pain of the hatred without an outlet of familial support to reassure the student that he/she/they are understood. Teachers should be trained to specifically address challenges that create hostile school environments for LGBTQ+ students.

It is also important to note the generational divide in these participants' beliefs about their involvement in supporting LGBTQ+ students and how that finding informs teacher preparation. In this study, the younger generation was more adamant about advocating specifically for students who identified as LGBTQ+. Conversely, the older generation of participants believed in the importance of advocacy, but they prefer to frame it within a broader understanding of all marginalized identities. This is important for teacher preparation programs to consider because preparation programs may need to prepare their younger candidates to navigate the belief systems of the older teachers and administrators in the building. The navigation should provide new teachers with the theoretical underpinnings to support a belief in advocacy for LGBTQ+ students.

Finally, though the purpose of this study was not to examine the influence of divisive curriculum laws and the political power regimes in southern states, the finding emerged from the study, which merits a discussion. In relation to creating an inclusive and affirming classroom, the political climate is a stronger influence than the personal lived experiences of a majority of the men in this study. Specifically, there are numerous mentions of the role of the current political regime and its influence on a majority of these teachers' pedagogical decisions. Many refused to mention LGBTQ+ topics because of the fear the current political regime has imposed on education in the state. One teacher indicated that he wants to hide behind his white Christian male identity because of the current political climate in his state.

For further context, in one southern state higher education leaders were asked, "to gather information about courses, curriculum, jobs and research that focus on topics such as anti-racism and social justice" (Stirgus, 2022). According to the article, the state legislation wants to reduce funding if state institutions use allocations for social justice issues.

In this capacity, I argue it is necessary to explore how educators are prepared

to think critically about the methods to address all areas of difference (especially LGBTQ+ students) as it relates to the scope of the current political climate. Specifically, teacher preparation programs should prepare teachers to examine the laws about divisive curriculum and engage in critical conversations with candidates about the laws' influence on the process of schooling and their employment. For a majority of the participants, the current political climate in the state caused trepidation and influenced their instructional decisions, which perpetuates heteronormativity and intolerance.

The current political regime of power in a number of states is influencing higher education, as well as K-12 education. As such, teacher education programs must examine how the political actions will influence the methods through which we prepare future teachers. As the data (GLSEN, 2016) suggest, LGBTQ+ teachers provide more advocacy for LGBTQ+ students, and the findings of this study reveal that the political influence is greater than their own beliefs about advocacy, which harms the lives of LGBTQ+ students in our schools.

In addition to an examination, teacher education faculty must enter the conversations surrounding the current political climate. It is imperative that the academy support all marginalized identities within P-12 schools and higher education.

### Conclusion

According to GLSEN (2019), 59.1% of LGBTQ+ students felt unsafe in their schools, and 25.7% were physically assaulted in schools across the United States. This data, among other discussed earlier, is alarming. As an academic who prepares pre-service teachers, it is apparent that changes should occur in teacher preparation programs. We must engage in methods to prepare all candidates to become advocates and to create safe and affirming educational environments for all students, but especially for LGBTQ+ students. We must begin conceptualizing how to better prepare teacher candidates to enter the profession with the skills to combat these challenges while functioning within the divisive curriculum laws that a number of states are passing. Students are depending on teachers to provide safe learning environments, and it is imperative that teacher preparation programs are producing teachers who are dedicated to these principles.

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