

OPENING UP, FINDING SUPPORT: STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' LGBTQ  
DISCLOSURES

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
San Francisco State University  
In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
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Master of Arts

In

Sexuality Studies

by

Hana Nohad Afra

San Francisco, California

May 2015

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read Opening up, Finding Support: Students' and Teachers' LGBTQ Disclosures by Hana Nohad Afra, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts: Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University.



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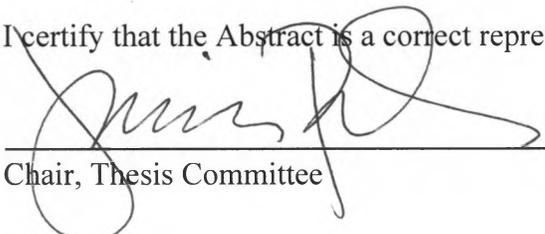
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OPENING UP, FINDING SUPPORT: STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' LGBTQ  
DISCLOSURES

Hana Nohad Afra  
San Francisco, California  
2015

Adults and youth in high schools make decisions about coming out as an LGBTQ person or ally based on the complex relationships among school culture, policy protections, and individual gendered embodiment. Research has yet to put teachers and students into conversation about LGBTQ sexuality and disclosure. This paper explores how disclosing an LGBTQ or allied identity can help create a community of support among teachers and students. Using stories collected by The Beyond Bullying Project, a national storytelling project, I examine ways students and teachers choose to disclose, how disclosure fosters a sense of support, and what undermines its supportive possibilities. I argue that feelings of support resulting from disclosure in the classroom contribute to the health, learning, and social empowerment of all students and teachers.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Chair, Thesis Committee

May 19, 2015  
Date

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Iris and Sara sit in front of the camera smirking at each other. As the researcher leaves the room to close the students in the booth, she tells them to “have fun.” Iris<sup>1</sup> holds up the movie slate, claps it, and bursts into laughter. She covers her mouth, and, as she relaxes, she says, “Okay okay. So...Sara, you talk first.” Sara smiles, looks around the booth, but remains silent. Iris now feigns a whisper, “Sara, you talk first. C’mon, the camera’s waiting for you.” As Sara murmurs, “I know,” Iris takes charge and asks, “So, have you ever had *Mr. Iwata*? . . . Did you know that, um, he’s . . .” Iris pauses here, nodding her head as if to emphasize the last word—“*gay*?” Sara responds, “I think I heard that. Actually. I know another teacher that’s kind of...she says she’s gay. You know Ms. Dioli?” Iris exclaims, “Oh yeah! I heard that someone said something mean to her, and she cried. It was about her being...lesbian...or something. I think it’s really sad.” Sara says “She just told us in class. She just told us she’s gay and she’s lesbian...” After an extended pause to reflect she adds, “She looks pretty normal.” Iris responds, “Yeah, they’re really nice. I don’t know why anyone would be mean to them. Right?” and looks into the camera after this proclamation. Sara nods in agreement. Iris closes with, “It’s discrimination. End!” She claps the movie slate, and this time both storytellers burst into laughter.

Iris and Sara’s narrative represents just a few of the accomplishments and consequences of disclosure in the classroom space. The student-teacher relationship conjures ideas of different dynamics: nurturer and nurtured, discipliner and disciplined,

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<sup>1</sup> All person and place names are pseudonyms.

mentor and mentee, authoritarian and subordinate. Teachers, counselors, coaches, and administrators in schools often assert, and even embody, heteronormative sexuality, which conflicts with non-heterosexual youths' emerging sense of sexual identity (Muñoz-Plaza, 2002). Coming out to students can be a powerful moment, exposing straight and non-heterosexual students alike to positive role models (Connell, 2014). Drawing on data collected by The Beyond Bullying Project, a nationwide storytelling project exploring lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning sexuality (LGBTQ) conducted in high schools, I examine a number of stories from students and adults in schools engaged in disclosure around lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) sexuality.

Disclosure is a relational process of making new or perceived hidden information known; it occurs through interaction: two or more people disclosing thoughts and experiences to one another. Critical pedagogy encourages disclosure: teachers are encouraged to draw on personal history, information they often keep hidden, to engage students who currently are making sense of themselves and their world (Connell, 2014). Adults and students in high schools make decisions about coming out as a person who identifies as a LGBQ person or as an ally based on the complex relationships between school culture, policy protections, and individual gendered embodiment. In The Beyond Bullying Project, adults and youth told stories not only about their disclosures, but also about being the audience to others' disclosures. These moments revealed LGBQ identities as well as positions and beliefs on LGBTQ issues. The Beyond Bullying stories often involved a person disclosing their identity as an ally or as someone who does not

support LGBTQ people. This paper explores how disclosing an LGBQ or allied identity can help create a community of support between teachers and students.

The history of LGBTQ sexuality in schools moves among stories of silence and narratives of safety. In the early 1900s, research and the public labeled non-heterosexual teachers as deviants who inflict harm on children (Tierney & Dilley, 1998; Blount, 2000). During the McCarthy era, investigators identified and dismissed suspected non-heterosexual teachers working in public schools (Harbeck, 1997). As tolerance for lesbian and gay educators increased during the 1980s, so too did expectations of discreet disclosures and gender expression conformity (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003). With few exceptions, research also ignored the presence of LGBTQ youth in schools. When research began to document the lives of LGBTQ youth, focus tended to be on the health risks of this “at-risk” population, particularly mental health and HIV (Savin-Williams, 1990). Schools routinely appeared in the research literature as sites of isolation and harassment for non-heterosexual youth, and contemporary research focuses on school safety for LGBTQ youth, educators, and families (Fields, Mamo, Gilbert, & Lesko, 2014; Griffin & Ouellett, 2003).

Much of the research conducted specifically on support and disclosure pertains to disclosing HIV status, other illnesses, sexual abuse, and partner violence. One study on the therapist-client relationship, which is marked by interactions and dynamics reminiscent of the teacher-student relationship, concluded the therapist who made the warm, accepting, self-disclosing remarks to the client was seen as the most nurturing and

elicited the greatest willingness to self-disclose from their clients (Bundza & Simonson, 1973). Research has yet to put teachers and students in conversation in regards to LGBTQ sexuality and disclosure. Though research on LGBTQ disclosures and support does exist, teachers and students are considered individually, rather than jointly, in relationship with each other.

This focus is distressing, because teachers and students are always in relation to each other. An imperative for LGBTQ people to come out in educational settings *to other people* currently exists. Someone who discloses their sexual or gender identity publicly may be perceived as “out” or “coming out,” whereas a “closeted” person refers to someone who does not disclose or stays “inside” the closet (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 144). The implications of disclosing or refusing to disclose vary based on the teacher, the school, the parents, and the community (Rasmussen, 2004). Karen M. Harbeck edited one of the first texts to explore issues on LGBQ sexuality and schooling, and her anthology argues that disclosing an LGBQ identity in the classroom empowers people and combats prejudice (1992). James Sears and Walter Williams similarly claim teachers can change homophobic attitudes through one-on-one personal contact in the classroom; Sears and Williams also cast the decision to stay inside the closet as one of weakness (1992). Rather than classifying the choice not to disclose a sexuality or position as weak, disempowering, or dishonest, I explore the complexity of disclosure in the classroom. I study how teachers and students, as they navigate the possibilities and implications of disclosure, feel about themselves, their relationships, and sexuality in these spaces.

Disclosure takes many forms everywhere, including the classroom. In “Teaching as a Gay Man,” Jonathan Silin argues teachers who disclose their sexual identity in the classroom encourage students to use their authentic voices while simultaneously dismantling taboos (1999). Didi Khayatt (1999) labels Silin’s type of disclosure as a “declarative statement” (p. 108) that occurs when teachers explicitly disclose an identity (i.e. “I am a lesbian”) to their classes. In her work, Khayatt notes several other ways of disclosure:

[T]elling may occur through the ways in which our bodies are inevitably read by students and/or through what we include in and leave out of syllabi. Some of us are perceived as queer regardless of what we say, while for others the act of announcing one’s queerness does not ensure this perception (pp. 110-112, 1999).

Building on these notions of declarative and perceived disclosure, I explore what I call “strategic” and “inadvertent” disclosures. Strategic disclosures occur not only when people use declarative statements, but also when they describe their moments as planned and purposeful. For example, in one *Beyond Bullying* story, a teacher described telling her students she is in a relationship with a woman. Though she does not deploy a single declarative statement, the story she shares reflects her intentions. Inadvertent disclosures occur when people allow their bodies to be read in the classroom by recipients who perceive the disclosure to be happening more naturally or “casually,” not strategically. These disclosures may be planned and purposeful; what makes them “inadvertent” is the minimal control or purposefulness. For example, students describing their teachers

“casually” mentioning same-sex partners or desires in conversation, teachers explaining how an assignment sparked a student to relate to lesbian characters in books, and people recognizing LGBQ sexuality through people’s gender embodiment all represent how these disclosures occur. A consideration of inadvertent disclosure helps to complicate the in/out binary of the closet metaphor by looking at what may fall between these poles—at the threshold, perhaps, of the closet.

LGBTQ youth represent a vulnerable portion of the larger LGBTQ population (Muñoz-Plaza, 2002), and when research looks at disclosure and support for youth in schools, the focus still tends to be on safety. Receiving support from teachers and school staff results in a positive effect on the educational experiences of all students, motivating them and promoting positive engagement in school (Birch, 1997). According to the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, being able to speak with a caring adult in school may have a significant positive impact on the school experiences for students, particularly those who feel marginalized. LGBTQ students’ connections with supportive school personnel support their feeling safer in school, missing fewer days of school, and pursuing higher education (Kosciw et al., 2014). Students may even perceive non-family adults, especially if they identify as LGBTQ, as more supportive than family members (Muñoz-Plaza, 2002). Whereas the number of out LGBTQ personnel may point to an overall more supportive and accepting school climate, more than half of non-heterosexual youth are still unable to identify one LGBTQ adult in their school (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Teachers also occupy positions of vulnerability. A national study of LGBTQ educators in the workplace found almost all respondents in the classroom reported hearing homophobic comments from students, and half reported fearing the loss of their jobs if their students knew about their sexuality. And, even in the midst of this vulnerability, educators reported supporting LGBTQ students (Smith, Wright, Reilly, & Esposito, J., 2008). Most research on disclosure urges teachers to disclose their identity to students in order to role model and provide support to both LGBTQ and straight students (Harbeck, 1992; Griffin, 1992; Boutilier, 1994; Silin, 1999; Kosciw, 2014). I argue disclosure in the classroom challenges conventional ideas of the student-teacher relationship. Not only do students receive support from teachers and school personnel in these moments of disclosure, but—also important—adults working in schools receive support from young people.

Following the description of the participants and methods, I explore what strategic and inadvertent disclosure looks like in the classroom. I then outline what the stories suggest disclosure accomplishes for and between teachers and students. To do so, I first explain how storytellers used disclosure in ways that normalize LGBTQ people and relationships through visibility, and often through a heteronormative lens. Next, I show how disclosure often challenged students' and teachers' assumptions about gender and presentation as well as how adults use their childhoods to advocate for disclosure and provide support. The storytellers frequently described these intimate moments as creating trusting relationships between teachers and students as well as establishing a sense of

community that includes allies. I examine how disclosure in the classroom often sparked difficult feelings that turned into support and then describe when these feelings undermine support. The analysis I present shows that disclosure can help create a community of support, and I conclude describing how these accomplishments enrich the classroom experience, address LGBTQ vulnerability, complicate the in/out binary, and break down walls between adults and young people.

### **Participants and Methods**

This project draws on stories collected by The Beyond Bullying Project, led by (in alphabetical order) Jessica Fields, Jen Gilbert, Nancy Lesko, and Laura Mamo with funding from Ford Foundation's Youth Sexuality, Reproductive Health, and Rights Program. With technical support from the Bay Area Video Coalition, the Beyond Bullying researchers set up interactive and multimedia storytelling booths in three high schools: one in San Francisco, Minneapolis, and New York City. The team gained access to the school sites in consultation with established local partners: teachers, administrators, university faculty, and leaders in local school communities. Once at the school, a team of faculty and graduate student researchers invited students, teachers, administrators, staff, and community members into the 8 x 5 x 8 booths to tell stories about LGBTQ sexuality. Story collection took place during the 2013-2014 school year in each high school for ten school days (two weeks). The stories were video- and audiotaped and transcribed. The project collected over 300 recorded stories. Researchers granted me permission to use existing data from The Beyond Bullying Project for this study. I had researcher and IRB

permission to access the de-identified transcripts, audio recordings, and video recordings of the stories told by youth and adults who had provided the required consent.

The participating high schools serve racially diverse and under-resourced student populations. According to the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), West High School (San Francisco) serves 2,062 students—the majority (69%) are Asian American; and one quarter (24%) are English Language Learners (ELL). Over half of West High students are enrolled in the National School Lunch program to receive free/reduced lunches (reflecting lower socioeconomic status), and almost all (95%) graduate. Central High School (Minneapolis), with an enrollment of 840 students, also serves a student population that is predominantly youth of color; however, eight in ten Central students identify in the DOE survey as African American/Black or Hispanic; one in three (31%) are English Language Learners. Most students (85%) receive free/reduced lunches, the highest rate of all participating schools; 79% of Central students graduate with a high school degree. East High (New York), from which no class had graduated when The Beyond Bullying Project collected stories, enrolls 330 students. Six out of ten students identify as Hispanic, yet fewer than one in ten are English Language Learners, suggesting few students are from recently immigrated families. More than half of the students (63%) participate in the National Lunch Program (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2014).

Before storytellers entered the booth, the researchers secured informed consent to record and/or share their stories. Those who provided media releases to share their recorded images also provided parental consent, and all storytellers completed a brief

demographic survey before entering the booth. Student leaders at every school decorated the outside of the booth with feather boas, paper rainbows, and posters displaying story prompts. The booth's interior, lined with sound-dampening foam, housed a high-quality digital camera on a tripod that faced the storytellers as they entered the booth, as well as a small carpet, folding chair, and lamp. Once inside the booth, a member of the research team clipped a microphone to the storyteller's clothing (or to the clothing of one of the storytellers if multiple people entered the booth); storytellers meanwhile wrote their name on a movie slate. Often, people made note of the warm temperature inside the booth, wondered what they looked like on camera, and shared how it felt to sit in the booth getting ready to share their story.

When it was time to begin, storytellers clapped the movie slate in front of them, called out "action," and went on to tell their story. Stories lasted between a few seconds to over thirty minutes. They depicted the ordinariness of LGBTQ sexuality, touching on, for example, advocating for potentially closeted pop stars, moments of friends coming out, what it was like to witness a peer getting harassed because of their sexuality, conflicting values with parents, first kisses, and how a class project forced them to think about LGBTQ sexuality. People walked into the booth, noted their excitement, nervousness, confusion, concern, and even broke into uncontrollable laughter. Once storytellers felt done, they unclipped the microphone and knocked on the door to let the researcher know they were ready step outside.

Aggregate data shows that 286 different people told stories: 240 students, 29 teachers, 14 staff members, and 3 administrators. 6% of West High School students, 8% of Central High School, and 12% of East High School students told stories. About half (54%) of all student storytellers who offered a gender identification described themselves as girls/women, 43% as boys/men, one as transgender, one as genderqueer (someone who rejects the traditional gender binary [Usher, 2006]), and one as something else. Nine in ten were youth of color, and two in ten were not heterosexual—that is, they claimed an identity other than straight or heterosexual (including lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, pansexual, and demisexual). School personnel—for example, teachers, principals, community liaisons, sports coaches, counselors, and nurses—constituted 16% of storytellers. About four in ten adult storytellers identified as men, five in ten as women, and fewer than one in ten as something else. People of color made up 42% of the adult storytellers, and 23% claimed a non-heterosexual identity.

In this paper, I created a dataset of 47 Beyond Bullying stories: 32 student stories and 15 adult stories. After reviewing all of the stories, I identified those that describe a moment of disclosure between students and adults in schools on LGBTQ sexuality, whether someone was sharing an identity or belief. This includes sixteen (13 student and 3 teacher stories) from West High School, nineteen (11 student and 8 teacher stories) from Central High School, and twelve (8 students and 4 adults) from East High School. Within my subsample, fifteen people identified as boy/man, 29 as girl/woman, and one person as genderqueer. Two storytellers in my subsample skipped the gender question on

the survey. More than half of these storytellers represented people of color (66%) and non-heterosexual identities (52%).

I analyzed the data inductively using grounded theory and narrative analysis methods (Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Esterberg, 2002; Ezzy, 2002). I printed hard copies of transcripts and listened to the coinciding audio recording as I open coded. I then wrote analytical memos and conducted focused coding in order to identify key themes and concepts (Esterberg, 2002). I paid attention to how LGBTQ discussions came up in the classroom space and discovered students and teachers frequently referred to disclosure. With the stories that describe an LGBTQ disclosure in school, I noted when people felt supported, denied, and challenged. The patterns I explore in these pages emerged from this process.

A note on language: I use “LGBTQ” when referring to the invitation researchers gave to storytellers entering the booth (“Tell us a story about LGBTQ sexuality”). I recognize no one from my subsample identifies specifically as transgender. Therefore, when referring to students and teachers who do not identify as straight or heterosexual I will use LGBTQ or “non-heterosexual.”

### **DISCLOSURE IN THE CLASSROOM**

In many ways, each and every story shared for The Beyond Bullying Project represents a moment of disclosure. Students, teachers, administrators and community members at West, Central, and East High Schools were invited into the booth to tell an ordinary story about LGBTQ sexuality, and every person decided what to share. As

people spoke during these intimate moments inside the booth, they frequently expressed self-realizations or confessed they had never shared these thoughts with anyone close to them. Some disclosed a true or untrue event; many disclosed they felt torn between social expectations and their parents' values. Some shared they have a gay best friend, cousin, or minister; others disclosed they are unable to accept LGBTQ people. Many teachers and students explored how LGBTQ sexuality enters the classroom space: students demonstrated curiosity about the personal lives of their teachers; and teachers, regardless of sexual identity, described negotiating expectations regarding self-disclosure in the classroom. Though these stories represent people's personal disclosures, they also include reflections from teachers and students on how disclosures on LGBTQ sexuality enter the classroom space.

LGBQ teachers described a tension between intimacy and professionalism negotiated by legal protections and the reality of what occurs in the classroom. Brian, a 23-year-old white student teacher from East High School, shared a sentiment many teachers described in the booth:

I think especially as a teacher...how much do I let students know about my personal life? What's appropriate for them to know? . . . What should I keep to myself? How is this going to influence the way they view me as an instructor? Is that going to influence how much respect they have for me as their teacher?

A great amount of uncertainty comes with disclosure in the classroom. For teachers, coming out as LGBQ at work involves decisions not only about peers and superiors, but

also students (Connell, 2014). Students disclosing their sexuality to teachers seek valuable information, appraisal, and support (Muñoz-Plaza, 2002).

The stories people told about disclosure in the classroom did not always pertain to coming out as an LGBTQ identified person. Some people disclosed their position as an LGBTQ ally, some shared with the class that they had an LGBTQ loved one, and others revealed their personal values conflicted with LGBTQ acceptance. The recipients of these disclosures sometimes reported already knowing the information disclosed, while others said they had not anticipated the disclosed news. Disclosure arrived in the classroom strategically and inadvertently.

#### **“I would like to share with you my coming out PowerPoint”: Strategic Disclosures**

Storytellers often described moments of disclosure that they had thought about, planned, and strategically performed. Students and teachers who entered the booth to tell a story about their strategic disclosure of an LGBTQ identity frequently described life before they chose to “come out,” why they chose to disclose to the individual or group, and how they chose to present the information. River, a junior from Central High School, identifies as pansexual and genderqueer. They first used their feminine name and pronouns when beginning high school and described getting their peers to use their new name and gender-neutral pronouns as difficult. River decided to “[confide] in a teacher and told him that [they] prefer to be called ‘River’ and use ‘they’ and ‘their’ pronouns instead of [their] birth name.” River strategically disclosed their gender identity to this trusted adult in order to give and gain what they describe as “respect” in the classroom.

This deliberate disclosure on River's part represents an attempt not only to gain respect, but also to receive support from a teacher who might lead River's peers by example.

Sometimes these strategized disclosures transpired as a grand action. Anita DeMar, a 49-year-old white English teacher at Central High School who identifies as lesbian, comes out to her students every year on National Coming Out Day through a PowerPoint presentation she created. In The Beyond Bullying Project booth, Anita went through the slides she shows: the first one was dedicated to the movie *Body Heat* ("I first knew I was gay in 1989... [when I] thought I'd really like to date Kathleen Turner"), a slide featured her female partner, another slide was on their wedding plans, and another her participation in Gay Pride Parades. Then Anita tells students that she started coming out in the classroom once she secured tenure. She chooses National Coming Out Day not only because of the importance of the holiday, but also because the date is both far enough into the semester to allow her to establish rapport with students and early enough to not suggest she is hiding her identity. Her annual slideshow—a markedly strategic disclosure—allows Anita to present herself as a role model to "out" and questioning students.

Luis, a student from West High School, told a story about one of his gay male teachers. On the last day of school during "an auditorium performance about LGBT people," his algebra teacher came out on stage. He not only came out as a gay man to the full middle-school auditorium, but also disclosed that it took him a long time to begin his coming out process out of fear of his father and the prospect of "getting judged...based

on his sexuality.” Reflecting on this teacher’s grand disclosure, Luis stated, “I had...respect for him after that day...and many people had respect for him after that.”

Anita DeMar and Luis’ eighth-grade algebra teacher provide examples of formal disclosures by teachers who hope to gain and give support to students. Strategic disclosure requires intent, purposefully sharing one’s belief or identity with an other.

#### **“I’d use pronouns that were kind of mixed”: Inadvertent Disclosures**

Though many of these classroom disclosures involved planning, disclosure also occurred in the classroom inadvertently, sometimes before a strategic disclosure. Before telling the story about his algebra teacher’s coming out during a performance, Luis described, “At first when we entered into his classroom on the first day of school, it was obvious that, um, he was gay due to his features. But then we know...it was disrespectful to say he was gay even though he didn’t admit it yet.” Luis’ choice of words casts disclosing one’s sexuality as a confession—his thoughts bordered “disrespectful” because the teacher did not “admit it yet.” Teachers themselves recognize that their bodies and self-presentation may function as a sexual disclosure. Brian, the student teacher at East High School mentioned above, described, “Teaching twelfth grade...I feel like those kids read me as soon as I came in, they were like: Ok, that’s cool. It’s totally fine. They didn’t really care.” Brian believes he inadvertently discloses his sexuality to his students through his gender performance.

Teachers’ gender embodiment can create a “glass closet”: presenting one’s gender in non-normative ways that allow others to read one as LGBTQ (Connell, 2014). If the

metaphor of “the closet” means living without explicitly disclosing one’s sexuality or gender identity (Bochenek & Brown, 2001), the glass closet represents the idea of others seeing inside. For Brian, allowing his students to look inside his glass closet represents disclosure for him. Students like Luis may feel disrespectful for looking inside this closet before a formal disclosure. On the one hand, the glass closet allowed some teachers to step out of this metaphorical space: there was no point in hiding their identity. On the other hand, this glass closet may also compel teachers who are not visibly LGBTQ to disclose their sexuality in the classroom. These teachers also maintain more freedom to disclose their identities at will (Connell, 2014) and often had a choice between formally disclosing their identity or presenting the disclosure as more “casual,” whether this moment was in fact strategic or not.

Inadvertent disclosures also went beyond the glass closet. Mattie, the special education English teacher at Central High School, facilitated a lesson that required students to compare themselves to a character in the book of their choice. One of Mattie’s students told her she connected to a character because she also identified as lesbian and struggled with finding a way to come out to her parents. Mattie’s student planning how to formally come out to her parents allowed her to inadvertently disclose her sexuality to Mattie. These moments may either represent unplanned disclosures or planned disclosures cloaked in casualness; regardless, they represent one of the ways LGBTQ sexuality inserts itself and calls on support in the classroom.

## **WHAT DISCLOSURE ACCOMPLISHES**

**“Everybody thought he was just a normal guy; and then he confronted us”:**

### **Increasing Visibility, Challenging (and Reinforcing) Heteronormativity**

Disclosure as an LGBTQ person or ally in schools troubles heteronormativity by making visible and normalizing these identities and lives. Heteronormativity privileges people and groups based on presumed binaries of sexuality and gender. This system outlines beliefs and practices about what “normal” looks like in terms of sexuality and gender and teachers and students in schools often perpetuate these norms (Jackson, 2006; Oswald et al., 2005; Wilkinson, 2009). Schools reinforce heteronormativity in official and unofficial rules, school rituals, and pedagogical practices (Pascoe, 2012). When heteronormativity is pervasive in schools, LGBTQ youth often experience feelings of difference, stigma, and lower levels of wellbeing (Wilkinson, 2009).

When students and teachers discussed their LGBTQ disclosures, they also mentioned the presence of LGBTQ people in their schools. Valarie and Amy, Asian American seniors at Central High School, entered the booth with a researcher to tell their story about their relationship and being “out” together at school. The researcher asked about “positive stuff” they experience, and Valarie responded,

We've had a teacher come up to us and tell us that she wants us to actually tell our story. Like we've had a few teachers who've actually come up to us. And they're really proud to see that we're open about being together. Like we hold hands in the hallways. We're hugging and we're really close with one another.

The students also asserted their peers are “open” and they do not experience harassment in the halls. Heteronormativity celebrates heterosexual people and relationships (Wilkinson, 2009). Teachers who disclosed their LGBQ identity in Amy and Valarie’s school in turn helped foster the visibility of this relationship. Valarie and Amy’s presence in the hallway normalizes LGBQ sexuality by challenging heteronormativity and increasing visibility.

Brian discussed an instance where a male student read aloud in class a love poem he dedicated to Brian:

[The poem] obviously made me uncomfortable, but the fact that the student felt comfortable to do so . . . in front of his peers was really interesting, really cool for me. I couldn't imagine doing that in high school. And I think it was really neat that, you know, it was nothing to him. Um-. It was a very interesting experience.

As shown earlier, Brian’s gender embodiment allowed his students to inadvertently “read” him as LGBQ and, to Brian, the student’s disclosure in this moment seemed to be “nothing” to the student. This adult had not imagined that these disclosures could effortlessly present themselves in the classroom, and Brian felt positively about his student’s pronouncement as well as his own sexuality.

This increase in visibility often surprised, enticed, and affirmed students and teachers. Western society rests on a hierarchal system of sexuality, with married, reproductive, monogamous heterosexual people at the top (Rubin, 1984). Students regularly described their teachers as “normal” and metaphorically pushed them toward

the top of this pyramid in their stories. While the attempt to use these disclosures to normalize LGBTQ sexuality and relationships involved increasing visibility, people also validated this by mirroring heterosexuality. Serena and Ashley, ninth-grade friends at East High School, went into the booth together to “talk about [their] teachers who are, like gay and stuff.” Serena described the time she saw Ms. DeMar at Target with her partner, and she and Ashley discussed whether Ms. DeMar was married yet. Ashley reminded Serena, “Well, her slideshow thing,” in which, as we learned in Anita’s Beyond Bullying story, the teacher described her future wedding. To see Ms. DeMar and her partner at Target was “really cool” for Serena. She explains, “It’s just nice to see that it can be a thing these days and that . . . society sort of accepts it and that . . . you can love who you want. And I really like how Minnesota like lets you get married,” a recent right granted in the state at the time of storytelling (Margolin, 2014). Ashley built on Serena’s point: “Last year my choir teacher told us that he was gay. And he brought in his husband...It’s OK.” Ashley closed their story referring to Anita’s disclosure: “I thought it was pretty awesome when she told us she was a lesbian. I was like, oh, my gosh. Got another lesbian teacher.” Serena and Ashley not only talk about their teachers’ disclosures, but also normalize their teachers’ sexuality and relationships by emphasizing their marital status and the frequency of these disclosures.

Many students utilized this marriage equality rhetoric: LGBTQ people should possess the right to get married in order to normalize and validate their relationships. Minnesota law newly endorsed Ashley’s choir teacher coming out to his class and

bringing his husband to their performance, Ms. DeMar feeling secure in her job and publicly running errands with her (future) wife on weekends, and Ms. Tyler-Maines being open with her class about her identity and relationship with a woman. Serena later entered the booth with her friend Arianna to talk about their English teacher, Emma Tyler-Maines:

Serena: When they got married, it was during the school year. So we got to see some pictures of them at their wedding. And they both wore these gorgeous dresses

Adrianna: It was so cute. And then they went to Disneyland for their honeymoon

Serena: Which is just adorable

Arianna: They're really happy too

Serena: I'm glad they can like legally be together and still be just like any other person.

When young people normalize their teacher's sexuality and relationships through conventional expectations, they also mute sexual pluralism and reiterate dominant sexual hierarchies (Fields, 2001). Rather than challenging the social value within sexual populations, students like Serena, Ashley, and Arianna affirmed heterosexual values and practices. Adhering to heteronormativity does not leave space for the legitimation of other LGBTQ relationships, sexualities, or bodies, and this practice maintains the othering process rather than challenging it. Though this proves to be a consequence of disclosure, these "normal" moments in the classroom at times challenged assumptions about gender.

**“I was never even thinking she would be a lesbian”: Challenging Gender Norms**

In addition to challenging heteronormativity, these moments of disclosure also challenged gender norms. When teachers and students disclosed an LGBTQ identity or position, receivers were introduced to people and experiences outside conventional tropes. Often, teachers and students attempted to do this by either labeling the disclosure as unexpected due to the person's gender presentation, or by emphasizing the person's femininity/masculinity. Sean from West High School illustrated this challenge not explicitly but instead by emphasizing his teachers' masculinity:

He was ex-Air Force, and he was really well built. And he was really nice. And he was really, really a cool guy. He was a science teacher so like every week we would blow something up for a lab. But it was really, really fun. And he was such a nice guy.

Sean positions his teacher's past, body, and philosophy in the classroom as masculine and his personality as a “cool [and] nice guy.” Sean did this before explaining how this teacher “casually mentioned he had a male partner,” and Sean ended his story with “It's nice to know there's people out there that are really cool and they're really nice and they're gay. And everyone's fine with that.” Sean's story contains three emphases: his teacher's masculinity, his teacher's inadvertent disclosure, and perceiving his teacher as a cool and nice guy. This represents a student's attempt to challenge assumptions on gender through a story on how disclosure challenged his own. However, these moments also may come at a cost just like the challenging of heteronormativity. Sean may validate this

teacher's presence in the classroom not because his sexuality goes against heteronormativity but because his embodiment affirms gender expectations.

If Sean's story shows how disclosure can both challenge and reiterate gender norms, Betsy Volk's story shows how disclosure can challenge students' assumptions. Betsy, a white 27-year-old community liaison at Central High School who identified as straight, began her story by mentioning "the ways that...students sort of put each other in...boxes with stereotypes. And...adults also tend to do that." She described her physical presentation, referring to it as "particularly radical looking...I have tattoos and I have short hair, as a woman, as a person who presents as female." Because of her presentation, students and teachers often assume Betsy does not identify as a straight person. She offered an example of a time she wrote a poem about "how hard it is to feel like you can't share who you really are with...the people that don't really want you to be who you are" and then shared it with a student during an afterschool activity. Betsy's poem depicted her experience as a teen "trying to be cooler and better," explaining she suppressed the person she felt she really was during this time. The student with whom she shared her poem responded, "Oh, because you're gay." Betsy told the student, "That's not what I meant, but I totally understand where you're coming from when you said that." According to Betsy, she and the student then laughed. In this moment, the poem became an opportunity for Betsy and her student to talk about sexuality and gender presentation.

By disclosing she does not identify as an LGBTQ person, Betsy also challenged the student's assumption about sexuality and gender expression. Betsy told the Beyond

Bullying camera, she uses the word “partner” rather than a gendered term to refer to her relationship and talked about the school’s culture of gender presentation:

Part of the culture in our building is that...students don’t necessarily present um-, their sexuality in overt ways. And I don’t know why that is...if it’s because they’re scared or if it’s because...that’s just like a new world we’re living in that there are lots of different non-generalized ways to present yourself to the world.

Betsy Volk’s act of disclosure represents emotional work challenging the assumption that one’s gender expression and presentation allows one to know whom they have relationships with. Whereas Brian knew that students “read” his sexual identity with his gender presentation and expression, Betsy recognizes and allows for uncertainty with gender and sexual identity. The presence of nonconforming bodies and the unfolding acts of LGBTQ disclosures challenge the assumptions about gender circulating in schools. Such challenges foster a more inclusive environment and, potentially, a greater understanding of the world.

**“Youngsters now don’t have to hide who they are”: Adults Calling on and Validating Their LGBTQ Child**

Betsy wrote her poem about her experience as a teenager—hiding the person she felt she was to match what she felt society expected from her—and ends her story saying “I just find that really interesting that we in this building but also just in the world [have] really specific expectations about how people present who they are. And that if you’re trying to change that in some way, then you’re kind of weird.” In *Sexuality in School*:

*The Limits of Education*, Jen Gilbert argues LGBTQ adults attempt to tell their story forward by using their experiences growing up to understand the needs of modern LGBTQ children. The fight for LGBTQ equality is made in these tensions between children who are living through the present and childhoods long since lived (2014). Adults who entered the Beyond Bullying storytelling booths often related their own childhoods to what their students experience, or what they wish for their students. Some adults painted themselves as the queer child raised in a repressive environment who now wanted to build an inclusive classroom to support their LGBQ students. Others described being raised in religious environments and now wanting their students to know what the Bible says about same-sex sexuality or hope to protect their students from a restrictive world. Many talked about queer siblings and wondered how many of their students experience the hardships they witnessed their brothers and sisters endure.

After describing her student's inadvertent disclosure, Mattie explained that students in the school are comfortable with disagreements, but simultaneously maintain support and avoid judgments. She continued,

Which when I compare it to what my high school was like, it definitely was not that way. I feel like my high school was much more judgmental. And our students here seem to be okay with lots of differences, which is awesome. It makes me thankful to be working at such an awesome place.

Mattie used her current school's acceptance of LGBQ sexuality to reflect on her experience as a teenager with "judgmental" peers. She compared her upbringing to what

she imagines her students experience with one another and with their teachers. In this environment, students accept other students, which, according to Mattie, allows for feelings of safety and support as well as casual disclosure to trusting adults. In turn, Mattie supports her students because she herself faced a judgmental high school.

Sam Richards, a reserve teacher at Central High School who identifies as pansexual, prefaced his story with, "I feel it is a story of progress. And I feel it's a story of hope that I believe other students can learn from and draw a contrast to and hopefully relate to as well." Sam described the tremendous pain he experienced as his friends policed and criticized his effeminate expression. In seventh grade, he confided in a teacher that he no longer wished to live. She supported him as he sought help and transferred to a private high school. He says that his teacher saved his life and that the new school proved nurturing. Sam then related that experience to his current job:

Since then...I've not only...come out as someone who is attracted to people of all over the gender scale...but I've become active in the civil rights movement of our time. And I've now become a teacher in the district that shooed me away...but now embraces me as an educator, a leader, and a support member of the community...I find myself not only wanted but very...useful here, very much a part of this community. And I see students here that I would guess are multiple sexual and gender orientations. And they are thriving. And I see some bullying, but not to the extent that I remember. And when I do see it, I'm able to speak out

against it. I'm able to remind people of how ridiculous and pathetic it is to criticize someone because of love.

Sam drew on his experience as an “incredibly insecure, incredibly unhappy, and very literally suicidal” effeminate child to speak out against bullying in the same public school system he says failed him. Sam is not only able to be “out” in this space, but also feels embraced and capable of fostering tolerance among his students, allowing them to thrive. Almost every teacher who entered the Beyond Bullying storytelling booth shared a personal anecdote from their childhood, and often they described how past experiences shaped their efforts to facilitate disclosure and support. Adults use injustices experienced in childhood to commit to justice for contemporary LGBTQ youth (Gilbert 2014). In doing so, adults not only use their childhoods to provide the support they feel their students need but also repair their pasts.

Indeed, LGBTQ students often said they “relate” to their teachers’ sexuality because they know their teachers went through the same thing they currently face. Some students even wondered about their teachers’ childhoods and whether they mirrored their own. For example, Serena said in the booth, “[Ms. Tyler-Maines] tells a lot of stories in class about how [she] hated boys. So I always sort of wondered, like, when she knew cause I'm wondering myself.” Serena transforms Emma’s disclosure of how she felt about “boys” as a young person into how her teacher felt as an LGBTQ youth, allowing Serena to feel supported as she explores her own sexuality. Students’ ability to relate to their teachers not only promotes academic motivation and performance, but also fosters a

sense of warmth, affection, and approval (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). When disclosure prompted students and teachers to relate their histories to each other, this sense of intimacy flourished.

### **“He's not only my teacher, but he's a pretty good friend of mine”: The Formation of Trusting Relationships**

Disclosure not only allowed the adult and young person to reflect on each other's childhoods' but also allowed students and teachers to build intimacy and trusting relationships. When describing the teacher who supported the visibility of her relationship, Amy, the student in a relationship with Valarie, stated,

I've had a teacher my freshman year who I've been open about it with cause she was open to the class about it. So I came and opened up to her that I was bi. And she accepted me. And I've been close with her ever since.

This openness between teacher and student allows for feelings of intimacy, acceptance, and support. Amy says she asserted her own openness because one of her teachers asserted this openness with her class; and, because of the mutual disclosure, Amy feels “close” to her teacher.

Cat, a student from West High School, spent a majority of her time in the booth describing her life at home with her unsupportive mother. She described a time she was “caught” hugging and kissing her girlfriend in the hallway at school and feared what her mother would do if the school contacted her to report it:

But luckily I have people supporting me [who] let me talk to them. Like a lady named Ms. Flynn. I thank her, I will always thank her, like she has been there since day one to save me from getting a call home, save me from getting in trouble...I talked to her [about] everything— about how figure what I am...especially how I feel about other girls.

Cat felt she had done something wrong and Ms. Flynn was the only adult she could trust. Not only did Ms. Flynn support Cat as she made sense of her own sexuality, but she also provided protection against unsupportive people like Cat's mother. Cat also took time to explain she prefers to be at school as it provides an escape from life at home with her unsupportive mother. West High School's actual policy on public displays of affection is unknown; however Cat feared she was in trouble. Ms. Flynn helped preserve Cat's place of sanctuary.

Later in her story, Cat described what happened when her mother found a "coming out paper" from Ms. Flynn. Her mother told her to never speak to her girlfriend again, and throughout her story Cat used the word "disgusted" to describe her mother's feelings about Cat and her sexuality. Cat stated,

And she's really Christian...and to be called disgusting and sickening—your mom look at you like you're a pile of shit. Your own mother is—is intense. I'm grateful for everything she did for me. I'm thankful for friends. And Ms. Flynn and my girlfriends to support me.

Cat lives in a volatile home with a person who refuses to accept her sexuality, yet she still tries to be grateful for her. Her strength and refuge lie in her friends, girlfriends, and the only adult to whom she can disclose her sexual identity: Ms. Flynn.

While Cat described Ms. Flynn supporting her at West High School, other students at the school talked about the adults at the Wellness Center, a school-based program catering to the health and wellbeing of the students. Many warmly referred to the adults who work there and described the help they received during difficult times. Evan, a counselor at the Wellness Center, said he began his position making a conscious effort to be “out” to provide a role model for the students he works with. He described a unique experience with a student who came to see him because her teachers noticed she was “depressed and distressed.” He reflected,

And when she graduated, she told me that she was actually at the point of taking her life when she came and met me. And the thing that she believes that kept her from doing it was my honesty. She felt that nobody had ever been open with her. Or spoke to her like an adult in anyway. And that honesty’s what she feels kept her alive. And that was a very touching experience for me.

Evan believes he saved this student’s life through disclosure. Being out as an LGBTQ person did not necessarily facilitate this close relationship, but the act of disclosure did. Evan believes the student appreciated his emotional intimacy more than anything else, and he believes that emotional intimacy saved her life. In his story, Evan said that he discloses his sexuality in classroom presentations and, in return, students come to the

Wellness Center to “unload to [him] one-on-one.” He describes his sexuality as an “asset in helping our kids move forward with their own experience.” Gilbert’s queer adult and their lost queer child are at play (2014). Evan sees himself as protecting this student and as literally saving her life, and he perceives this trusting relationship as surviving through his efforts of disclosure.

**“It was critical that I be an ally to my students”: Creating a Community that Includes Non-LGBQ People**

When LGBQ adults and youth told their stories about disclosing their sexuality to one another, they often mentioned motivation to do so resulted from the inspiration from each other. Valarie felt close to a teacher who disclosed to the class her sexuality. Emma Tyler-Maines began coming out to students once she met a colleague really open with her sexuality. These moments of disclosure also provide ways for straight people to join in the effort of welcoming and supporting LGBQ people. The Beyond Bullying Project stories portray not only queer adults wanting to protect children, but also straight and heterosexual identified teachers protecting their image of the child and non-heterosexual students standing in solidarity with their teachers.

After telling the camera about her coming out PowerPoint presentation, Anita DeMar brought up several other moments in her life. She mentioned during the homecoming parade every year, she along with other students throw candy to the audience while on the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) float. The parade provides “a way for the kids to kind of be visible.” In addition to normalizing her LGBQ students by

facilitating the increase of her and their visibility, Anita also points out that every year the school cheerleaders jump on the float. She notes these students do not participate in the GSA, they are “the popular kids,” and “most of them identify as straight.” Their straightness encourages Anita: “I feel good about it. And I think they liked it too, that they were being inclusive.” Tropes commonly applied to cheerleaders cast them as students with the most power in school, often using this power to inflict harm. Anita does not see these students as inflicting harm but instead facilitating a sense of community between LGBTQ people and powerful allies. According to Anita, her students see the great pride she has—a powerful lesson to her students. She depicts her disclosure and visibility as an LGBTQ person in school as creating a sense of community between her, LGBTQ students, and their heterosexual peers.

Whereas the cheerleaders’ endorsement of Anita and the GSA marks a momentary alliance, others demonstrate more of an activist and intentional relationship to the term “ally.” An ally is a member of a socially dominant group who works to dismantle a form of oppression from which they benefit (Ayvazian, 1995). Teachers’ often told stories about disclosing their position as allies to their students and all teachers mention that their LGBTQ family members and friends inspire them to “come out” as allies in the classroom. Jaclyn, a teacher from Central High School, described a student physically fighting peers who had used anti-gay epithets. After stopping the fight, the student disclosed that his mother identifies as lesbian; his peers had offended him and his family. Jaclyn says this disclosure and incident pushed her to disclose her position as an

ally to her students. She ended her story by stating, “I just think about how critical it is for our students to feel honored and safe and respected for who they are... That’s what I think about—how to be an ally and how to help prepare teachers to be allies in any way they possibly can for all kids” Laurie from Central High School similarly stated, “I hope that calling myself an ally and making myself available just keeps the climate and the environment for all of my students one where they feel safe.” Though these teachers do not identify as LGBTQ, they want to keep their classrooms “safe” and to “honor” all of their students. These teachers advance these aims by disclosing their identities as allies to their students.

### **“Kids were making fun of him because he came out the closet”: Allowing Difficult Feelings**

When people disclosed their LGBTQ identity to others who did not share this identity, they called on their audiences to position themselves as allies willing to facilitate support and build community. At times these disclosures brought up and allowed for difficult feelings, and people sorted through these difficult feelings in order to support people. When people call themselves “allies,” it often emerges from feelings of empathy. In an attempt to understand the oppressive conditions others face, these storytellers sorted through difficult feelings to assert their positions as allies, thus creating support (Fields & Copp, 2015).

Anita’s account of the cheerleaders jumping on the GSA float emphasizes her own positive feelings; she assumes the cheerleaders feel the same. Other people joined

Anita in reporting feelings of happiness, intrigue, surprise, love, support, and bravery resulting from these moments of disclosure. However, other teachers and students also reported sadness, hatred, confusion, and disgust. They reported then turning these difficult feelings into supportive ones.

Kirk, a 45-year-old white man and the basketball coach at East High School, began his story describing his upbringing in “a very heterosexual world of Catholic school.” He stated he “never really experienc[ed] anything that would go on” because of the constant homophobia in that space. He then described a moment of disclosure and his reaction:

My first experience when a girl on the team that I truly cared about and [I] was never even thinking she would be a lesbian um—, had a girlfriend for the first time. And it just freaked me out. And I couldn't—. I couldn't handle it. I didn't know what to do and it took me a while to um—, just accept it. Maybe a month or so. And then just, you know, because I cared for her so much, I was, it was easier to deal with it and even seven, eight years later, we're still friends.

Kirk's initial reaction stirred difficult feelings, and he could even recall the length of time he needed to sort through them and turn them into support. Their relationship shifted into a friendship. He ended his story, “I'm just glad that I'm in a world where these things are accepted and the people I'm around, they're not persecuted for um—you know, their [sexual] identity.” He is glad that the “world” can accept the people that surround him, and told a story about how *he* came to accept his student.

However, rather than recognizing the social change needing to occur to fight oppression, Kirk talked about his *personal* transformation. Others were able to make the move from personal change to broader social justice. Aiden, a student from West High School, said that his friend would “tell gay jokes” in class. His teacher then disclosed to the class “he used to be straight,” possibly explaining to the class that anti-gay slurs sometimes force people to present themselves and their identities differently to avoid being ostracized:

I think that in an environment where people don't embrace their sexuality, I think it's disrespectful. And I don't think it makes people [who] may think they have different sexuality than [other] people comfortable. And I just think it's unfair...and disrespectful that, what extent people will go to make other people laugh where it goes to the point that makes other people uncomfortable and feel like they don't belong.

Aiden recognizes that his peers police one another's sexuality, and his experience in the classroom with his teacher's disclosure allowed Aiden to feel concerned, confused, and sympathetic towards people who may feel they do not belong. Disclosure allowed some teachers and students to recognize that the whole world does not accept LGBTQ people, and these difficult feelings pushed for support of people's rights, comfort, and respect.

Aiden's story about difficult feelings focused on his teacher's disclosure of his identity. Not all disclosures and difficult feelings emerged from LGBTQ declarative statements—they also emerged from someone disclosing a connection to LGBTQ

sexuality. David, a student from West High School, told his story about his current health class, where they talk about “a lot of gay stuff.” The class once “watched a movie about a gay guy that [was] bullied in school and he even tried to take his life away.” When the movie was over, David and his classmates noticed that the assistant teacher in class sat crying “and no one knew why.” David said the assistant teacher then disclosed to the class that her son identifies as gay and is HIV positive, “so everyone was really sad.” To David, this disclosure seems to have taken the distanced “gay stuff” discussions in class pertaining to bullying and suicide and made it relevant on a personal level. What occurred in the movie speaks not only to David and his classmates, but also to the assistant teacher in the classroom. Teachers who disclosed their connection to LGBTQ sexuality allowed students to see that LGBTQ issues affect all people, regardless of how one identifies.

Mainstream ideas of LGBTQ sexuality sometimes conjure images of LGBTQ people and their allies marching hand-in-hand during pride parades. However, as Kirk and Aiden’s stories shows, not everyone’s road to supporting LGBTQ sexuality begins with glitter and rainbows. Storytellers described needing personal time for sadness to turn into empathy and sympathy, for confusion to become self-reflection, and for concern to translate into alliance.

### **DISCLOSURE CREATES A COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT**

When disclosure normalized people’s relationships and challenged gender assumptions, it affirmed identities. When adults used or reflected on their childhoods as a

result of disclosure, it created trusting relationships between teachers and students. Difficult feelings called on people to recognize the importance of being an ally. Students and teachers routinely referred to disclosure in the classroom, and frequently stories ended with feelings of support. Neely, a ninth-grade African American student at Central High School, began her story by disclosing to the camera she identifies as bisexual and her strategies for managing friends who label her sexuality “a sin.” She quickly shifted focus:

There’s like so many stories that I could say. But I only have a little time. Some teachers here are either lesbian or are allies, and I like having teachers that are because they’re supportive and they’re nice. I’m not saying that if...you don’t like the same gender that you’re not nice and supportive. But I just think that it’s a way to relate to the teachers.

With many stories to choose from, Neely chose to talk about, first, accepting her friends in spite of their using religion to justify not accepting her sexuality and, second, why she likes having lesbian and ally teachers. Neely knows her teachers identify as an LGBTQ person or ally because they engaged in either strategic or inadvertent disclosure, and her teachers give her the support she needs in order to reinforce her sexual security. Neely shares this marginalized identity with her teachers. These teachers also may have experienced unsupportive friends and family, allowing these teachers to support and relate to Neely.

Storytellers described the emotional experience of not only receiving support but also providing support. Mattie, the Special Education English teacher who described a moment when a student inadvertently came out as a lesbian, talked about how she felt in that moment:

I was just really struck that one of my students would...trust me and feel safe enough and comfortable enough with me to tell me something they hadn't told their parents yet. So it made me really happy that I was able to foster that kind of relationship with one of my students

Mattie considered her relationship with this student different from the relationship the student has with her parents. She felt a great sense of trust, safety, and comfort since her student disclosed a part of her life that she had not yet shared with her parents. The student may or may not have actually felt supported; regardless, the disclosure permits Mattie to feel supportive.

Teachers described not only providing support but also receiving support. Emma Tyler-Maines described her students' reactions when, in a "terrifying" moment, she first disclosed her relationship with a woman:

The faces [laughing] of the kids when they figured out what I was talking about...are burned into my memory. But I didn't have a single kid that wanted to leave. They were curious. They wanted to know more. Or they grabbed me after class. Or they didn't care.

Emma describes her disclosure having a profound or indifferent impact on students. Students felt curious, some wanted to further the discussion, and others felt indifferent. Most important to Emma is the students' commitment to staying in class during her disclosure. She shared her wedding pictures with her students, and her students' excitement provided her with "some comfort" when she anticipated terror:

I think in knowing that the community I'm with, even if they're not my peers, if I work professionally or I hold a position of respect, that my kids don't respect me because of the position. They respect me because I'm a person...It's been a source of strength for me here at this school.

The students' excitement provided Emma with comfort and a sense of community. She believes her students "respect" her not because of her authority as a teacher, but because coming out to her students allowed them to see her as a person. The moment began as "terrifying," and, by the moment's end, Emma regretted not coming out to her students sooner.

Student and teacher stories about disclosure in the classroom suggest that feelings of support occur when LGBTQ sexuality and relationships are normalized, gender norms are challenged, and adult experiences are validated. In these moments, students and teachers foster trusting relationships and make a community that includes allies. In the midst of and despite difficult feelings, teachers and students commit themselves to supporting one another. However, not every moment of disclosure opens up the

possibility of support; at times disclosure resulted in people feeling denied or incapable of sorting through personal values in order to provide support.

### **UNDERMINING FEELINGS OF SUPPORT**

When disclosure did not result in feelings of support, people explained they felt hurt, denied, and confused. Storytellers who described being unable to accept LGBTQ people reported that LGBTQ sexuality confused them, or that it went against their personal values. The imperative for LGBTQ people to come out in an educational setting can sometimes place people in a complicated position (Rasmussen, 2004).

Teachers who told their stories about coming out in the classroom demonstrated bravery, and the stories from students depict that this act had a profound impact on their views with LGBTQ sexuality. However, the act of not coming out in the classroom should not be read as irresponsible, disempowering, or shameful (Rasmussen, 2004). In his story, Jason described his desire to disclose his sexuality to students, but feeling unable to. As a white 40-year-old gay man, Jason began teaching in California where he was “out” to his students but “never felt the need to announce it on a soapbox.” He recalled that when he moved to teach at East High School, “The very first day of class I was greeted with students with some really serious statements about their hatred toward gay people . . . And suddenly I felt thrown back into the closet again.” Jason rationalized his decision to go “back into the closet” with wanting that “balance,” and wanting to “reach” the other students as a teacher. However, he prefaced his story with the verbal violence he has experienced with his students.

When students appear hostile toward LGBTQ sexuality, some teachers may alter their gender presentation and behavior in the classroom. Anita DeMar and Emma Tyler-Maines work in a different school and professional climate than Jason. When Jason told his story, it was during the end of his first year teaching at East High School whereas Anita has been at Central High School for over a decade, and Emma receives support from Anita and other our teachers. The school culture at each site is also vastly different: storytellers from East High reported and demonstrated more homophobic attitudes, and Jason sees this in his own classroom. Jason strategically refuses disclosure in the classroom space in order to “reach” the students he anticipates will deny his sexuality.

People described experiencing the denial Jason fears when they anticipated receiving support. When River disclosed their genderqueer identity, new name, and preferred pronouns, they felt their teacher was “confused” as he asked, “You want to be referred to as multiple people?” In the booth, River reported their teacher sometimes does “well with it” and other times he will still use feminine pronouns to refer to them. River described how they felt about this:

And that kind of, that kind of hurts because...I very much felt like: Oh, this is this teacher I really like; that I feel like I can trust. And that I can tell him about what I want to be called in the classroom because I feel like I’m more respected. And I’m giving him respect by letting him know....And even though I’m not...they’ll still always see me as a girl. And that really hurts.

River felt that they could confide and trust their teacher and that, by coming out to him personally, they had called on the teacher to advocate for and support River's transition at school. While River was striving for mutual respect by coming out as genderqueer to their teacher, they were hurt to find that the teacher felt confused and continued to use the wrong pronouns when referring to River. River strategically disclosed their gender identity to this adult and wanted respect in the classroom from this teacher. Instead, River felt disrespected, hurt, and denied.

Thus, though disclosure may foster engagement for some people, it alienates others. Imad described a moment when his middle school teacher formally came out to his students on graduation day. Imad painted a picture of his teacher putting himself in a vulnerable position with his students, prefacing his story with "I want to be honest with you." Imad then described the ensuing chaos:

A lot of kids were like, "Oh my God. He's a homo."...Everyone was just yelling and making fun of him. And the teacher ran out the class. And I could've sworn I saw a tear in his eye. It...wasn't nice being there. I didn't feel like we as humans do this. ...A bunch of kids were throwing names at him and making fun of him because he came out the closet. I don't think that should ever happen.

Although this moment allowed Imad to sort through his difficult feelings in order to sympathize with his teacher, the damage was already done. His classmates seemed unable to manage this emotional intimacy, and Imad blames them for causing his teacher pain that everyone witnessed.

While Imad witnessed others deny his teacher's personhood, Brandon, an African American sophomore from East High School, explained in his story the perspective of someone unable to accept LGBTQ sexuality: "One of the teachers told me that he was gay. And I just thought he was out of his mind. . . . The teacher wanted us to learn about LGBTQ issues and I thought it was useless." As Brandon sorted through his range of feelings in his story, he alludes to his confusion: he does not understand how two people of the same sex can feel attracted to each other and act on it. Immediately after describing LGBTQ discussions in the classroom, Brandon said with a defeated tone, "But I think this could actually make a change." How Brandon imagines this change would look is unclear; however, he attempts to be very clear about viewing LGBTQ people and disclosures as "wrong." If he feels the teacher who disclosed his sexuality is "out of his mind," then a straight-identified teacher who refuses LGBTQ discussions in class possibly represents a teacher "in his mind." When someone shares any information, including sexual identity, the risk lies in the response. Countless stories showed people embracing others in moments of disclosure; however, people are not always receptive to the information. Brandon jeopardizes the sense of community Jason and other teachers try to promote with disclosure.

Culturally responsive teaching acknowledges and welcomes students' backgrounds and centers on the importance of reshaping the curriculum to reflect all students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). When teachers remain incapable of putting their personal values aside to accept their LGBTQ students, it jeopardizes the safety of the

classroom. Elle Mason, a 24-year-old white staff member at Central High School, explained, “I’ve learned so much stuff I’ll believe for as long as I’m alive...And a big thing in Christianity is being gay is wrong.” She described her struggle between religious faith and the “love” she has for her students. Elle created a hypothetical scenario where a student asks her “is being gay wrong?” and then considered how she would handle it:

I wouldn’t even know what to say because I don’t want them to think—I don’t want to lie and tell them that I think it’s ok, because I don’t. But at the same time I don’t want to tell them it’s not ok because that’s who they are. . . . That’s like telling someone who they are as a person is wrong, and no one has the right to do that. . . . I guess I’ve just had so much trouble with that. . . . No kid has asked me that.

Elle imagines the question “Ms. Elle, is being gay wrong?” stands in for the student’s real question: *Ms. Elle, am I wrong?* Elle loves her students. However, in her eyes their sexuality is not “okay,” and she feels incapable of setting her personal values aside to support her LGBTQ students.

Michele Kahn (2006) argues students need to explore their own subjectivity to understand that they are active agents in how they construct themselves and others; according to Kahn, educators who refuse to take these steps can cause irreparable damage. Teachers explicitly professing a disapproval or dislike of people from an ethnic group or a social class would be unlikely; however, open prejudice toward LGBTQ people based on religious beliefs continues to be acceptable. Elle remains fully aware that her

version of Christianity places LGBTQ people in the category of “not okay”—sinners, deviant, and abnormal. Her conflict lies in not wanting to tell her students that they are wrong as people. Though Elle’s describes the love she feels for her students, she fails to acknowledge their sexuality as a part of their personhood.

### **Conclusion**

Iris and Sara, with whom I opened this thesis, encapsulate many of the accomplishments and consequences of disclosure in the classroom with just a two-minute story. The students—who struggled with using the terms “lesbian” and “gay”—told a story about their teachers’ LGBTQ disclosures. Sara says that Ms. Dioli strategically told the class she identifies as lesbian using declarative statements. Sara also expressed Ms. Dioli challenged her assumptions about presentation and LGBTQ people when she said Ms. Dioli “looks pretty normal.” Her classmates’ rejection of and lack of support for Ms. Dioli’s sexuality produced difficult feelings within Iris. Her sadness turned into a greater understanding of the larger problem of discrimination.

This project suggests disclosures in school about LGBTQ sexuality—whether about being an LGBTQ person or being an LGBTQ ally—can help create a community of support. Ideas of “normal” and gender embodiment are challenged. Students and teachers in schools create a sense of trust between each other and share different parts of their lives in addition to an identity. Adults reflect on and share their childhoods with their students, and students compare and contrast these experiences. A community grows to include allies who do not necessarily participate in the GSA at school. At times,

disclosure incites difficult feelings and calls on people to support others in their difficulty. Conversely, support can be undermined in these moments of disclosure when others deny people's identities and cannot put their personal values aside to meet expectations.

The privileging of coming out discourse puts some in a pressured position, and I do not necessarily issue a call for all LGBTQ teachers to disclose their sexuality to their students. The stories showed people coming out in the classroom influenced by the anticipated response, school culture, job security, relationship status, need for support, and so on. However, others may refrain from adhering to this imperative due to, for example, unsupportive peer and family groups, religious affiliations, and financial dependence, and because of this we cannot assume everyone who had something to say walked into the booth to share their story. However, these stories suggest who discloses and when disclosure happens. Nevertheless, students and teachers at the very least are bodies and minds in the classroom, and disclosure occurs through the ways we move and the words we say. If trust, support, and community can be built through disclosure, we must work to be welcoming and warm in these moments.

The stories suggest the structure of schooling may facilitate or hinder disclosure. School administrators set the tone of schools while implementing specific policies and programs that may affect the school's climate. This allows them not only to be seen as caring (or callous) adults but also to play an important role in the school experiences of LGBTQ youth and teachers (Kosciw, 2014). Of the 47 adults who told stories for The

Beyond Bullying Project, only three identified as administrators. Though students do not interact with administrators as much as they do with their teachers, not one of the three administrators told a story about disclosure. With the command of implementing comprehensive school policies, administrators should also make sure these policies include LGBTQ people and are enforced by the adults who interact with students daily. Teachers might then feel secure disclosing to their students before tenure, and students may feel they have non-family adults they can trust.

Pedagogy and curriculum are also significant conditions of schooling. The stories indicate classroom lessons prompted disclosures when LGBTQ sexuality announced itself during formal and informal lessons. Sexuality is embedded in textbooks, school functions, language used, class projects, gender-segregated bathrooms, and other ordinary places in schools. These lessons about LGBTQ sexuality must extend beyond bullying, harassment, and suicide. Students like David need to discover “gay stuff” that goes beyond discussions of HIV in health class; students like Iris and Sara need to learn to say the words “gay” and “lesbian” without caution. Analogies used in the classroom should refrain from expressing heterosexuality as the only possibility and instead suggest many possibilities. Gender neutral and inclusive language should be taught and practiced when referring to students, teachers, families, or others outside the classroom space. Students’ and teachers’ preferred names and pronouns should be used in the classroom, and we should consider and challenge the ways stereotypes are perpetuated. If we are serious about creating room for LGBTQ students, families, and teachers in schools, then we not

only invite these topics into the formal curricula but also welcome them when they enter the class informally.

The context of schooling also matters. Many of the students who told stories about their peers undermining support in the classroom described this happening in middle school. LGBTQ students in middle school are more likely to report hearing anti-LGBTQ language, report higher frequencies of victimization, and less likely to have access to resources, supportive educators, and inclusive curricula (Kosciw, 2014). Even younger students—those in elementary school—might benefit from disclosure differently, allowing them to receive disclosures later in middle school and high school. Students in rural areas are less likely to report having LGBTQ resources or supportive school personnel (Kosciw, 2014), and research should focus on how disclosure can shift this culture. With an increase in the number of supportive staff available to students by ensuring policy actually supports LGBTQ teachers, schools can move toward a future in which all students are able to learn and succeed in schools, regardless of sexuality or gender.

Disclosing an identity helps communities and boundaries become realized as an experience of the world, creating a bridge across multiple communities. People are able to connect with others who share their history as well as learn across a range of experiences, which socially empowers people rather than marginalizes them (Wenger, 2000). Disclosures of LGBTQ identities or positions promoted a greater sense of belonging and understanding. These admissions can extend beyond sexuality and into disclosing

immigrant and documentation status, favorite hobbies, intersectional identities, unconventional family dynamics, dis/ability, financial status, a colorful past, or a difficult present. Disclosure is not the key solution to concerns regarding equity, community, and support. However, disclosure contains the power to break down not only walls between the teacher and the student but also the adult and the young person. Rather than viewing disclosure as inappropriate, irresponsible, and risky, sharing our lives with our students can help build intimacy, community, and belonging.

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