

The Lived Experiences of Queer Educational Leaders

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Title: The Lived Experiences of Queer Educational Leaders

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of queer educational leaders in Oregon, focusing on how their identities inform their leadership and how they navigate political scrutiny. Using a phenomenological multiple case study design, the research employed semi-structured interviews and focus groups to gather descriptive data from eight participants. Data analysis involved thematic coding, utilizing descriptive, emotion, in vivo, and magnitude coding cycles to identify key themes and patterns.

The study aimed to address gaps in the literature by centering the voices of queer administrators, understanding the challenges they face, and highlighting the strategies they use to create inclusive school environments. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersectionality of identity, leadership, and social justice in education, informing practices and policies that support queer educators and students.

The goal was to discover the lived experiences of queer educational leaders by answering two research questions: (1) How do queer educational leaders' lived experiences impact or inform their leadership in public schools? (2) How do queer educational leaders navigate living into their identity at a time when queerness is under political scrutiny?

*To my queer community –
this is a love letter to you.*

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“We are powerful because we have survived.” - Audre Lorde

*Audre Lorde was a writer, professor, and civil rights activist.
She was a self-described “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet.”*

Queerness is under attack in the United States. The rise in legislative attacks on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) rights, mainly targeting transgender youth, has become a significant concern. Lawmakers across the United States are advancing bills that target transgender individuals and seek to limit state protections to allow for discrimination based on religious beliefs. These actions have prompted organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to closely monitor legislation, emphasizing the right of LGBTQ+ people to live safely and without stigma (ACLU, 2025).

Simultaneously, movements like Project 2025 are gaining traction across the United States, aiming to implement policies that further erode LGBTQ+ rights on a federal scale (Dans & Groves, 2023). This initiative, spearheaded by the Heritage Foundation and supported by numerous anti-LGBTQ+ organizations, seeks to eliminate LGBTQ-inclusive language in federal agencies, restrict healthcare access, and criminalize gender nonconformity (Dans & Groves, 2023).

Escalation of Anti-LGBTQ+ Legislation

Since 2015, state-level attacks on LGBTQ+ individuals, especially transgender people, have risen; even as some states have tried to advance LGBTQ+ equality. The ACLU’s tracking of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation reveals a concerted effort to undermine the rights and protections of the queer community. The proposed legislative actions range from restricting access to accurate

identification and healthcare to censoring curricula and weakening civil rights laws. For example, numerous states have introduced healthcare restrictions targeting transgender individuals, including age restrictions and limitations on healthcare funding (ACLU, 2025). According to the ACLU, many states have advanced measures that affect various aspects of LGBTQ+ life:

Barriers to Accurate IDs: Laws complicate the process for transgender individuals to obtain personal identification that reflects their gender identity.

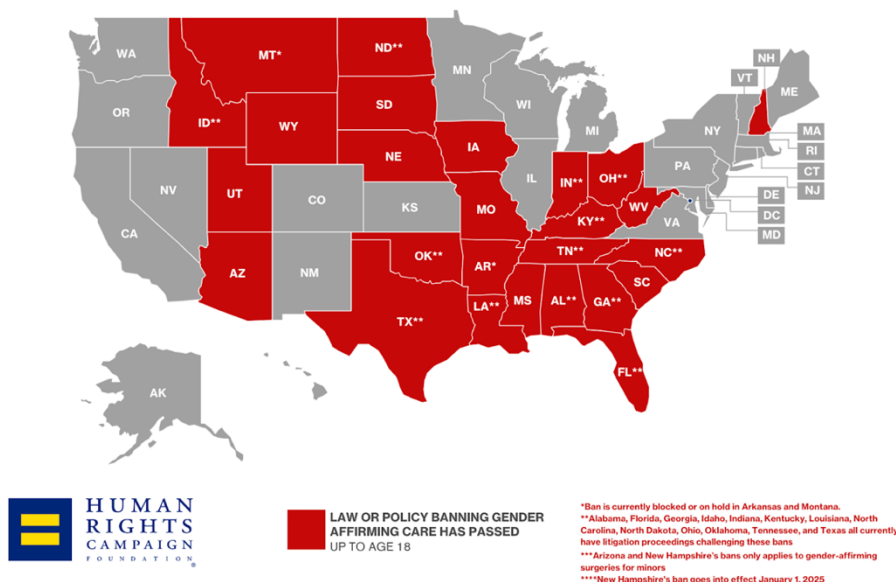
Free Speech and Expression Bans: Some states are attempting to restrict free speech and expression, including drag show bans.

Healthcare Restrictions: Measures being passed to limit access to gender-affirming care, impose age restrictions, and restrict healthcare funding. Figure 1 illustrates how these types of legislative bills are sweeping across the United States.

Figure 1

Attacks on Gender Affirming Care by State, (Williams Institute, 2024)

Attacks on Gender Affirming Care by State



Restricting Student and Educator Rights: This involves curriculum censorship, forced outing of students in schools and banning sports participation for some students.

Weakening Civil Rights Laws: Actions such as redefining sex and creating religious

Project 2025: A Blueprint for Rolling Back LGBTQ+ Rights

Project 2025 is a comprehensive plan to reshape the federal government under a conservative agenda, with significant implications for LGBTQ+ rights. The Heritage Foundation spearheads the project, which aims to create a series of executive orders and policy changes within the first 180 days of the new administration (Dans & Groves, 2023). The project's objectives include eliminating LGBTQ+ rights, eradicating federal funding for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, and purging the government of nonpolitical civil servants. This initiative views LGBTQ+ identities as contrary to "traditional American family" values and aims to eliminate federal policies that promote LGBTQ+ equality. This includes the removal of terms such as sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender equality from federal rules and regulations.

The Heritage Foundation's long-standing opposition to LGBTQ+ rights is well-documented, with decades of efforts against LGBTQ+ military service, marriage equality, and protections against discrimination. Partner organizations in Project 2025, such as Alliance Defending Freedom and Moms for Liberty, are known for their anti-LGBTQ+ stances.

The convergence of increasing legislative attacks on LGBTQ+ rights, the agenda of Project 2025, and the policies of the 2025 presidential administration pose a significant threat to the queer community. These actions aim to weaken existing protections, allow for discrimination, and begin to criminalize gender nonconformity. The fight for LGBTQ+ rights is at a critical turning point in the United States. To combat the anti-LGBTQ+ legislation that is

sweeping the country, a coordinated effort to protect and advance the rights of all individuals to live without stigma and discrimination is required.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE SYNTHESIS

“Queer people don’t grow up as ourselves, we grow up playing a version of ourselves that sacrifices authenticity to minimize humiliation and prejudice. The massive task of our adult lives is to unpick which parts of ourselves are truly us and which parts we’ve created to protect us.” - Alexander Leon

*Alexander Leon is an advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and anti-racism.
He identifies as gay and is a public speaker on topics of inclusion.*

The recent uptick in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation is not a surprise; queer people have endured decades of discrimination in the United States, ranging from criminalization, false classifications of mental illnesses, hate crimes, psychological and physical violence, and exclusion from fundamental human rights such as marriage, employment, housing, public establishments, and health care (Casey et al., 2019). In 2024, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) reported that 515 anti-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) bills have been introduced in the United States over the last twelve months. For the first time in history, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) has declared a national state of emergency for LGBTQIA+ Americans due to the unprecedented number of anti-LGBTQIA+ bills being signed into law (HRC, 2024). Given the history of discrimination and the current socio-political context, homophobia permeates many aspects of queer people’s personal and professional lives.

Often, the terms LGBTQIA+ and queerness are used interchangeably, but there is a desire amongst the LGBTQIA+ community to shift to a more inclusive language (Harvey, 2024). The term *queerness* embraces a broader spectrum of identities beyond just those in fixed categories. Queerness is a complex and fluid concept that challenges normative assumptions

about sexuality and gender identity (Ruberg & Ruelos, 2020). For this dissertation, I will use *queerness*, which rejects fixed categories and aids in promoting a greater understanding of human expression and identities outside traditional societal expectations.

Despite moves toward more inclusive language, the long history of biases toward the queer community impacts the climate of public schools (Lugg, 2003). In the current socio-political context, public school leaders face multiple challenges and changes in a nation polarized by politics. Current politics is divisive, dividing the public on numerous topics that impact teaching and learning in public K–12 settings. Instead of issues creating space for civil engagement and conversations that prompt critical thinking, divisiveness has intruded on public discourse. Queer culture, race, and religion are among the polarizing topics that are leading state legislatures to ban books, shows, and words (Ates & Brooks, 2023).

According to the HRC (2021) about 20 million U.S. adults self-identify as queer. However, due to homophobia and potential professional risk, there are no current estimates on the number of queer educators. In this literature synthesis, I highlight what has contributed to the complexities that queer educational leaders face within the current socio-political context. I have organized the synthesis into four main sections: (a) a brief history of the gay rights movement in the United States, (b) homophobia in education, (c) the psychology of coming out, and (d) challenges faced in educational settings. The fourth section is divided into three subsections: the role of educational leaders, school environments, and the current socio-political context of public schools.

In this synthesis, I highlight the challenges confronting queer educational leaders by detailing the history of the gay rights movement, homophobia in education, and the

psychological dynamics of coming out. At the end of this synthesis, I review the limited empirical research on this topic and identify gaps in the literature.

A Brief History of the Gay Rights Movement in the United States

Significant milestones and ongoing struggles mark the history of the gay rights movement in the United States. Until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, scientific, medical, and legal constructs of homosexuality were nonexistent because societal norms assumed that people were naturally attracted to the opposite sex for procreation. By the early 20th century, the popularization of Christianity accelerated throughout the United States and led to the emergence of measures to regulate non-reproductive sexual activity (Hassel, 2001). These types of measures would turn into laws focused on the criminalization of queer people.

The rapid growth of the United States post-Civil War also saw a rise of queer subcultures. Prosecutions for homosexuality escalated with the visibility of queer culture, leading to public hysteria over perceived immoral and sexually deviant behavior. In the 1930s, states toughened laws to criminalize same-sex activity, and homophobia became more prevalent (Eskridge, 1997). Homophobia is a prejudice against queer people, and post-World War II, widespread homophobia began to link homosexuality to communism by popularizing the slurs “commie, pinko, queer” (Lugg, 2003a). Society scrutinized government, military, and educational institutions, seeking to rid them of suspected homosexuals to conform to heterosexual societal expectations (Lugg, 2003a).

In the 1950s, ensuring a “non-queer” workforce had become a national priority (Lugg, 2003a). Led by Florida, states passed legislation to allow the removal of suspected homosexual educators from schools (Lugg, 2003a, 2003b). These laws empowered states to arrest educators on homosexual charges, leading to their termination and loss of licensure (Harbeck, 1997).

During the 1950s and 1960s, queer educators faced many challenging choices; the education profession risked exposure and humiliation. In the 1960s, laws began to oppress queer people severely. Queer people faced the risk of arrest and possible police brutality for being part of the queer community.

At a critical time in the history of gay rights, the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City acted as a tipping point and brought the gay rights movement to the mainstream. Although the 1970s saw civil rights gains for queer individuals, there was still strong opposition. One of the earliest and most impactful events was the removal of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1973 (Drescher, 2015). The depathologizing of homosexuality was a crucial step in reducing the stigma associated with being gay. However, not long after, Anita Bryant started a nationwide *Save Our Children Campaign* in 1977 as the first organized opposition to the gay rights movement (Harbeck, 1997). Bryant's campaign reversed sexual orientation non-discrimination clauses in school policies in Dade County, Florida; Eugene, Oregon; St. Paul, Minnesota; and Wichita, Kansas (Harbeck, 1997).

Making positive progress for gay rights, Wisconsin was the first state to pass a non-discrimination law protecting sexual orientation in the workplace in 1982. The following year, Massachusetts became the second state to pass an anti-discrimination law that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, housing, public accommodations, credit, and services (Harbeck, 1997). Momentum continued, and in 1991, Hawaii and Connecticut enacted sexual orientation anti-discrimination laws. This was soon followed by New Jersey, Vermont, and California in 1992, and Minnesota in 1993 (Harbeck, 1997).

In 1993, President Clinton took office, and his administration was a strong advocate for gay rights. The following year, in 1994, Senators James Jeffords (R-VT) and Edward Kennedy (D-MA) co-sponsored the federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) and introduced it to Congress. ENDA aimed to provide essential protection against employment discrimination based solely on sexual orientation. Despite unprecedented bipartisan support, including an endorsement from President Clinton, ENDA faced strong opposition and failed to pass in Congress. Its failure to become law was reportedly due to efforts by right-wing evangelical and fundamentalist Christians (Harbeck, 1997). Congress introduced ENDA annually from 1994 to 2015, but it never passed. In 2015, the Equality Act, which expanded on ENDA, was also introduced to the legislature, and in 2024, it has still not passed in Congress.

Although there has been little movement in Congress to protect the rights of queer people, landmark legal cases have played a critical role in advancing queer rights. In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court made a historic ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas* and declared all sodomy laws unconstitutional. In 2006, Illinois prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation, Washington State included sexual orientation protections as part of its nondiscrimination laws, and Missouri legalized homosexuality among adults.

Changes among state laws helped pave the way for the landmark Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015). This important Supreme Court decision gained nationwide attention and legalized same-sex marriage in the United States, marking a significant victory for the gay rights movement. This case affirmed the right for queer people to marry and receive the same legal protections as heterosexual couples.

Although there has been progress made over the years in the gay rights movement, the political environment in the United States continues to be contentious. There are ongoing efforts

by political groups to both advance and undermine the rights of queer individuals. For example, the Trump Administration worked to implement policies often seen as hostile to queer individuals, highlighting the fragile nature of civil rights related to the queer community (Moreau, 2018).

Among the states, non-discrimination laws differ widely and result in different levels of protection that impact the daily lives of queer individuals (Movement Advancement Project, 2023). Different aspects of life, including employment, housing, and education, are the focus of non-discrimination laws, and their presence or absence can shape the experiences of queer individuals. The varied levels of anti-discrimination laws across the United States underscore the deep-rooted presence of homophobia embedded in American society.

Homophobia in Education

Not surprisingly, homophobia exists within the public education system. The history of homophobia in education is long and complex, yet despite homophobia permeating the education profession, homosexual teachers have educated youth since the time of Socrates in ancient Greece (Harbeck, 1997). However, as detailed in the review of literature about the history of the gay rights movement, homosexuality has been criminalized, leading to persistent homophobia within the education system.

Throughout history, society has shaped teaching as a profession primarily for single women and nontraditional men, but in the early 1800s, men dominated teaching positions. After the Civil War, the teaching profession's demographics changed rapidly, as an influx of women led to a mass exodus of men. During this period, communities could no longer offer teaching wages comparable to what men could earn in other professions. Women became ideal candidates

for teaching positions, welcoming the opportunities despite earning lower wages than their male counterparts (Blount, 2003).

As women transformed teaching into a predominantly female profession, administration emerged as a more appealing opportunity for male educators. Administrative positions offered competitive wages and restored men to educational roles (Blount, 2003). By the mid-1800s, as schools desegregated students by gender, the roles of teacher and administrator evolved into more gender-specific positions, with expectations to model “acceptable mainstream sexual orientation” (Blount, 2005). Single women were hired as examples of moral virtues, while married women were urged to resign. Contrary to this practice, married men were preferred over single men, as communities often questioned the sexuality of single male teachers.

Before World War II, many administrators used their powers to eradicate any suspected homosexuals from their schools (Blount, 2003). Society expected teachers to model exemplary behavior, and homosexuality conflicted with this expectation. The perception of homosexuality as evil and sinful left many queer teachers with no opportunities to fight for their jobs (Lugg, 2003a). However, since the late 1940s, the increased visibility of queer subcultures led to debates about what constituted “immoral” conduct (Harbeck, 1997). This debate sparked new discussions, and the creation of policies aimed at accepting queer people in educational settings.

During the 1950s, a backlash against judicial leniency towards homosexuals sparked lobbyists in California to launch *Penal Code 291* and *Education Code Section 12756*. These laws required law enforcement to notify local education boards of a teacher’s arrest or detention and to immediately suspend a teacher’s credentials upon conviction for violating sex and morality statutes. Suspected involvement in criminal activity became grounds for termination, thus ruining a teacher’s reputation and credibility as a role model (Harbeck, 1997).

This legislative setback threatened the careers of queer educators and further exacerbated homophobia within the education system. At the same time, there have been positive strides toward achieving greater acceptance and inclusion of queer individuals in education. In the 1990s, awareness and advocacy for queer students' and educators' rights grew, and policies and programs aimed at creating safer and more inclusive school environments began to reflect a broader societal shift towards acceptance and equality (Rankin et al., 2019). Professional risks for queer educators remained high throughout the 1990s, despite slow-changing societal attitudes toward homosexuality.

However, despite these efforts, many educational settings still pose significant challenges for queer individuals, ranging from microaggressions to outright discrimination (Boyland et al., 2016). Microaggressions, subtle forms of discrimination, are common and profoundly impact the well-being of queer individuals in educational settings. Heteronormative cultures in schools can lead to a culture of microaggression as, according to Fox (2007), "Sexuality, as a regimen of truth, is partly constructed through a hetero/homo dichotomy, whereby heterosexuality is considered normal, natural, and inevitable and homosexuality is constructed as its binary opposite, abnormal, and perverse" (p. 501).

Research has noted that education leaders are crucial in creating an inclusive school environment and addressing homophobia (Boyland et al., 2016). School leaders' attitudes shape policies, and their actions can either perpetuate or mitigate homophobic behavior within the school setting. Supportive and proactive leaders aid in promoting inclusivity and addressing discrimination to create positive environments for all students and staff (Boyland et al., 2016).

Garvey and Rankin (2015) state that the experiences of queer individuals on school campuses significantly influence their willingness to come out and live openly. They note that a

supportive and inclusive school environment encourages students and staff to be open about their identities, while a hostile climate leads to fear and concealment. The level of “outness” among queer individuals is directly related to the perceived level of safety and acceptance in their educational settings (Garvey & Rankin, 2015).

The Psychology of Coming Out

Given the history of discrimination, many queer individuals mask their identity to avoid harm and prejudice. Coming out is a multifaceted and ongoing process that encompasses various stages throughout one’s life. Coming out is not one event but a series of disclosures that occur over time: After a person initially comes out, they come out repeatedly as they encounter new people and situations. Each disclosure, especially to loved ones and noteworthy individuals, can have a profound impact on a queer person’s psychological state. Breakwell and Jaspal (2021) emphasize that these coming-out experiences can have lasting psychological effects.

It is essential to understand the differences between coming out and the state of being out, often referred to as someone’s *degree of outness*. Understanding these distinctions is crucial because different people perceive coming-out experiences differently. Some queer individuals perceive *coming out* as positive, negative, and sometimes neutral, and the overall state of *being out* is generally associated with better psychological health outcomes (Drescher, 2004).

The process of coming out has been linked to psychological well-being. Significant coming-out experiences that are either positive or negative have the potential to profoundly influence one’s sense of identity and mental health (Lopes & Jaspal, 2024). Coming out can be viewed as a path of self-discovery and affirmation (Drescher, 2004). However, the process can also be filled with anxiety and fear, coupled with the risk of rejection, which can lead to a depressed state of mental health.

Many queer individuals do not come out; they remain in the closet. The closet represents the hiding of one's identity from loved ones, friends, and the public, which can lead to adverse psychological outcomes such as stress, anxiety, and a diminished sense of self-worth (Drescher, 2004). The decision to come out is influenced by various factors, including perceived acceptance and support in one's environment. Queer people may be out to different people and in different settings. "Coming out may be the most commonly shared cultural experience that defines the modern gay identity" (Drescher, 2004, p.4). For many queer individuals, coming out can be a liberating experience that enables them to live authentically. However, it also carries the risk of encountering adverse reactions and discrimination.

Due to stigma, queer youth often face mental health challenges, which can be impacted by bullying, discrimination, and rejection (Russell & Fish, 2016). Creating supportive environments affirming their identities is crucial for improving their mental health and well-being (Boyland et al., 2016). Educational leaders play an essential role in fostering positive school environments by working to create and implement inclusive policies and practices, such as affinity groups and inclusive curriculum that is representative of queer students. Extensive research highlights that queer individuals are at a higher risk of experiencing poor psychological health outcomes compared to the general population (Williams et al., 2021). Much of the research has focused on clinical psychological consequences such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Drescher, 2004).

The decision to come out is particularly complex for educators, who must navigate the intersection of their personal and professional lives. According to Drescher (2004):

Coming out to oneself is a subjective experience of inner recognition. It is a moment that is sometimes charged with excitement and the other times with trepidation. It is a

realization that previously unacceptable feelings or desires are part of one's self. It is, in part, a verbal process - - Putting into words previously inarticulated feelings and ideas. It is a recapturing of disavowed experiences. (p. 5)

Coming out is challenging, and coming out at work can be an even more daunting prospect, given the potential for discrimination, negative repercussions, and a lack of anti-discrimination laws protecting employment. However, coming out professionally as an educator can also be an empowering experience that enables educators to serve as role models and advocates for inclusion (Ruberg & Ruelos, 2020). Some queer educators choose to “fly under the gaydar,” avoiding disclosure to maintain a sense of safety (Kannabiran, 2022). This approach allows them to navigate their professional environments without drawing attention to their queer identities.

Like remaining closeted in other aspects of one's life, masking one's identity in the workplace may also negatively affect well-being. On the other hand, educators who come out often find that it enhances their ability to connect with students and colleagues. Thus, a more inclusive and supportive school climate can be created.

The process of coming out is a complex and ongoing journey that can significantly impact queer people's psychological health. Creating supportive environments, particularly for queer youth, is vital for fostering positive mental health and well-being. As noted, the literature states that queer individuals face higher risks of poor psychological health. This highlights the need for continued efforts to support and affirm the identities of not only queer students and educators, but all queer people.

Challenges Faced in Educational Settings

Educational leaders play a crucial role in fostering inclusive environments that impact the well-being and success of queer students and staff. Although leadership can be defined in many

ways, educational leadership will be defined by job description and positional power in this literature review section. *Educational leaders* will be used synonymously with the terms school principals, administrators, and superintendents.

Leadership in Education Today

Today, educational leadership involves strategic planning for improving schools while developing an inclusive and culturally relevant curriculum that fosters inclusive environments to support meeting the needs of diverse learners. Education leaders, such as assistant principals, principals, curriculum directors, district administrators, and superintendents, are tasked with shaping educational policies and systems that enhance student engagement and learning while maintaining an equity mindset.

Leaders who prioritize equity establish a culture of learning within their organizations. They intentionally create and maintain inclusive, culturally responsive environments that connect schools to their communities (Khalifa, 2018). Effective educational systems rely on collaboration and inclusion, recognizing the impact of community-based knowledge on school systems. Every child, caregiver, and staff member deserve an equitable education built on trust and respect.

School leaders must capitalize on individual learners' and stakeholders' perspectives and lived experiences in educational environments to enhance the teaching and learning process. In Glatter's (2006) research on school leadership, the conclusion was made that "educational leadership and management may be too restrictive a label to capture adequately the dynamics of the complex human and adaptive systems which we know as educational organizations" (p. 79). School leaders must seek to understand the complexities of human experiences and center diverse perspectives in decision-making. Leaders share the responsibility for creating conditions for others' success by establishing spaces where multiple perspectives can be shared and heard.

The role of school leaders has changed over time, and educational leaders must address systemic issues such as racism, poverty, sexism, ableism, and homophobia by building trust with marginalized groups of people (Banwo et al., 2022). These challenges redefine school leaders' responsibilities to foster equity, diversity, and inclusion in schools (Banwo et al., 2022). This interconnectedness between leadership and social responsibility shifts the focus of school leadership, hoping to establish school environments that support all students and staff.

School Environments

As detailed in this synthesis and review of anti-LGBTQIA+ laws, school environments are not immune to homophobia and discrimination. Queer students and educators often perceive their school climates as unsafe or unsupportive, which affects their ability to learn and lead effectively and authentically (Wright & Smith, 2015). Factors, including colleagues' attitudes, the presence of inclusive policies, and the overall community environment, shape these perceptions. In schools where administrators do not openly address queer issues or where discrimination prevails, queer educators may feel compelled to conceal their identities, limiting their ability to engage in their roles fully (Wright & Smith, 2015).

According to the GLSEN survey (2021), schools nationwide can be hostile environments for many LGBTQIA+ students, who regularly hear anti-queer remarks and experience victimization and discrimination. Political discourse around gender identity, inclusive literature, and relevant curricula exacerbates these issues. In the United States' current political climate, not only queer students, but also queer staff members, face unwelcoming school environments (Durate, 2020).

Queer educators navigate identity erasure and the constant threat of discrimination (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). Many LGBTQIA+ educational leaders remain "cloaked in secrecy," fearing the

repercussions of coming out (Blount, 2003). This erasure of identity leads to significant personal and professional challenges, as these educational leaders must continuously guard against revealing their authentic identities. As noted by Dresher (2004), when queer educators need to sacrifice a core part of their identity, it impacts their well-being and effectiveness (Lugg, 2003). School environments for public educators are evolving (Wright et al., 2019), with improvements and many challenges remaining. Over time, school districts have created and implemented anti-discrimination policies, affinity groups for queer staff, and progressive hiring practices based on anti-bias principles. However, the political landscape in the United States continues to impact school climates in ways that oppose welcoming and inclusive environments.

The Socio-Political Context of Public Schools

Amid the current socio-political context, public school leaders face multiple challenges and changes in a polarized nation. Instead of creating space for civil engagement and critical thinking, divisiveness has intruded on public discourse. Issues like queer culture, race, and religion have led states legislatures to ban books, shows, and words (Ates & Brooks, 2023). Navigating complex situations is a daily task for educational leaders. Socialization leads us to believe that schools are naturally fair and neutral, *but they are not*. When stakeholders, influenced by the current socio-political context, protest or complain about school practices, school leaders are tasked with responding.

In a 2022 study, Rogers et al. noted that public schools have increasingly become targets of conservative political groups in the United States, focusing on topics such as critical race theory and the issues surrounding sexual and gender identities. Furthermore, Rogers et al. (2022) highlight that “Schools also are impacted by political conflict tied to the growing partisan divides in our society. These political conflicts have created a broad chilling effect that has limited

opportunities for students to practice respectful dialogue on controversial topics and made it harder to address rampant misinformation” (p. 1).

The increased partisanship and hostile attitudes of politicians and political rhetoric have grown since the Trump Administration (2016), and there is evidence (Rogers et al., 2022) that these dynamics have begun to infiltrate public schools and exacerbate pre-existing disparities. The data obtained from Rogers et al.’s (2022) research are telling and paint a picture of the current socio-political context influencing public schools:

More than two-thirds (69%) of principals surveyed reported substantial political conflict over hot-button issues. In many schools, parents or community members have sought to limit or challenge: Teaching about issues of race and racism (50%); Policies and practices related to LGBTQ+ student rights (48%); Student access to books in the school library (33%); or Social Emotional Learning (39%). (p. 7)

Among the current political discourse impacting schools, principals also reported an increase in harassment of queer youth (Rogers et al., 2022).

This political conflict adds to the complexity of issues leaders face in public school settings. When school leaders are tasked with creating equitable and inclusive environments, they must also navigate the socio-political challenges of teaching about race, racism, and diversity. The embedded history of homophobia in education, underpinned by discriminatory laws and practices, has converged with the current political climate in the United States to create challenging circumstances for educational leaders today.

Gaps in Literature

Despite the growing body of literature on queer issues in education, significant gaps remain. There is a need for more research on the specific experiences of queer educational

leaders, particularly in terms of how their identities impact their leadership practices and interactions with others. In Tooms (2007) article, *The Right Kind of Queer: Fit and the Politics of School Leadership*, it is noted that:

There is a tremendous and often overlooked irony regarding the national conversations about social justice issues within educational administration. Although it is currently chic for scholars to discuss social justice as a contextual framework, there is still a palpable discomfort within many circles of our professional fraternity when it comes to thinking, reading, and talking about the struggles of one particular group: queers. (p. 601)

Over the past three decades, researchers have studied various aspects of the queer experience throughout many sectors of public life, including public education. Several studies focus on the experiences of queer educators: only sometimes distinguishing between teachers and administrators. The experiences of queer educational *leaders* have been largely overlooked.

There is a need for research to tell the stories of the personal and professional lives of queer school administrators. Queer educational leaders exist in public schools today. Researchers focused on the history of homophobia and queerness in public schools (Blount, 2003; Lugg, 2003a, 2003b) and researchers detailing laws and the gay rights movement (Harbeck, 1997) have added to the body of literature on queer educational leaders. However, very few researchers have added to the body of empirical research on the experiences of working queer administrators (deLeon & Brunner, 2009, 2013; Denton, 2009; Fraynd & Capper, 2003; Hernandez, 2009; Jones-Redmond, 2007; Watkins & Mooney, 2022). This lack of research underscores the importance of understanding how queer leaders' experiences shape their well-being given the challenges of today's public schools. Gaining a better understanding of how queer educational

leaders navigate issues in conflict with their human rights while upholding their responsibilities as leaders is a topic worth additional inquiry and research.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

“There will not be a magic day when we wake up and it’s now okay to express ourselves publicly. We make that day by doing things publicly until it’s simply the way things are.” - Tammy Baldwin

*Tammy Baldwin is a United States Senator.
She was the first openly lesbian woman elected to the Wisconsin State Assembly in 1993.*

I am a queer educational leader, and I am committed to understanding how identity, intersectionality, and inclusion impact the culture in public schools as well as those who work within those systems. I often wonder about the transformative effects of creating spaces in our schools so that everyone’s uniqueness is celebrated authentically. I envision school environments where children and adults learn and grow into their true selves without masking their personal qualities or abilities.

As I detailed in the literature synthesis, educational leaders face many socio-political issues across the landscape of a divided country (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021), which add to the complexity of their daily work. Keeping an inclusive vision at the forefront of my leadership work, I want to understand better how other queer educational leaders navigate living into their identity at a time when queerness is under political attack (Kannabiran, 2022). Being part of the queer community and an educational leader, I am particularly interested and invested (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) in the following research questions:

RQ1: How do queer educational leaders’ lived experiences impact or inform their leadership in public schools?

RQ2: How do queer educational leaders navigate living into their identity at a time when queerness is under political scrutiny?

Research Design

For my research, I explored the phenomenon of queer educational leadership in today's polarized political landscape, using a phenomenological multiple case study design, a form of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007). This approach is particularly appropriate due to the sensitive nature of the study and its grounding in the context of anti-discriminatory policies and societal attitudes and norms.

Qualitative research methods are “pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 2), making them particularly suitable for this study. Using qualitative methods allowed me to investigate and understand the complexity of social interactions expressed in daily life. This method helped me understand the phenomena from the inside and obtain rich data, as Van Manen (1990) noted. The phenomenological approach is particularly suitable for exploring, describing, and analyzing the meanings of individual lived experiences. Van Manen (1990) outlines six steps for conducting a phenomenological study:

- (1) Turning to the nature of lived experience, which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
- (2) Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
- (3) Reflecting on the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon;
- (4) Describe the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
- (5) Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relationship to the phenomenon;
- (6) Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

In my research, I focused primarily on the first four steps described by Van Manen (1990) because they are the most pertinent to my study, while not neglecting the last two.

Case Study

Using a case study framework helped me explore and better understand the essence of what it is like to be a queer educational leader in today's political environment. Participants were able to share multiple perspectives throughout the interview process, which led to a deeper understanding of the research questions (Patton, 2014). A case study approach enabled me to integrate many methods for exploring a contemporary situation, aiming to understand the nature of a complex social phenomenon.

Yin (2009) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). Essentially, the case-study approach allowed me to provide a more holistic understanding of the experiences of queer educational leaders. I utilized a multiple-case study design for this study, one intended to investigate several cases to study a phenomenon. Using a multiple-case study design allowed me to do comparative analysis and hold a focus group with participants to check for themes.

Setting and Participants

The study was set in Oregon, and participants were selected from across the state. I chose to use the state of Oregon as the study's setting rather than narrow the focus to a specific community due to the sensitive nature of the research topic. To maintain participant confidentiality and minimize the potential risk of identification, participants were chosen from the 1,200 public K-12 schools distributed across 197 school districts and 19 education service districts in Oregon. The combined workforce of teachers, administrators, and other school and district staff across these schools and districts exceeds 63,000 individuals (ODE, 2024). I

selected Oregon because it is the state where I live, and it is important to me to ground my study in relevant practice.

Purposive sampling was used to select the study participants. This means that specific decisions were made concerning prospective participants for the study because they were able to purposefully inform understandings of the research questions and phenomena guiding the study (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological research typically focuses on relatively smaller sample sizes to understand the full complexity of the targeted population's experience. Thus, I located and selected participants who are experiencing the phenomenon instead of soliciting a larger sample chosen randomly with the intent of generalizing findings to the representative population. Initially, nine participants were recruited for this study. However, one participant dropped out of the study due to fear of ramifications in their workplace. Thus, the study was completed with eight participants.

I used the snowball method of sampling to identify all potential participants. Because of the sensitive nature of the study and possible risks, including the lack of job protections facing the participants, I began by contacting colleagues whom I knew had already come out professionally as queer educational leaders and asked them to consider referring additional participants—friends, colleagues, relatives, or acquaintances who were also queer educational leaders—for participation in the study.

The participants were selected according to the following criteria:

1. They were residents of the state of Oregon.
2. They were current public educational leaders.
3. They self-identified as part of the queer community.

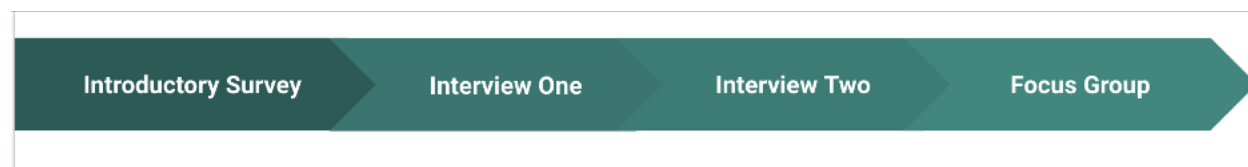
I planned recruitment for participation in the study primarily from educational leaders who were serving in administrative positions, including superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, and assistant principals.

Sources of Data and Data Collection Plan

In the end, eight participants participated in the multiple case study, and data were collected through an iterative cycle that included: introductory survey, two interviews, and a focus group. Figure 2 outlines the process used for data collection.

Figure 2

Data Collection Process



I collected data over a seven-month period of time. Table 1 lists the commitment each participant made to participate in the study. The time commitment through the data collection process was about 3 ½ hours or 220 minutes over seven months.

Table 1

Participant Time Commitment

Data Source	Month	Time Commitment
Introductory Survey	July 2024	10 minutes
Interview One	September 2024	45 minutes
Member Check Survey One	September 2024	20 minutes
Interview Two	November 2024	45 minutes

Member Check Survey Two	November 2024	20 minutes
Focus Group	January 2025	60 minutes
Member Check Survey Three	January 2025	20 minutes
Total		220 minutes

Introductory Survey

Because purposeful sampling was used along with a snowball method, initial participants were given a survey prior to their first interview. The survey helped to distinguish if the individual was an appropriate participant for the study. The survey gave a brief overview of the research and research questions and asked each participant the following questions:

- (1) Name:
- (2) Current Job Title:
- (3) Do you live in Oregon?
- (4) Do you identify as part of the queer community?
- (5) Would you be willing to contact other queer educational leaders in Oregon who might be interested in this study to provide them with my contact information?
- (6) What is your preferred method of contact? (phone, email, text)
- (7) Is there anything else you would like me to know about you?

After this introductory survey was completed by the first few participants selected through purposeful sampling from colleagues whom I already knew met the inclusion criteria, I was able to reach out to more potential participants through the snowball method. Then, I began to select

appropriate participants for the case studies. I started sending introductory surveys to possible participants in August 2024.

Interviews

Next, the eight selected participants were invited for interviews. Each participant participated in two in-person semi-structured interviews: one in November 2024 and one in December 2024 or January 2025. The interviews were approximately 45 minutes in length. For my interview data collection procedures, I established content questions with probes, “reminders to the researcher to ask for more information” (Creswell, 2016, p. 131). The interviews took place in-person and one-on-one (Creswell, 2016). For the first interview, I used the following questions:

- (1) When in your life did you come to realize you are queer?

Probe: Please tell me more about...

- (2) How did you come to realize you are queer?

Probe: Tell me what you mean when you say...

- (3) What is your coming out story?

Probe: What was your school experience like?

- (4) What drew you to a career in education?

For the following few questions, I'd like to hear about successes and challenges....And let's start with...

- (5) How would you describe your overall experience in the profession as a queer educator?

Probe: Please tell me more about...

- (6) How does being queer shape your personal relationship?

Probe: Please tell me more about...

- (7) How does being a queer educator shape your professional relationships with staff members and students?

Probe: Please tell me more about...

- (8) Is there anything I didn't ask you that you wished I had asked?

After the first round of interviews, I coded the data and created a new set of semi-structured questions for the second interview. The questions used for the second set of interviews were:

- (1) Since we met last, what has come up for you in regards to this topic?
- (2) Trump is widely expected to quickly issue executive orders including ones that change discrimination protections for queer Americans. Can you share your thoughts on how political discussions or policies around queer rights have impacted you personally as a queer educator?
- (3) How do you balance your authenticity as a queer leader with the potential risks that might come from external pressures?
- (4) What role do you think queer educational leaders should play in advocating for queer students and educators when political opposition or scrutiny is at its height?
- (5) How do you take care of your mental and emotional well-being while navigating the stress and challenges of being a queer leader during politically charged times?

Probe: What strategies or resources have helped you remain resilient and authentic in the face of political scrutiny?

- (6) How do you think your experiences as a queer leader could be used to inspire or support future generations of queer educators?

Probe: What advice would you offer to other queer educators who aspire to take on leadership roles in public schools?

- (7) What changes or actions do you think are necessary at a policy level to better support queer educational leaders in the current political climate?
- (8) What legacy do you hope to leave as a queer leader in education, particularly in relation to how queer identities are understood and supported in schools?
- (9) Is there anything I didn't ask you that you wished I had asked?

I used Otter AI to record and transcribe the session during both interviews. After each interview, I downloaded the transcript and edited it for accuracy. A total of 272 pages of transcripts were collected from the interviews. I used the edited transcript to create a summary of the interview that I sent to each participant to allow for follow-up member checking. Member checking helped me check the for accuracy in my coding by allowing each participant to edit or expand on their answers while simultaneously enabling me to have another touch point with each participant to build positive researcher and participant rapport.

Focus Group

After the two interviews and surveys, I held two focus groups in March 2025. The focus groups were approximately 1 hour long and included seven of the participants from the case studies. For the focus group, I presented the common themes I found in the data from the individual interviews. In this way, the focus group allowed “participants to clarify their own and other’s perspectives” (Patton, 2014, p. 477).

To capture data during the focus group, I again used Otter AI to record and transcribe the conversation. I also took notes or jottings during the focus group to capture more aspects of human interaction. I listened as the conversation happened, took jottings, and made note of any

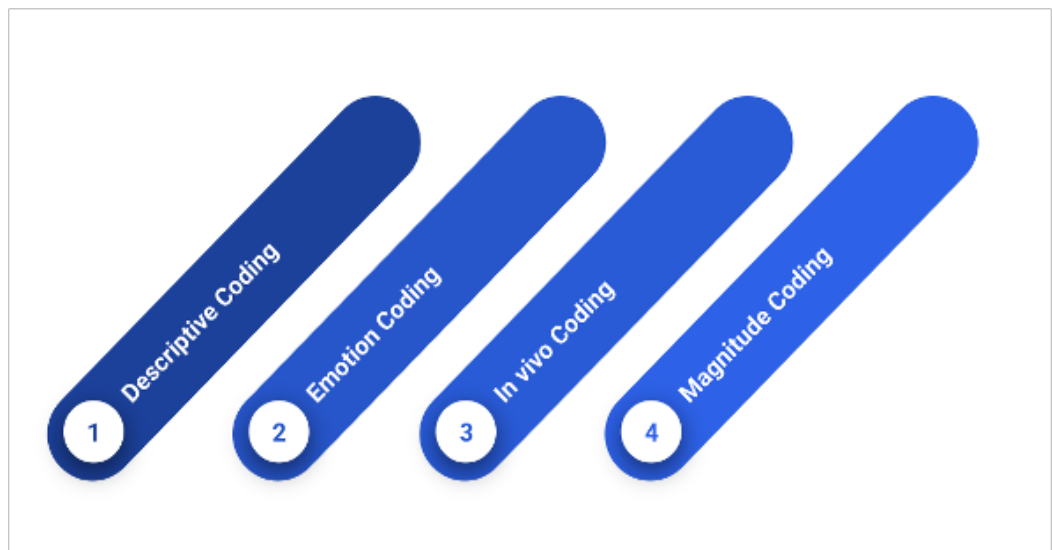
key topics, phrases, keywords, or themes in the dialogue. I used jotting because it allowed me to listen more thoroughly and actively pay better attention to what was happening in the meeting. This is in accordance with what is described by Lofland and Lofland (1995), “participant observation, then, always involves the interweaving of looking and listening, and watching and asking” (p.19). As with the interviews, I downloaded and edited the transcript for accuracy. I sent the edited transcript to each participant after the focus group to allow for one last follow-up member checking.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with identifying key themes and patterns from the collected data using Dedoose by thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I continued the process of phenomenological reduction by identifying the essence of the phenomenon under study and coding the data using keywords and emergent themes. Developing the coding process in Dedoose allowed me to identify categories by labeling emerging patterns in the data. After initial coding was completed using Dedoose, I also coded the transcripts manually, by hand. I did this to better understand the phenomena. I coded the data for each interview data set through four cycles: descriptive, emotion, in vivo, and magnitude. I then used my coded notes and Dedoose to look for themes and relationships between the codes, as described below.

Figure 3

Coding Cycles



Cycle 1: Descriptive Coding

Descriptive coding is a technique that involves dissecting core phenomena to address research questions effectively. It functions as a way to categorize or organize the information within the data (Saldaña, 2013). Descriptive codes were used for the first coding cycle after each interview and focus group. This descriptive coding was also used to produce and add texture to the vignettes of leaders presented in the results chapter.

Cycle 2: Emotion Coding

I used emotion codes to classify the range of feelings experienced by queer educators. Following Saldaña's (2013) guidance, emotion coding is a practical approach to delving into personal and interpersonal experiences. I input my jottings from the focus group and the codes for emotion.

Cycle 3: In Vivo Coding

For my third cycle, I used in vivo coding techniques, as Saldaña (2013) outlined, to capture the essence of participants' experiences. This approach entailed using participants' words or phrases as codes. This cycle was beneficial when highlighting themes used for discussion in the focus group.

Cycle 4: Magnitude Coding

Magnitude coding was used for my fourth cycle to discern and emphasize the frequency of words used by queer educators during the interview process. This method allowed me to examine the more prevalent experiences by using word frequency (Saldaña, 2013).

Four coding cycles with each interview transcript allowed me to extrapolate three major themes from the data. I was able to use analytic member checking (Brantlinger et al., 2005) throughout the interview process. After I developed themes from the interview data, I was able to

get feedback on the themes from the participants during our focus group sessions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This process added to the thematic analysis approach for analyzing the qualitative data and allowed for particularizability (Brantlinger et al., 2005), in which thick descriptions of the case studies are detailed.

Research Integrity

I designed my study to triangulate sources of data. Participants were involved in surveying, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups with embedded member checking. The triangulated transcript data is presented visually in the form of figures, tables and data visualizations. Qualitative visualizations such as word clouds, quotes, and word streams are used to display data from the many data sources creatively (Whittemore et al., 2001).

Throughout the collection of data, sensitivity to the privacy of participants (Whittemore et al., 2001) was of utmost importance. As previously noted, I have described the setting as “the state of Oregon” to reduce the potential identification of participants. To ensure confidentiality, each participant is identified as leader A, B, C, etcetera. All pronouns in the reporting were changed to they/them. To further maintain privacy, participants were given the choice of whether to disclose their identity to the other focus group members. Confidentiality agreements were put in place for the focus group. Even with these protections in place, one participant left the study in the winter of 2025 out of fear for job protections.

As previously stated, my interest in the topic and research questions stem from my own experiences as a queer educational leader. To maintain research integrity, I needed to check for researcher effects (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To do this, I kept my own research journal to record my assumptions, biases, and beliefs throughout the research process. This approach is

consistent with researcher reflexivity, as described by Brantlinger et al. (2005), as I attempted to self-disclose my thought processes throughout the research.

It is also important to note that, for the purposes of this study, I am an insider on the topic. As an insider, I bring unique sensitivity to the research topic. However, my preconceived notions may lead to bias and human error because I am an insider. It was important for me to acknowledge biases that arose throughout the process and record them in my research journal. I was also keenly aware of the potential harmful effects on me as a researcher in relation to secondary trauma when participants shared negative aspects of their experiences as queer educators.

Summary of Methodology

During a time where queerness is under political scrutiny, I sought to discover the lived experiences of queer educational leaders by answering the following two research questions:

RQ1: How do queer educational leaders' lived experiences impact or inform their leadership in public schools?

RQ2: How do queer educational leaders navigate living into their identity at a time when queerness is under political scrutiny?

I employed qualitative methods using a multiple case study design to understand better the phenomenon of the lived experiences of queer leaders in education throughout the state of Oregon.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

“I believe that telling our stories, first to ourselves and then to one another and the world, is a revolutionary act.” - Janet Mock

*Janet Mock is a writer and television producer.
She is a transgender woman and transgender rights activist.*

The main objective of this phenomenological study was to better understand the experiences of queer leaders in education. To accomplish this purpose, interviews were conducted with eight queer leaders in education throughout the state of Oregon. Participants were asked to reflect upon their personal experiences related to their queerness, coming out journey, and leadership in public education. The information reported in this chapter was gathered from interviews and focus groups captured in 272 pages of transcripts.

Throughout this study, participant safety was a top priority, and to that end, many protections were put in place to de-identify participants. In the reporting of the results, I identify participants by leader A, B, C, etcetera. To further add anonymity, I changed all pronouns to they/them.

This chapter is divided into six sections. The first section is short narratives summarizing the experiences of each participant in their roles as leaders in education. Each narrative details the experiences of queer leaders to the greatest extent possible without disclosing their identity or location in Oregon. To do this, the narratives are reported in a similar, formulaic manner. The following sections present results from four different cycles of qualitative coding techniques using various data visualization tools. The last section defines the overarching themes identified from this multi-case study.

Queer Leader Narratives – Introducing the Participants

As this dissertation could not exist were it not for people's courage and willingness to share their experiences, I believe it is both important and respectful to spend a little time introducing each of the participants before diving into the analysis and findings.

Leader A

Leader A's story as a queer leader in education is one of navigating a complex landscape of identity, advocacy, and the persistent pursuit of safety. As an administrator in public education, Leader A's journey is marked by both triumphs and challenges and offers a glimpse into the realities faced by queer individuals in positions of leadership.

Leader A's professional identity is intertwined with their personal journey to acceptance. Although they prefer to be called by their chosen name privately, they continue to use their birth name professionally because, as they say, "that's what everyone knows me as." This "name switch" symbolizes the balancing act they perform, navigating between their authentic self and the expectations of their professional role.

As a leader, Leader A demonstrates remarkable courage in advocating for change. They see themselves as a "safe person on campus", and someone who is a source of support for queer students navigating their own identities. Leader A has actively challenged discriminatory practices in their school district, ensuring that "we don't just direct all of the queer bias incidents to the queer person." They advocate for inclusion and have taken their concerns to the district office, advocating for gender-neutral restrooms.

However, Leader A's path is not without obstacles. They recall an incident at school during a parent meeting where the parent told them they "didn't want to hear my gay ass view," a reminder of the stigma that persists. In a prior position in another school district in Oregon, Leader A endured the daily use of the "f slur", which they noted as a demoralizing experience

that fueled their determination to create safer, more inclusive environments. Yet, despite these challenges, Leader A remains resilient and determined. Leader A noted that they are ever-vigilant even in the face of progress in their new school district. They admit, “I feel like I’m never safe anywhere I go,” a sentiment that underscores the emotional labor required to navigate a world that is not always accepting.

Leader A relies on a strong support system to cope with these challenges. A current colleague provides a safe space for dialogue and support, and their partner offers solace and understanding, helping them navigate the emotional toll of their work.

Leader A’s story is a reminder of the ongoing need for advocacy, systemic change, and supportive communities to ensure the safety and well-being of queer individuals in education. Their experiences highlight the complexities of being a queer leader, navigating identity, advocating for change, and striving for safety in a world that is not always accepting.

Leader B

Leader B’s experiences as a queer leader in education reveal a narrative of authenticity, advocacy, and safety within a politically charged environment, similar to those expressed by Leader A. Leader B has navigated these challenges with a blend of caution and determination while trying to create an inclusive environment.

Leader B’s interview was marked by a noticeable tension between their commitment to authenticity and their very real fears about potential repercussions. They described feeling like they were “on the edge of a cliff,” not knowing what was going to happen or how they would be impacted as an out person in a conservative community. This feeling of uncertainty that they expressed was a recurring theme during their interviews, especially when discussing the potential removal of discrimination protections for queer Americans.

One of the primary challenges Leader B noted was balancing their visibility as a queer leader with the need to protect themselves and their family. They admitted to sometimes “shrinking back” and not being as present as they should be when speaking publicly or when parents of students were around due to fears of negative perceptions or encounters. Despite these fears, Leader B remained solid in their commitment to authenticity, explaining that it was “really hard for me to not be authentic.” They believed their visibility was essential for every child, providing a model of kindness and caring to counter the types of stereotypes that some children might have learned at home.

Leader B played a crucial role in advocating for queer students and staff, often feeling a significant amount of pressure to balance their own safety with the need to be an ally for others. They spoke of having to “show up” for their staff and help them feel safe enough to interrupt homophobic or inappropriate conversations. Leader B also emphasized the importance of correcting people’s pronoun usage and ensuring that queer staff felt supported.

Leader B’s approach to self-care involved a combination of emotional distancing and active engagement with supportive communities. They admitted that sometimes they did not think about the potential threats and challenges. Leader B also relies on a therapist, a supportive community of teachers, and the joy they found in their interactions with elementary school children. They noted that the children’s joy was a counterbalance to the stress and fear they experienced. Leader B described how going to a classroom or sitting with kids at lunch could lift their spirits and remind them of the importance of their work.

They hope to leave a legacy where queer identities are understood and supported in schools, where people can simply exist without controversy. They want to be remembered as someone who cared for all kids and made changes, regardless of how others felt about them.

Leader C

Leader C's reflections as a queer educational leader provide insight to the challenges that are inherent in advocating for inclusivity while navigating the shifting dynamics of social acceptance. Their narrative encompasses personal experiences, professional challenges, and proactive strategies for fostering supportive environments for queer students and educators.

Leader C's early life experiences significantly shaped their empathy and commitment to educational equity. They knew they were queer from middle school, but they did not acknowledge this until after college. As a twin, the first person they came out to was their twin sister. They grew up in a split household and were poor, and they had a nontraditional path to becoming a leader in education. They were initially hired to work in athletics. Leader C quickly realized that the graduation rates for students of color and queer students were significantly lower. This awareness fueled their passion for change and set them toward educational leadership.

The decision to be openly queer in their current role was a calculated one, acknowledging the potential risks involved. "I'm just going to be myself," they said, demonstrating their commitment to authenticity. Before applying for their position, they researched the school board to gauge a likely response. They were relieved to find a mix of liberal and conservative members open to learning and growing. They took their current position knowing it would be interesting to be in a similar demographic to where they grew up and wanted to see what they could do with their leadership.

Leader C's authenticity has profoundly impacted the school district where they work. They shared how conservative board members supported them and their partner. They recalled a specific incident early in their tenure when a board member commented about a transgender

student at prom. Leader C quickly addressed the issue, reminding the board of their commitment to accepting all students: “We’re going to accept anyone that walks through our doors.” They later talked with the board member, using it as a learning opportunity.

Even so, Leader C’s role was not without significant challenges. They have a detailed safety plan because a person did not like them. They are not allowed to be in the district by themselves after dark. They expressed frustration that people focused on who they slept with instead of getting to know them: “Get to know me, I think you’d have a better understanding than really focusing on who I sleep with, to be very honest with you.”

Leader C emphasized the importance of self-care and maintaining a strong support system to cope with the stress and challenges. They also prioritized having good people around them, such as family. They spend ten minutes to an hour meditating every day. They engaged in activities such as working out, listening to music, and spending time outdoors. In addition to self-care, they believed in the importance of counseling.

Leader C’s actions are motivated by the challenges they have overcome. Their work corresponds to their desire to make schools safer for all students.

Leader D

Leader D’s path through education reveals a navigation of professional aspirations and personal identity within an evolving journey of acceptance. Their narrative encompasses initial denial and concealment, experiences of discrimination, and eventual empowerment through finding their voice and authenticity.

Leader D’s personal journey began in self-denial, rooted in their college years and involvement in a university ministry. During that time, they grappled with their identity, suppressing their true self for self-preservation. “So I was ... kind of in a self-denial phase where

I was going to go into the ministry. And so really denial,” they recalled, highlighting the internal conflict between their identity and the expectations of their environment. This period of denial lasted several years, with Leader D remaining closeted to family, friends, and colleagues.

Moving out of state marked a turning point for Leader D, giving them a fresh start and the courage to come out to colleagues. However, this decision came with severe consequences. Despite their competence and experience in their work, they faced discrimination and were ultimately “fired for my orientation.” This experience triggered self-doubt and internalized homophobia, causing them to question their worthiness. This led to a period of professional and personal turmoil. As Leader D stated, it caused “a lot of self-hate...internalized homophobia, kind of questioning everything about who I am, whether I was worthy of acceptance, whether I was worthy of being who I am.”

In subsequent educational positions, Leader D retreated back into the closet, becoming guarded to disguise their personal life. “I think I was back in the closet instantly at the next job, the next two jobs, actually, so walls instantly went back up,” they explained, highlighting the emotional toll of concealing their identity. Years later, after building trust and rapport with friends, they revealed their true self to a select few.

After a move to a conservative school district, Leader D was presented with new challenges. Despite making their sexual orientation clear during their interview process, they remained cautious and guarded. They waited until three years into their tenure to share their engagement to a same-sex partner. However, this announcement was not universally embraced, leading them to realize the need to move to a new community.

Despite these challenges, Leader D remained committed to a career in education, driven by a desire to impact students on a broader scale. Originally intending to become a counselor,

they transitioned into educational leadership after being asked to serve as a principal. “And the reason that I think education, educational leadership, has stuck is that I’ve learned about my ability to impact student systems...because I can impact change on a much broader scale.”

Leader D has found a supportive and affirming environment where they can thrive as an authentic leader. “Only now, six months into a job, I, for the first time in 25 years, feel supported and aligned to my values,” they noted, discussing the transformative power of acceptance in their new community. In this new role, they experienced a sense of belonging, connection, and empowerment that had been missing throughout their career. “I showed up, and it was like, oh my God, family, we’re here!”

Although they feel supported in their current role, Leader D has also faced some political opposition, specifically from some local protesters. Leader D said, “Authenticity needs to come first. And I understand that there will be opposition.” Leader D’s story emphasizes the power of authenticity and resilience and the importance of finding environments where individuals can be their true selves.

Leader E

Leader E’s reflections as a queer leader in education illustrate a deep commitment to fostering inclusivity and equity for queer students and educators, while also acknowledging the personal and professional challenges that come with being an out leader.

From a young age, Leader E recognized themselves as queer, even without having the language to describe it. “I knew that I was a queer person, and I didn’t have those words for it, but I knew when I was at 11 years old,” they recalled, describing a childhood awareness of being different. Growing up in a time and community where it was unsafe to be out, Leader E remained closeted

through college and into their early career. They navigated this period with a sense of being “odd,” a label they used to define their growing-up experiences.

As a young professional, Leader E worked in conservative suburban communities where it was not safe to be openly queer. They consciously censored themselves, avoiding mentioning their personal life or family. “Who I was at home was very different than who I was at school,” Leader E explained, bringing to the forefront the emotional toll of living a double life. It was not until they were 40 years old that they finally came out to their family, a decision prompted by falling in love with someone of the same sex. This experience was described as “the best thing ever.” They described it as a “profound sense of liberation and authenticity.”

Even after coming out, Leader E continued to navigate the complexities of being a queer leader in education. They recognized the privilege of presenting as straight, which allowed them to bridge divides and foster understanding in more conservative communities. “I can help people bridge into understanding and not being so scared,” they noted, emphasizing their unique position to facilitate dialogue and acceptance. However, Leader E also acknowledged the need sometimes to censor themselves, being intentional about with whom they share their personal life to avoid diverting from the work.

Leader E’s commitment to creating inclusive school environments is unwavering. They believed that educators are responsible for affirming and acknowledging all students’ identities, and they noted that belonging leads to more substantial learning outcomes. They also recognized the heightened vulnerability of trans educators and students, feeling a profound responsibility to step into conversations and advocate for their protection.

In their role as an administrator, Leader E has been instrumental in implementing policies and practices that support queer students in their school district. They celebrated small but

significant victories, such as creating a single-stall bathroom that all children can access and use. “Everybody uses a single stall restroom that has been on a plane, right? Why is it suddenly different in the school building?” they questioned, noting the resistance they have encountered to inclusive facilities. Leader E expressed gratitude for working in a school district with policies that allowed children to use facilities aligned with their identity and gender.

Navigating the current political divide has been a significant challenge for Leader E. They emphasized the importance of being strategic in engaging in conversations, focusing on critical issues while avoiding unproductive debates. “I’m really done having conversations about bathrooms,” they said.

Despite the challenges, Leader E has remained resilient, grounded in their belief in public education and democracy. “I deeply believe in public education as a foundation of democracy. I deeply believe in democracy,” they affirmed their leadership role. They focus on the good in humanity, believing that focusing on the right things leads to positive growth and outcomes.

Looking to the future, Leader E hopes their experiences can inspire and support future queer leaders in education. “I didn’t think you could be gay and a principal of an elementary school,” they admitted, emphasizing the importance of visibility and representation. Leader E believed that being able to show up as their whole self makes them more authentic and effective in their work, fostering environments where kids and families can thrive. Leader E wants their legacy to normalize queer identities and promote a richer, more diverse cultural landscape in schools and communities. They want students and families they have worked with to be grateful for their time together and hopeful about their possibilities.

Leader F

Leader F's story reveals a journey of self-discovery, resilience, and advocacy within the educational system. Both personal struggles and professional triumphs mark it. Their experiences highlight the complexities of reconciling faith, sexuality, and career aspirations in environments that range from conservative to affirming.

Leader F's early life was steeped in conservative evangelical beliefs in the backwoods of Appalachia, where they heard "hundreds of times" that being gay was an abomination. This upbringing created a deep internal conflict, as they felt same-sex desires during puberty but feared eternal damnation. Lacking the language to understand themselves and facing immense societal pressure, Leader F entered into a mixed-orientation marriage, desperately trying to "pray away the gay." This period was marked by intense internal struggle and unhappiness, leading to suicidal thoughts and depression. They said they "did everything" in their power not to be gay.

The turning point came in Leader F's early 40s when they realized they could no longer suppress their true identity. They first confided in their then-heterosexual partner, leading to a year-long exploration of a mixed-orientation marriage. Ultimately, they divorced, acknowledging that it was unfair to both of them to continue living a lie. Soon after, Leader F connected with the Gay Christian Network, where they found solace and community. This led to a spontaneous decision to resign from their university professor position and move to Oregon to be with someone they met online.

Professionally, Leader F's experiences varied greatly depending on the environment. During their years as elementary principal, they were closeted, presenting as straight. Interestingly, after coming out, many colleagues revealed that they had always suspected Leader F was gay, suggesting that their attempts at concealment were not as successful as they thought.

After moving to Oregon, Leader F initially remained closeted professionally, fearing they could be fired for being gay, as there were no protections for gay educators in Virginia. However, a turning point occurred when the Obama administration issued guidance on trans students' rights. This sparked intense community backlash, with "awful things" being said. Leader F shared their coming-out story with vocal critics to foster understanding, hoping it would ease tensions. Unfortunately, the community became even less accepting, leading to a board election that resulted in a majority vote to oust the "gay administrator that supports trans people."

After this experience, Leader F intentionally came out during an interview for a new job. Since then, Leader F has described it as "amazing not to have to be hidden or secretive or try to pretend to be something that I wasn't." In their personal life, coming out was described as "incredibly free," like the "curtain had finally closed," and they could stop being an actor. This newfound authenticity extended to their professional relationships, except for the "religious right community," which Leader F said were "just awful."

In response to the discrimination they experienced, Leader F founded a queer educator affinity group and a queer youth and educator allies' network, becoming a go-to resource for queer issues in their region. They also became involved with the Oregon Department of Education and other organizations, using their experiences to advocate for queer equity. Despite the strong legal protections in Oregon, Leader F acknowledged the ongoing need for advocacy and education to ensure the safety and well-being of queer individuals in schools. They emphasized the importance of equipping people with the language and resources to be strong allies and creating a climate where everyone can thrive.

Leader G

Leader G's narrative reveals the multilayered experiences of a queer educational leader navigating the complexities of community support. Leader G realized they were queer as early as eight years old, with more confirmation around ages 12 or 13. However, this realization remained buried for much of their life due to societal pressures and a lack of acceptance. When Leader G was around 13, their mom asked if they were queer, but they panicked and denied it.

As a student preparing to be an educator, Leader G encountered repeated warnings about the potential problems of being openly queer in schools. This created a sense of shame and fear that led them to remain closeted until they were around 30 years old. Even then, coming out was a gradual process, influenced by the support of affinity groups and the encouragement of friends. Leader G described how, after implementing affinity groups, they gained the confidence to come out.

As an administrator, Leader G grappled with balancing their authenticity with potential political risks within their work community. Under a different presidential administration, they felt safer taking risks while working for a more conservative school district. However, with changing discrimination protections, they grew nervous about employment and where they chose to be employed, highlighting the instability of queer rights. Leader G acknowledged the difficulty of this balance, expressing a willingness to step back into a classroom-based role if they felt they were compromising their ethics or who they are. They explained they had spent many years doing what others wanted and were no longer willing to do so.

When encountering resistance or opposition, Leader G found that directly addressing the issue often led to a quick backing down. They emphasized the importance of visibility in normalizing queer identities, making it harder to discriminate against queer individuals. As

Leader G stated, “If it normalizes that [queerness] across the board, then I think it’s much harder to say, like these people can’t work here.”

During times of political scrutiny and divisiveness, Leader G found comfort and grounding in their queer friends and community. They described this support system as a way to “fill your bucket and then return,” providing a sense of connectedness and family that allowed them to navigate challenging situations. Leader G also noted the importance of having core folks to confide in, problem-solve with, and hold them accountable.

Leader G hopes to leave a legacy of safe and inclusive spaces for students and staff. They shared a story about increasing rainbow decorations after a parent complained during Pride Week, illustrating their commitment to creating visible and affirming environments. Leader G emphasized the importance of administrators knowing they can be themselves, regardless of their family structure or identity. They aimed to create a district-level climate where everyone feels safe and comfortable bringing their families to events, fostering a sense of belonging and retention. Leader G wants queer identities to be understood and supported in schools.

Leader G also noted the need for policy-level actions to support queer leaders better, recalling that protections alone are not enough. They pointed out the nuances within the rules and the gray areas around harassment that can still be harmful.

Leader H

Leader H’s narrative unveils a unique moment of queer realization, resilience in the face of trauma, and the navigation of unaccepting social and professional landscapes. Leader H’s queer realization came most distinctly in the last five years. This late discovery was significantly influenced by a history of intense and horrific sexual trauma, which led them to disconnect from their body and suppress their sexuality. They stated, “My story is a lot about trying to not feel my

body or be connected to my body in any way.” The trauma created a barrier to self-awareness and safety, delaying their understanding and acceptance of their queer identity.

When recalling childhood experiences in school, Leader H noted the difficulty of separating their queer identity from the overlaying trauma. They explained that their “awareness of my sexuality was incredibly low” because they “were just trying to be not touched.” The constant sexualization they experienced made it challenging to piece apart their identity, as their primary focus was on safety and survival.

Leader H’s coming out story began with dating someone of the same sex, which triggered varied responses from people at work within the school district. They observed three distinct reactions: supportive and unaffected, dismissive and silent, or inappropriately inquisitive. Leader H found these interactions hard to navigate, particularly the “profoundly inappropriate and awkward questions” they received from co-workers.

Leader H noticed a marked difference in how people interacted with them in their queer relationships compared to heterosexual relationships. They observed that people generally did not ask about their queer relationships at all. Leader H stated, “now that I’m in a queer relationship, people don’t ask me anything” and “it always bums me out.” They found this disappointing, as it felt like people were unwilling to engage with their personal life. Leader H also noted a difference in the responses to their relationships, observing that their relationship with a transgender person elicited more intense reactions than when they dated someone who was also queer.

When describing their overall experience as a queer leader in education, Leader H found it hard to separate their queerness from their gender. Leader H believed that people in their school district liked being able to check the box but were disengaged from the actual

conversation. As a result, they felt that no one was asking about their experience of being a queer leader. Leader H stated that for the past three years, they have attended district level meetings about queer affinity for staff, but no one ever spoke with them about their experience or involvement.

Being openly queer has significantly impacted Leader H's personal relationships. They "lost a big chunk of personal relationships" after their divorce, and then more relationships were lost after they became openly queer. While this process was incredibly painful, Leader H felt there was healing and good in it. In their professional life, Leader H noted that being openly queer impacted relationships in ways they did not love. As female-presenting leader, they felt they were constantly being sexualized. Leader H stated that "any male counterpart you talk to, you're having sex with them, obviously," which they found disheartening. They also felt that coming out as queer intensified this dynamic at play and led to more distance from others. Leader H observed that people "really keep distance pretty consistently."

Despite the challenges, when asked about what it felt like to have someone intentionally ask about their personal experiences, Leader H shared that no one had ever asked about their experience. Having someone stop, ask, and then think about their experience was good. It was a process of thinking about what it means to talk about it instead of just internally, a thing they would walk around with and not talk about to anyone.

Moving Through Iterative Analytic Cycles – Uncovering Themes

In the following sections, I describe the process I used to analyze and code the data and share the results from each of the different coding cycles. The data visualizations comprise of many colors that are not linked the meaning of the results or visual representations.

Coding Cycle 1: Descriptive Coding Findings – Sub-Themes

Most findings came from the cycles of descriptive coding. The first cycle of descriptive coding using the interview transcripts resulted in 11 sub-themes. These findings are explained below:

Authenticity. Leaders expressed their need to live authentically even in the face of risks. Leader A noted, "...it's my way of life. Every day, it's a daily balance on what, what do I fight, and what don't I fight, and where do I do the silent fight, and where do I just keep showing up?" In the same way, Leader D said, "...because I was able to truly show up and be me, they wanted me to. And so it's been amazing." This highlights the transformative power of authenticity. To further emphasize the importance of authenticity, two leaders explained how they are committed to being out professionally and personally. Leader F said, "You know, for me, I just I spent so much time in the closet and so much time trying to be someone that I'm not. I'm not going to lie about who I am, and I'm not going to try to hide my existence to make other people comfortable." And, Leader B said, "I mean, it's really hard for me to not be authentic."

Visibility. Three leaders explained the importance of visibility. Leader E expressed the importance of visibility for a younger generation. "I think it's visibility... Like it's representation in some ways. I think for kids, that's really important that they see ... who I am and that it's possible." Leader B emphasized a similar commitment about visibility adding to the normalization of queer leadership in public schools. "I feel like for me because I've been outed, it's even more important to me that I'm just transparent and inviting and welcoming to all families, because I have even more of a spotlight on me... that's the only way I know how to be, because I think my visibility is so incredibly important for every child, because every child has a home environment that tells them how to feel and how to think about people like me, and at some point, they're going to be able to make their own decisions." Leader G connected visibility

to normalizing queerness, suggesting that when queer individuals are seen and known, it becomes more difficult to discriminate against them. They said, “I think it makes the visibility all that more important ... if it normalizes that across the board, then I think it's much harder to say, these people can't work here.”

Acceptance. The sub-theme of acceptance emerged in the data as leaders spoke about the accepting and supportive spaces they have experienced and how those characteristics impact accepting school environments for students. Leader C spoke to their work environment, “I think aligning myself in spaces for work that I feel like I’m supported. I think I align and do things in my personal space with the people that I know care about me and love me, you know, make sure nothing happens to me.” Leader G underscored this in terms of their responsibility to promote acceptance: “I would want the administrators that I work with to know that it’s that I’m a safe person and that they can be themselves, and that they can however their families look or however they show up is acceptable.” And leader E expressed the imperative of genuine acceptance to create safe spaces for students. “I think as educators, we have the responsibility to affirm and acknowledge all of our students’ identities, because we know that when students experience belonging in their school communities, we have stronger learning outcomes.”

Political Scrutiny. Three leaders spoke about living under political scrutiny and during political divisiveness. Leader F said, “It’s kind of like whiplash that we’ve been going through politically right because we had Obama administration that really moved us forward, then we have the Trump administration that pulled us back and tried to wipe our existence from all of the web pages and government documents. Then we had Biden come in, moved us back to where we were, and now we’re going to have Trump again.” Leader C emphasized this sentiment, noting, “Because Oregon has state laws that protect us. But now I have to think about when I go across

the country, and how that looks with my partner... just and how we will have to maneuver those things in the states where, you know, we want to go visit and do different things, it just changes things.” This hostile political environment was further explained by leader A, “But then, just in terms of the queer rights and gender I mean, I feel like I’m already having to filter myself a lot and having to be really careful with how we talk about these things.”

Personal Safety. All eight transcripts of the leaders’ stories presented the theme of safety. Two leaders detailed their feelings of personal safety. Leader A spoke at length about their experiences with their safety and said, “I feel like I’m never safe anywhere I go. And so the only difference now is that people feel like they’re they have an opinion about my life, and they can come forward because I’m not really protected.” And leader B talked about the constant worry for their safety: “I just don’t know what’s going to happen, and I don’t know how I’m going to be impacted, or because people might feel more emboldened to speak their fears to my face.”

Professional Safety. Connected to the sub-theme of personal safety, a slightly different aspect of safety emerged in the coding related to workplace safety. Leader C explained, “I have a safety plan in the school district, there are people that do not like me, and I think it is because I am openly gay.” Based on previous experiences, Leader D noted past fears for their safety in their professional environment that are not present now. “I can stay here late at night and not be afraid of what’s going to show up in my parking lot.” Leader E explained this difference between work communities as well. “...when I worked in a district that didn’t have that protection, I did not feel [safe in] that way...I worked for a long time in two different districts where it wasn’t just the community pressure, but it was not safe to be out, and so I just wasn’t.” This theme also

included discussion of professional safety in terms of employment, "...it makes me nervous in terms of, like, employment and where I choose to be employed," leader G said.

Community. Leader D spoke extensively about the importance of finding the right community. "But what I never really quite understood was working in a school district in this type of a position... could be doing a disservice to a school district by stepping into a community that is not a fit...coming to a district that there's fit, I felt alive. I felt effective and efficient, but I noticed people here felt alive, people felt heard, people felt hope. I don't think they ever felt that at my last district, because they didn't feel like they had a leader that they could see themselves reflected in whereas here I've heard so many people tell me that they see themselves in me."

Continuing the theme of local community, leader B noted that "it's a conservative community, and there's been some pushback in our school district around like, what books are available in the libraries and that kind of thing." This further highlights the challenges of navigating differing community values. In a different way of thinking about community, leader E said that "resources in the community...can help build community, because it can be so isolating, particularly in suburban areas like in conservative areas. How do I find people who have been through this who can help me..." This exemplifies the importance of building supportive communities.

Networks. Connected to the sub-theme of community is another theme of networks. Leader F spoke about the importance of building networks. "I will share how I tried to turn what happened with me... into something positive for our community now and professionally for me now, is I founded the...queer educator affinity group, and our first meeting, there were three people there, myself, my [partner], and a friend of ours. And over time, that's grown to a network of about 50 queer educators." Creating and participating in various queer networks can support queer leaders by creating spaces of affinity. Leader G underscored this sentiment, "I feel

like I found a lot of comfort in, like, my queer friends and having, like, getting together with them because it becomes grounding in home and like, you know when you're at home and you're like, this is, these are my people, this is my family." Creating networks within the community can be a supportive process for stakeholders as well. As leader E described, "...it's been really fantastic to find and connect parents who are navigating parenting queer children, gender expansive children, and helping them process what they're feeling and experiencing."

Environments. Just as community emerged as a sub-theme, three leaders discussed the importance of their work environments. Leader C explained, "I would say, helping people understand that your safety and security is the number one first right... you have to make sure the environments that you are in are safe, and if not, then you've got to figure out and move in the different direction." Leader F said, underscoring the need for safe work environments, "When I got my first job here in Oregon, I was still closeted professionally. So I was out personally, but closeted professionally, and I was terrified to come out, because when I left [former school district], I could have been fired for being gay. There were no protections whatsoever." On the other hand, Leader A explained their role as a leader in a creating safe environment for other queer educators and students, "being in this position, especially in leadership...especially in a school, you can be that role model ... that our queer population looks at."

Advocacy. Leader A explained that they act as an advocate by being open and answering staff and community questions. "I wanted to be in a leadership role so that other queer students could see like...so I am open to all conversations. So I would rather be that leader who sits and goes through all of the questions with our staff and our community so that we get actual information out there that is factual....Let's talk." To support advocacy efforts, leader F said, "I

have more than 100 people who sign up for resources from the queer educator affinity group. So we've sent out things like, why pronouns are important, how to support your students. How to think about dress codes in ways that don't put all of the responsibility and impact on female-identifying individuals. I sent out a resource to all the allies about, I guess that was just yesterday, about the election and about the stress that students could be feeling, and about how to be an ally and how to support queer kids and your colleagues." Even in the face of their own challenges, queer leaders continued to show up to advocate for queer rights, like leader E who said, "I feel a deep responsibility to step into the conversations."

Resilience. Leaders spoke about overcoming their difficult life experiences. Leader H said, "I was living in trauma...I wonder what my path would have been if I hadn't had trauma and been living in survival." They spoke to their "strength to overcome...adversity, shame and trauma." Speaking to that resilience, leader E said, "I think it's that I just have a hope. I deeply believe in public education as a foundation of democracy. I deeply believe in democracy. I believe that our country is very, very young in the scheme of things, and we are all learning how we want to do this well. And I really believe in humanity. I just, I think there are so many people out there doing so much good that I want to focus on that." Demonstrating that resilience is not achieved alone, leader D said, "This is actually a really great opportunity to show support for everyone. It's not a time to hide."

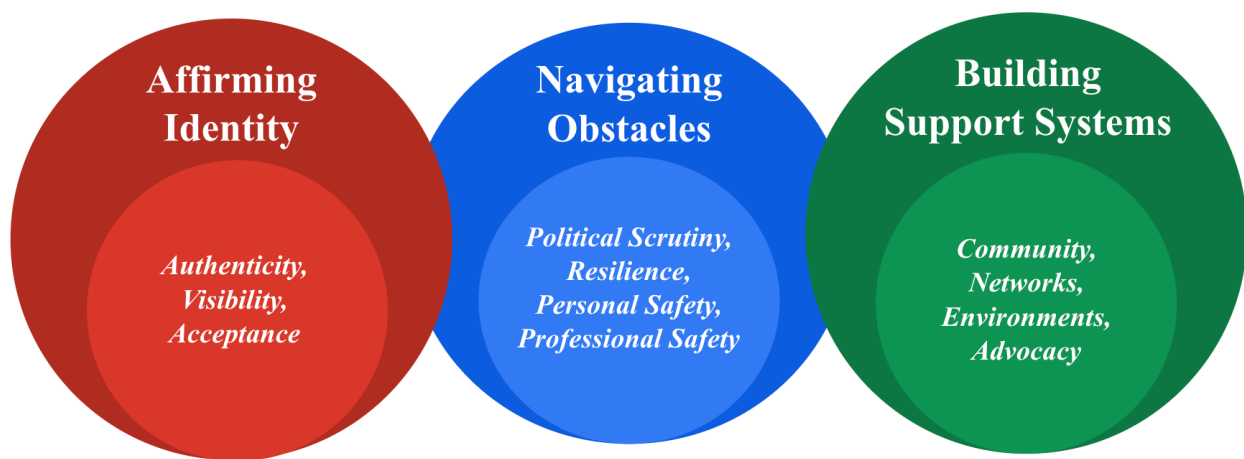
Coding Cycle 1: Descriptive Coding Findings – Primary Themes

A second round of descriptive coding was completed to reorganize and condense the initial sub-themes into three broader, overarching themes. The sub-themes were clustered into groups of three to five to create broader primary themes. The findings centered on authenticity, visibility, and acceptance were grouped to form the primary theme of *affirming identity*. The four

sub-themes of political scrutiny, resilience, personal safety, and professional safety were combined to create the primary theme of *navigating obstacles*. Finally, the four sub-themes of community, networks, environments, and advocacy were grouped under the primary theme of *building support systems*. Figure 4 depicts how the sub-themes from descriptive coding led to the three overarching themes.

Figure 4:

Descriptive Coding Themes and Sub-Themes



These themes collectively illustrate the multifaceted experiences of queer leaders in education, highlighting both the affirming aspects of their identities and the persistent challenges they navigate on a daily basis.

Affirming Identity. Authenticity, visibility, and acceptance are all aspects embedded within the primary theme of affirming identity, as confirmed by details from all eight leaders. As leader A said, they have to be, “that role model that our queer population looks at.” This was further emphasized by leader E, who said we must “affirm and acknowledge all of our students’ identities.” Visibility supports other queer members in the community, “I have to be authentic, because there are kids here that benefit from me being authentic and parents and families,” leader

B said of their role in promoting acceptance in their school community. Working to support spaces that affirm identity, leader F said, “I tried to equip people with the tools and resources that they needed so that no kid had to go through that like I want every kid, regardless of who they are, how they identify, what their sexuality is. I want every kid to be able to go to school and to be safe and to feel like they belong.” Leader H commented on some interactions with accepting colleagues highlighting the importance of acceptance and visibility. “It was interesting to have somebody stop and ask my experience, and then think about my experience and think about what it means to talk about it, as opposed to just like internally, a thing I would walk around with and don’t talk to anyone. I think that’s probably the thing that stood out the most... in the sense of feeling like people don’t actually ask what it’s like to be [queer] and a leader and in this community which is deceptively hard to be in.”

Navigating Obstacles. During data analysis, I found an overlap between themes. For example, within the theme of affirming identities, there are noted challenges that come with being visible and authentic as a queer leader. Each of the eight leaders discussed navigating different obstacles related to their identities. Leader A said, “I was the only queer person in the school, and I was out. Not a lot of at that time, there were not any like pride flags like you see now, and a lot of people in staff lounges talking about queer people. And then I had an experience with my principal where he... I walked by and he was talking to a group of students, and he said, that’s so gay. And my principal said that. And it took me a good couple of weeks before I could meet with him and talk to him about why that was a horrible thing to say.” In five of the leaders’ circumstances, it was not safe to stand up to microaggressions. Leader B said, “I feel like I’m already having to filter myself a lot and having to be really careful.” And to further emphasize this obstacle, leader F’s story reminds us that they “could have been fired for being

gay.” Leader H noted the obstacles faced because of the intersectionality of their identity. “It’s hard to separate out who I am as a queer leader versus who I am as a [female presenting] leader, and my experience of being a [female presenting] leader in education really has been pretty frustrating.”

Building Support Systems. The third primary theme was found by combining the sub-themes of community, networks, environments, and advocacy. In their interviews, all eight leaders discussed the importance of strong support systems. Leader C said, “I think aligning myself in spaces for work [so] that I feel like I’m supported.” This was emphasized by leader B, who said, “just having a community is a big part of it for me.” Leader C also said, “I put myself around good people.” Leader A talked about a colleague and their partner being supportive: “It helps a lot talking and her asking me questions on where’s the best way to support me and then some coping mechanisms are definitely having a partner that I can talk to.” This was like the support systems built by Leader F. They noted, “I will say I have a really strong network of open and affirming people around me, right?...There are a lot of people that I work with who are very affirming.” The community environment and networks that support advocacy efforts reinforce the primary theme that building support systems are integral to the experiences of queer educational leaders.

Coding Cycle 2: Emotion Coding Findings

Based on the emotion coding, the leaders’ five primary emotions were worry, gratitude, hope, sadness, and fear. These emotions were derived from the sub-themes of descriptive coding that correlated to primary emotions. The figure below depicts five main emotions coded with their corresponding descriptive codes.

Figure 5:

Themes from Emotion Coding



Worry. Worry was a heavy feeling found in the data. Leader A feels it in nearly every space they step into. “I’m scared for our students,” they admitted. “I never feel safe anywhere.” This adds to a persistent worry of safety and well-being. Leader C carries the same unease, especially for their staff. “Political changes make everything uncertain,” they said, discussing worry after the presidential election. Leader F sees the fear stretching beyond their immediate community, “People are worried—especially for queer folks in places with fewer protections.” The leaders expressed worry about safety, discrimination, and well-being.

Fear. Fear emerged as a primary emotion in the data, and it was not far from worry. For Leader B, the fear is ever-present. “Being [queer] in a conservative community feels like standing on a cliff, not knowing what’s below.” Leader A emphasized they “...never feel truly safe.” The fear of being visibly queer in uncertain spaces never entirely goes away. Leader A

added, “I fear for our students.” With policies shifting, the future feels unpredictable. Leader F recalled their fear before coming out, “I was terrified to come out—back then, I could’ve been fired.” Although the emotion of fear came out in different forms in the data, it was linked to the fear of harm, being targeted, or losing safety.

Sadness. Sadness was evident in the experiences of all eight leaders. Primarily stemming from laws, politics, and the weight of not being seen or being ignored. Leader H said that in their role, sadness appears in their decision-making. “This work is brutal. I feel like I’m always on the chopping block.” This was noted in connection to how judgement showed up in their conversations as a leader. In their leadership, Leader C explained the feeling of sadness regarding micro-aggressions and hate speech. “It’s hard to swallow that people are okay with discrimination against me.” And sadness was further expressed by Leader B when talking about the current political climate, “Survival shouldn’t be the goal—it’s sad.”

Hope. Hope was a primary emotion in the data connected with inclusion, shared values, and empowerment. Leader E said, “I don’t think silencing anyone does anybody any good.” They believe in the power of conversation and said, “I deeply believe in public education as a foundation of democracy.” Leader A spoke about hope as a celebration. “I would hope that I’ve created a culture where we don’t just accept people—we celebrate them.” Leader B shared their hope for a future too, one where queer identities are not questioned or debated. “We should just exist without it being a thing.” Hope was often paired with stories of resilience, like when leader H told their story about overcoming trauma, they also spoke to the hope they have for a better future within the queer community.

Gratitude. Gratitude was evident throughout the data from all eight leaders. Each leader presented a reflection of their work and the future they hope to shape. Leader A said they are,

“grateful for the chance to create a culture where we celebrate differences and prepare future leaders.” Similarly, leader E feels grateful for the spaces they have created. “I’m thankful for the opportunity to keep learning and creating spaces where students can grow.” They also noted that they are, “deeply grateful for public education.” And connected to their work to support students, leader B is, “thankful for the chance to be a model for students, showing them kindness and breaking stereotypes.” They elaborated, “I’m grateful to show up as myself, creating a space where students can just be who they are.” Gratitude runs through the work of the leaders in the case study, as demonstrated through the emotion coding.

Coding Cycle 3: In Vivo Coding Findings

Using in vivo coding, the interviews with queer leaders in education were coded using the leaders’ own words and phrases to identify significant themes. This approach captured the participants’ perspectives and experiences in their own terms. The themes from the in vivo coding support the themes from the cycles of descriptive coding and emotion coding. The exemplar quotes provide more in-depth detail to the results and allow the voice of the participants to be heard in the analysis (see Table 2).

Table 2:

Main Themes from In Vivo Coding Cycle

Theme	Exemplar Quotation
Authenticity and Openness	...I got applause. And it’s because I’ve not been afraid to hide any part of me, and with that, I’ve been able to face the community and feel like I’m supported for who I am, which also leads to not being afraid of being authentic and not being afraid of getting out in front of people. (Leader D) Well, it was incredibly free. I mean, it’s been ten plus years now, and it’s almost impossible to remember, it feels like a lifetime ago, but what I remember describing it to people as originally, it’s as though I had, well...was almost like I had been having an out of body experience that, like my entire life, I had been watching myself knowing that I was disconnected from who I was and that like I was just going through seeing myself

	going through all of these motions, but having no emotional attachment whatsoever to anything that was happening in my life, like I just I was so cut off emotionally. (Leader F)
Challenges and Stress	I mean, the heartbreak of the politics of our country is like in every single thing, in every moment of every day for me now. (Leader E) There was one incident this year where the union did put my [same-sex] relationship on their agenda to talk about. (Leader A)
Advocacy and Support	I feel like there has to be something more than protection. Like, it has to be like, I get everybody can follow the rules, like, but then there's these nuances within the rules, and like you can have there's a definition of harassment, right? But then there's this gray area around harassment that's not harassment, but it is harmful and will not retain your administrators. (Leader G) We have lots of work ahead, and I'm really trying to figure out - how do I navigate the power of my positionality and my identity within the community that I'm in as we move forward together, and also keep the focus on really strong outcomes for kids. (Leader E) ...I owe it to them to not let all of their hard work be done in vain, right? Like I have to be as brave as they were in continuing the advocacy. (Leader F)
Community and Visibility	I have to be authentic because there are kids here that benefit from me being authentic and parents and families and stuff, and so there's fear, but I don't, I don't feel like I'm letting it impact me in terms of just how I'm showing up. I'm still advocating for all kids. (Leader B) I'm also not going to stop advocating for queer youth and queer educators, because I spent too much time already. I wasted too much time trying to be somebody that I'm not. (Leader F)

Authenticity and Openness. The theme of authenticity and openness resonates strongly throughout the interviews with many exemplary quotes from the queer educational leaders interviewed. All shared how living and leading openly, while often challenging, is a deeply held value and a significant aspect of their experiences. Using their own words, leader A said, “my way of life. Every day, it's a daily balance on what, what do I fight, and what don't I fight, and where do I do the silent fight, and where do I just keep showing up? And that's what I'm doing at work?” This same leader also stated that they see their leadership role as “a really great opportunity to show support for everyone.” This underscores their choice to be authentic and open.

Leader C spoke about their decision to “just ... be myself” when starting a new role. They found success in this approach, noting that even “very conservative board members...have asked a lot of questions, are supportive of me, are supportive of my partner that I’m with. I think that that is a huge success, coming into a rural district and having that.” This illustrates how openness can foster understanding and acceptance, even in unexpected environments.

Leader H shared a different perspective related to authenticity and openness, noting that while they have been openly out, they have not felt a deep engagement or curiosity from their colleagues about her experience as a queer leader. However, they expressed that openness in their personal life, while initially painful, ultimately led to more genuine connections.

An exemplary quotation about openness and authenticity came from leader F: “Well, it was incredibly free. I mean, it’s been ten plus years now, and it’s almost impossible to remember, it feels like a lifetime ago, but what I remember describing it to people as originally, it’s as though I had, well...was almost like I had been having an out of body experience that, like my entire life, I had been watching myself knowing that I was disconnected from who I was and that like I was just going through seeing myself going through all of these motions, but having no emotional attachment whatsoever to anything that was happening in my life, like I just I was so cut off emotionally.” And leader D added to this by saying, “...I got applause. And it’s because I’ve not been afraid to hide any part of me, and with that, I’ve been able to face the community and feel like I’m supported for who I am, which also leads to not being afraid of being authentic and not being afraid of getting out in front of people.”

Challenges and Stress. The data provided evidence that navigating the current educational landscape as a queer leader is marked by many different challenges and stressors. All leaders shared the constant need to balance their authenticity with potential risks to their

employment and safety. Leader F acknowledged the need for caution, mentioning that there are “places in ... where ...and I don’t go into the restroom at the same time, because I think it would be unwise.” Leader A said, “There was one incident this year where the union did put my [same-sex] relationship on their agenda to talk about.” Beyond overt discrimination, leaders also highlighted subtle challenges and policy limitations alone. Leader H noted a lack of real conversation around queer identity despite the existence of affinity groups, suggesting a form of superficial acceptance. Leader G pointed out the “gray area around harassment that’s not harassment, but it is harmful,” indicating that formal policies may not address all the difficulties queer leaders face. The challenges and stress from politics also play a role in the experiences of queer leaders. As leader E said, “I mean, the heartbreak of the politics of our country is like in every single thing, in every moment of every day for me now.”

Advocacy and Support. The eight queer educational leaders demonstrated a commitment to advocacy and support for queer individuals within their school communities. For instance, Leader A explicitly stated that they, “wanted to be in a leadership role so that other queer students could see like, oh, this, this actually can happen for us. I actually do have a space in this world. So that was a driving force for being in the for being a leader, a principal.” Similarly, leader D emphasized the need for all students to feel cared for, stating, “I grew up thinking I was alone, and our kids need to know that they’re not...” Leader F’s exemplar statement is, “I owe it to them to not let all of their hard work be done in vain, right? Like I have to be as brave as they were in continuing the advocacy.” This sentiment connects to the history of queer activism.

Regarding advocating for policy change, Leader G said, “I feel like there has to be something more than protection. Like, it has to be like, I get everybody can follow the rules, like,

but then there's these nuances within the rules, and like you can have there's a definition of harassment, right? But then there's this gray area around harassment that's not harassment, but it is harmful and will not retain your administrators." Leader E recognized their power in advocacy and support. They shared, "We have lots of work ahead, and I'm really trying to figure out - how do I navigate the power of my positionality and my identity within the community that I'm in as we move forward together, and also keep the focus on really strong outcomes for kids."

Community and Visibility. The theme of community and visibility stood out in the words of the queer leaders in the study. Leader A said their school engaged in work "around what it meant to be queer and have someone in the queer community working in our school." Similarly, because of their community, Leader D felt not, "afraid to hide any part of me." Leader E spoke about visibility and said, "it's representation in some ways... that they see and know ... that it's possible." An exemplar quote from Leader B highlighted this idea: "I have to be authentic because there are kids here that benefit from me being authentic and parents and families and stuff, and so there's fear, but I don't, I don't feel like I'm letting it impact me in terms of just how I'm showing up. I'm still advocating for all kids." All eight leaders felt a responsibility to be visible. Leader F powerfully stated, "I'm also not going to stop advocating for queer youth and queer educators, because I spent too much time already. I wasted too much time trying to be somebody that I'm not."

Cycle 4: Magnitude Coding Findings

I employed magnitude coding to enhance data interpretation and deepen my understanding of the complexities within the data by entering deidentified transcripts into a word cloud generator. I chose to use the visualization of two hands making a heart to represent community and connectedness. The findings in this coding provide another example of

Table 3:

Primary Themes and Definitions

Theme	Definition
Affirming Identity	This theme encompasses codes related to authenticity, visibility, and acceptance. Queer leaders emphasize the importance of being their true selves, being seen, and feeling accepted within their communities and professional settings.
Navigating Obstacles	This theme includes codes such as challenges and safety, reflecting the difficulties and concerns about safety that queer leaders face causing feelings of worry. These obstacles range from political scrutiny to personal safety concerns in the community and workplace.
Building Support Systems	Codes related to support and community highlight the significance of having strong networks and supportive environments. These systems provide emotional and professional comfort and help queer leaders to thrive in their roles. Sub-themes related to self-care and resilience were connected to supportive communities.

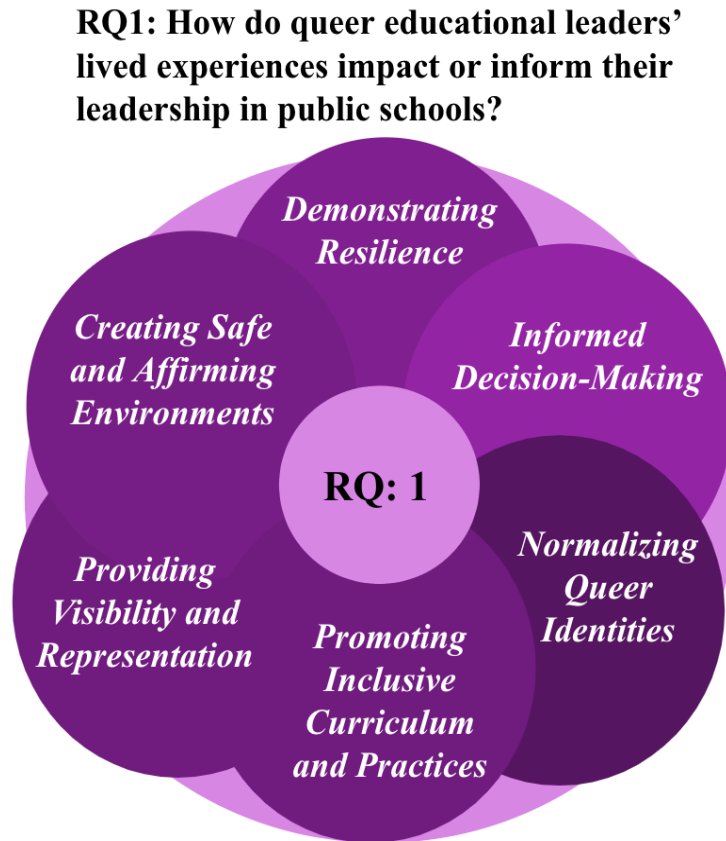
Answers to Research Question One

RQ1: How do queer educational leaders' lived experiences impact or inform their leadership in public schools?

The findings show that queer educational leaders' lived experiences have a significant impact on how they lead in public schools, affecting how they advocate for diversity and inclusion, provide safe spaces, and mentor upcoming queer leaders. These life experiences give them distinct viewpoints and insights that guide their decisions and actions, benefiting students, staff, and the larger school community. Six main ways that queer educational leaders' lived experiences influence or inform their leadership in public schools were identified in the data and are discussed below. The six areas are shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Answers to Research Question 1



Creating Safe and Affirming Environments

All eight queer leaders in the study prioritize creating school environments where all students and staff feel safe, accepted, and valued. Their personal experiences with discrimination and marginalization drive their commitment to establishing policies and practices that protect and support queer individuals. These policies and practices may include anti-bullying measures, gender-neutral facilities, and inclusive curricula. For instance, Leader A strives to be a “safe person on campus” for the queer population. Similarly, Leader B recognizes the need to “show up for my staff and help them feel safe enough to interrupt any sort of like homophobic or

inappropriate conversations, because there's fear for them as well." Leader D states that not supporting queer students is, "not an option because I grew up thinking I was alone, and our kids need to know that they're not... every kid deserves to feel cared about."

Providing Visibility and Representation

A primary theme found in the data was *affirming identity*. By being open about their identities, queer leaders provide visibility and representation for queer students and staff as well as the larger community. This visibility can inspire hope for both closeted and out queer individuals to embrace their identities and pursue leadership roles in education. All leaders in the case study repeatedly noted that visibility and representation are essential for students, so they know being a leader is possible. For instance, Leader A explicitly stated that they, "wanted to be in a leadership role so that other queer students could see like, oh, this, this actually can happen for us. I actually do have a space in this world. So that was a driving force for ... being a leader, a principal." Leader F talked about how they created support networks across their region that promoted visibility and representation for youth and adults.

Promoting Inclusive Curriculum and Practices

A key aspect of queer leaders' work in education involves promoting inclusive curriculum and practices that acknowledge and affirm the diversity of their student populations, especially in the face of challenges like Project 2025 which aims to restrict inclusive education. All eight leaders strive to embed queer perspectives within the educational framework and establish systems that validate all students' identities. Leader A highlighted advocacy for "gender neutral restrooms" in schools, demonstrating a commitment to affirming gender diversity. Leader C emphasized the importance of ensuring "your safety and security is the

number one first right” for queer students and staff. Leader B hopes that “queer identities are the norm” reflecting a broader vision of normalization emphasized by Leader G’s story.

Normalizing Queer Identities

To promote an accepting and celebratory culture within the school community, seven of the queer leaders talked about their work to normalize queer identities. They aim to dispel heteronormative presumptions that are embedded in public school and the United States as well as provide staff and students with chances to understand and value the variety of human experience. They tell students, staff, and community stakeholders about their own stories and experiences to help reduce stigma and normalize queerness. For example, leader A shared their hope that they had “created a culture of...I hate the word acceptance. I always say that’s ridiculous. I’m like a really great human you don’t need to accept me. You need to celebrate me. And that’s what I’ve said... is we celebrate the queer community and differences. Similarly, Leader B stated their vision for the future where “queer identities are the norm.”

Demonstrating Resilience

Despite facing challenges and obstacles, queer leaders demonstrate resilience and perseverance in their roles. Another primary theme in the data was *navigating obstacles*. Their ability to overcome adversity inspires others and reinforces their commitment to creating positive change in education. To be role models for this type of resilience, seven of the queer leaders employed a myriad of self-care strategies, such as regular exercise, meditation, and seeking support from friends and family. Leader G said they spend time with their queer friends to lift their spirit while Leader C employed strategies such as counseling and therapy. Leader E spoke to the ability to demonstrate resilience, “I think it’s that I just have a hope. I deeply believe in public education as a foundation of democracy. I deeply believe in democracy. I believe that our

country is very, very young in the scheme of things, and we are all learning how we want to do this well. And I really believe in humanity. I just, I think there are so many people out there doing so much good that I want to focus on that.”

Informed Decision-Making

Through their lived experiences and knowledge gained through hardship, queer leaders draw upon their past to make informed decisions that consider the needs and perspectives of marginalized communities. Leader C talked about how they helped school board members examine their bias to help them make more equitable decisions. They bring a critical lens to policy development, resource allocation within school districts, and the implementation of programs and curriculum to ensure that equity and inclusion remain central to their leadership. For example, Leader F reflected on their time being closeted professionally, stating, “I spent so much time in the closet and so much time trying to be someone that I’m not...I’m not going to lie about who I am, and I’m not going to try to hide my existence to make other people comfortable.” This experience of needing to be cautious and closeted helps to inform their commitment to creating safe and inclusive environments for others. Leader B discussed how they advocate for curriculum that is representative of all identities.

Answers to Research Question Two

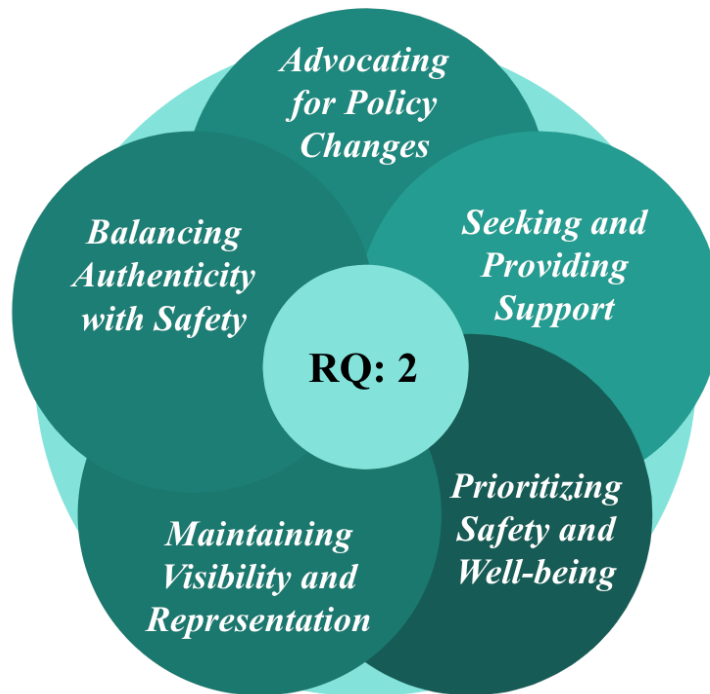
RQ2: How do queer educational leaders navigate living into their identity at a time when queerness is under political scrutiny?

Queer educational leaders navigate living into their identity during times of political scrutiny through a combination of self-preservation, advocacy, and community engagement. Their strategies to protect themselves while supporting their students and staff are a testament to their courage and resilience, inspiring respect and admiration. From the research, five primary

ways queer educational leaders navigate living into their identity at a time when queerness is under political scrutiny are outlined in Figure 8.

Answers to Research Question 2

RQ2: How do queer educational leaders navigate living into their identity at a time when queerness is under political scrutiny?



Balancing Authenticity with Safety

Queer leaders often balance their desire to be authentic with the need to protect themselves from potential harm or discrimination. Depending on the audience or community, three leaders discussed how they censor how they talk about their families or personal lives. Leader H, for example, shared how they still have to, “censor how I talk about my family, my partner based on the audience that I’m with, being aware...I just have to be very intentional politically with who I’m with and how I talk about it, so that I’m not diverting the work that we’ve come together to do.” Others noted they avoid specific locations where they feel unsafe.

For instance, Leader F explained that there are “places...where....[partner] and I don’t go into the restroom at the same time, because I think it would be unwise.” Despite these concerns, many refuse to hide their identities or stop advocating for queer youth and educators, because having the opportunity to live authentically is essential. Both Leaders E and F talked about this and noted their advocacy for youth.

Advocating for Policy Changes

Queer leaders often advocate for policy changes at the local and state levels to better support queer students and staff. They use their understanding of the challenges they have faced through their own personal and professional experiences to push for inclusive policies that address discrimination, promote equity, and protect the rights of queer individuals. All eight leaders noted they have been putting policies in place to protect people doing equity work in public schools. For example, Leader C explained that in Oregon, “there have been some things that have been put in place to protect us... I think there’s been some things policy wise of, hey, just because you don’t believe in my views doesn’t mean you can remove me from the work that we’re doing in the best interest of kids.” Similarly, Leader B stated, “I think we have to have policies that that don’t allow for hate speech, discrimination. I mean, we have to be protected by the laws and our identities have to be protected.” They suggested the need for policies for staff that mirror the state guidance for queer students. Leader E emphasized the importance of strong state leadership, noting, “I think it's just really important that we have strong leadership at our state level right now so that we can ensure that Oregon is a place where kids and families can be safe.” These examples illustrate the proactive stance queer leaders take in understanding and leveraging policy to foster safer and more inclusive educational environments.

Seeking and Providing Support

Queer leaders rely on their affinity networks and communities for emotional and professional support. They seek comfort and strength from queer friends and family, creating spaces where they can be themselves without fear of judgment. Additionally, they provide support and mentorship to other queer educators and students, helping them navigate the challenges they face. The leaders in the case study all emphasized the importance of maintaining supportive relationships. Leader G explained, “I feel like I found a lot of comfort in, like, my queer friends.” Leader F told a story about founding a “queer educator affinity group” that has grown to “a network of about 50 queer educators.” In both cases, the leaders talked about how these connections provide essential personal and professional support in a challenging environment. Leader A also highlighted that staff can “come together with me and just brainstorm ideas about what it’s like to be in the queer community, or what our students need,” indicating their role as a source of support and understanding within their school district.

Prioritizing Safety and Well-being

Queer leaders put their safety and well-being first because they are aware of the possible risks that come with their public positions. This can involve creating safety measures. Leader C explained, “I have a significant safety plan. I’m not allowed to be in the district by myself after dark.” It also means exercising caution when disclosing information; Leader H shared that they still “censor how I talk about my family.” Furthermore, many queer leaders push for laws that safeguard queer people in positions of authority and others. As noted previously, Leader C highlighted the need to continue pushing for policy changes so that, “boards can’t come in and because that works being done, or because that leader is, you know, openly gay, that they’re they have the ability to remove them.”

Maintaining Visibility and Representation

Despite the challenges, all eight of the queer leaders believe it is essential to remain visible and open about their identities. By being visible, they provide representation for queer students and staff, demonstrating that it is possible to be successful and live authentically. Leader E believed that “it’s visibility, right? Like it’s representation in some ways.” Leader D explained how being out was a driving force for their leadership role, stating, “I wanted to be in a leadership role so that other queer students could see like, oh, this, this actually can happen for us. I actually do have a space in this world.” Leader A said how being a visible queer leader allows the queer population to see them as someone, “who’s pretty successful, and I could be like them, and they, have that safe person on campus, so that’s a positive for sure.” These statements underscore the theme of the power of visibility in the data.

Overall, queer educational leaders demonstrate resilience and determination in the face of political scrutiny. As noted in the data, they used their lived experiences to inform their leadership in public schools. By combining self-care, advocacy, and community engagement, they navigate the challenges while continuing to create positive change in their schools and communities.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

“Hope will never be silent.” - Harvey Milk

*Harvey Milk was a politician and gay rights activist.
He was among the first openly gay elected officials in the United States.*

The experiences of queer educational leaders in Oregon offer valuable insights into their influence within public schools and their navigation of identity amidst current political challenges across the United States. Through the multi-case study, it was found that queer leaders’ personal journeys and identities profoundly shaped their approaches to education, influencing their interactions with students, staff, and the communities in which they serve. To be clear, queerness is currently under attack in the United States, and the heightened state of alarm enriched the data with valuable insight.

The design of the phenomenological study was centered on collecting qualitative data about the human experience. Through coding and data analysis, three main themes were found: (a) affirming identity, (b) navigating obstacles, and (c) building support systems. These primary themes and the subsequent sub-themes from the data add to a robust discussion about how queer educational leaders’ life experiences impact their work in public schools. It is first important to discuss the challenges that queer educational leaders face in today’s divided political landscape, one that is prevalent with anti-LGBTQ+ legislation.

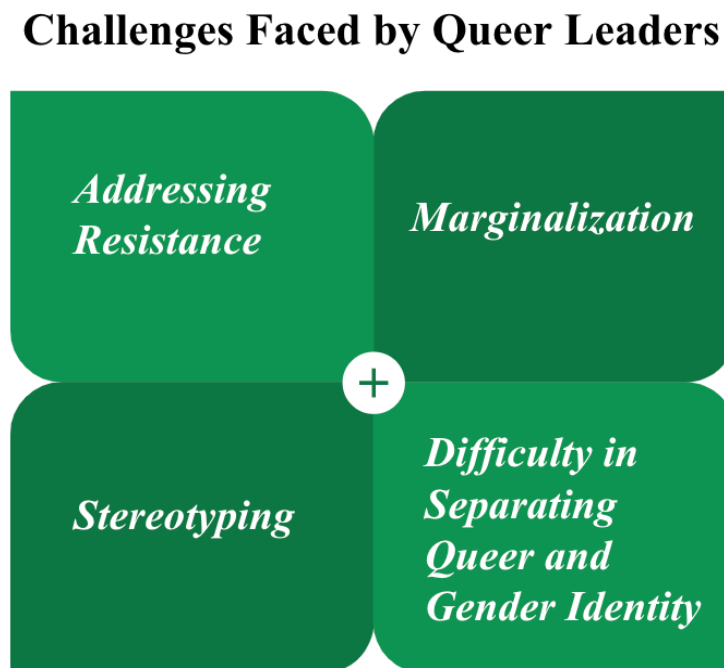
Challenges Faced by Queer Leaders

The data from the case study as well as prior research (Casey et al., 2019), note that queer leaders face many obstacles because of institutional hurdles, personal vulnerabilities, and cultural biases, despite their perseverance and commitment. These difficulties facing queer educational

leaders in education are highlighted in the body of literature (Lugg, 2003) and in alignment with the results of the case study. These findings call for structural reform and more substantial school district assistance. Four main issues facing queer educational leaders both arose from the data collected for this case study and are in alignment with the literature: (a) stereotyping, (b) difficulty in separating queer and gender identity, (c) marginalization, and (d) addressing resistance (see Figure 9).

Figure 9

Challenges Faced by Queer Leaders



Stereotyping

In addition to being subjected to queer-specific biases, five of the female-presenting queer leaders frequently noted experiences of increased sexualization and stereotyping, which reinforces traditional gender roles. As their queerness was often perceived through a lens of hypersexualization, many reported finding it challenging to be taken seriously in social and

professional settings. The fear of being seen as the “wrong kind of queer” in leadership, as mentioned in Tooms (2007), is rooted in this history of defining and excluding queer individuals from professional spaces.

Leadership experiences are further complicated by queer preconceptions, such as being extremely radical, nonconforming, or even unprofessional. It can be challenging for queer leaders to obtain networking opportunities, job promotions, and mentorship because of preconceived notions about their competency. Due to the intersection of gender and queerness, they are in a unique situation where they must constantly balance preconceptions that undermine their leadership and uphold oppressive systems. Fox (2007) said that, “Sexuality, as a regimen of truth, is partly constructed through a hetero/homo dichotomy, whereby heterosexuality is considered normal, natural, and inevitable and homosexuality is constructed as its binary opposite, abnormal, and perverse” (p. 501). This quote highlights the social construction that positions queerness as “abnormal” which can contribute to the hyper sexualization of queer individuals as noted in the story shared by Leader H and make it challenging for them to be taken seriously in professional settings. Leader H’s experience aligns with the literature that discusses how the perception of queerness as inherently sexual rather than just an aspect of identity can lead to female-presenting queer leaders being viewed through a lens of sexualization.

Marginalization

Given the historical and current socio-political contexts, all eight leaders noted experiences of marginalization and a sense of tokenism instead of true inclusion. Three of the leaders believed that although their school districts enjoyed being able to tick the diversity box, they were not interested in having open discussions about concerns pertaining to queer people. Casey et al. (2019) highlight the historical and ongoing socio-political context of discrimination

against queer people. This broader history of marginalization can contribute to queer leaders feeling like their inclusion is superficial rather than deeply rooted in a commitment to their well-being and concerns.

It is noted in the literature that despite moves toward more inclusive language, the long history of biases toward the queer community impacts the climate of public schools (Lugg, 2003). The research by Lugg (2003) is validated by the experiences of the leaders in this case study. Leader A told their story of being called the F-slur, while Leader B discussed being outed and Leader D was fired for their sexuality. This difficulty highlights the intricacy of identity, the value of intersectionality in leadership, and the necessity of real interaction instead of shallow representation.

Difficulty in Separating Queer and Gender Identity

Fox (2007) discusses the connection between gender and sexual orientation as well as the necessity of strategies that recognize and tackle the unique challenges faced by queer leaders. Leader A noted, “Is it going to be looked at because I’m a queer person? Am I the queer person at the table advocating for the queer people, or am I just a person advocating for human rights?” It also emphasizes how crucial it is to design inclusive leadership development initiatives and support networks like affinity groups that acknowledge the intersections of sexual orientation and gender identity. In their story, Leader H says that, “The challenges [of queerness and gender identity] are hard to untie. Would be hard to untie queerness and just gender in general, which has been really hard.” Queer leaders may overcome these obstacles with more self-assurance if they are in environments that create spaces to support and recognize their experiences. However, this remains a challenge, as noted by the eight leaders in the case study, as many queer staff members face unwelcoming school environments (Durate, 2020).

Addressing Resistance

Leaders stressed the importance of tackling the matters of injustice head-on with transparent and honest communication. When faced with opposition or resistance, they stood firm in their beliefs. Leader A advocated to their school district for gender-neutral bathrooms and Leader C stood up to the school board for inappropriate comments about queer youth. As previous research notes, supportive and proactive leaders aid in promoting inclusivity and addressing discrimination to create positive environments for all students and staff (Boyland et al., 2016). They discovered that facing prejudice head-on frequently resulted in a quick retreat from opponents, that helped to normalize queer identities, thus making it harder to maintain discriminatory practices. Leader F demonstrated this by giving people resources and language to use to support the queer community. The data underlined how crucial it is to promote an atmosphere of open communication rather than silence anyone, although this does not mean allowing people to cause harm to others. These acts show how effective direct interaction can be in combating prejudice and advancing inclusivity.

The data from the case study support the existing body of literature on the challenges faced by queer educators. The four main challenges facing queer educational leaders that were found in the data and are in alignment with the literature are include (a) stereotyping, (b) difficulty in separating queer and gender identity, (c) marginalization, and (d) addressing resistance.

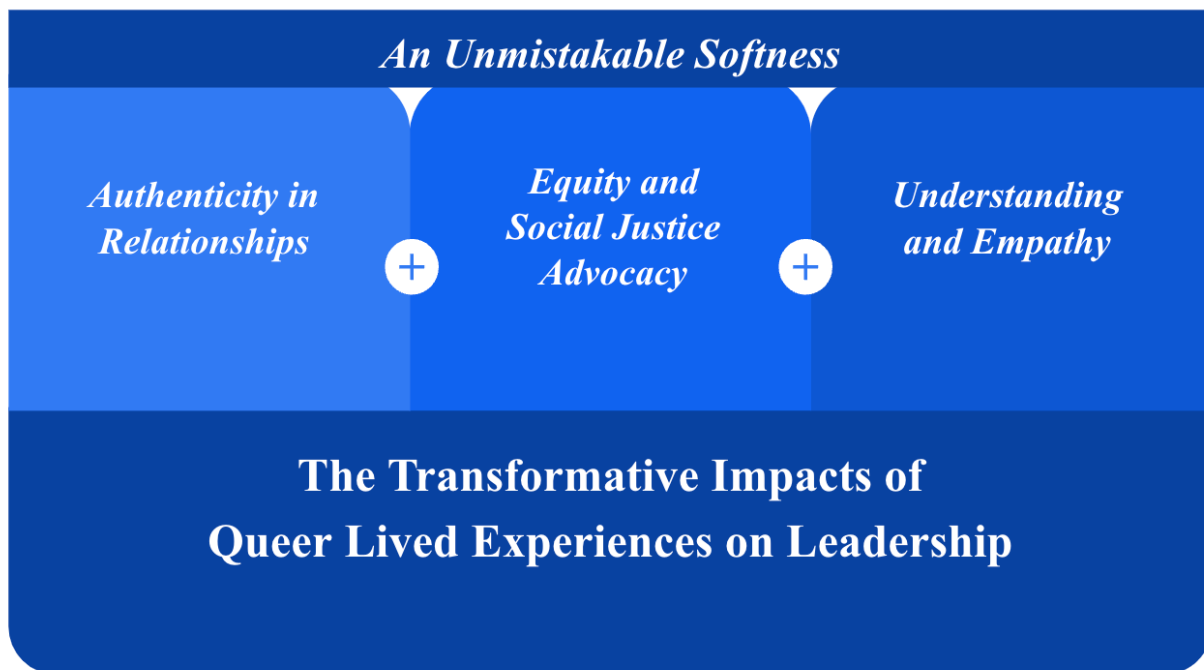
Key Takeaways: The Transformative Impacts of Queer Lived Experiences on Leadership

Despite the challenges faced by the leaders, an unexpected finding surfaced in the data that is worth discussion. A key takeaway from the data was an unspoken demeanor of gentleness that the leaders embodied. When paired with their real-life experiences, this may help queer

leaders' practice of leadership evolve in a transformational manner. It is important to recognize that the distinct identities and life experiences of the leaders greatly influence how they approach educational leadership and interactions with communities, staff, and students in a positive manner, rather than as a burden. In this way, this disposition of *gentleness or softness* that is tied to queer leadership is depicted in Figure 10.

Figure 10

Transformative Impacts of Queer Lived Experiences on Leadership



Authenticity in Relationships

The eight leaders acknowledged the importance of authenticity in their relationships and interactions. Being able to show up as their authentic selves allows them to form more genuine connections with students, staff, and families. The leaders stressed that being real and authentic has a positive impact on their school communities in addition to strengthening their personal relationships. Colleagues and students are inspired to live truly when they see leaders embracing

who they really are. This fosters an environment of openness and vulnerability. For staff and students who identify as queer and may experience identity issues, this exposure is especially important. Queer leaders inspire others to embrace their uniqueness by setting an example of self-acceptance and resilience; like Leader F has done by establishing queer support networks. This has a profoundly transforming effect on the leaders in the study that goes well beyond their close relationships.

Equity and Social Justice Advocacy

The queer leaders in the case study view their role as an opportunity to advocate for equity and social justice, particularly for marginalized communities such as the queer community. They recognize the systemic barriers that certain students face and work to dismantle them through policy changes, curriculum development, and ongoing community engagement. It is imperative that leaders actively challenge discriminatory practices and work to create a more inclusive environment for all students and staff, just like Leader A did when they stood up to a principal for their homophobic remarks. The importance of giving a language to the people and framing the work in ways that support all is stressed during advocacy. This might look like the need to equip people with the tools and resources necessary to combat bullying and harassment. These examples highlight the leaders' commitment to promoting equity and justice in their schools and communities.

Understanding and Empathy

Because of their own experiences, queer leaders frequently have a unique perspective on the difficulties queer staff and students confront in the school setting and broader community. They center their leadership on empathy and compassion because they have experienced similar hardships. One leader participant detailed a moving story about a mom who told them that her

transgender son's life had been saved by their visibility, kindness, and the understanding of the queer community. This narrative highlighted the significant influence queer leaders may have on other's lives by leading with empathy and understanding that is paired with their visibility in public leadership roles.

An Unmistakable Softness

Sixteen interviews were given as part of this study. After 15 of the interviews, I reflected in my research journal on the feeling of gentleness or softness that was demonstrated by the leaders. This was a quality that all the participants demonstrated implicitly throughout their interviews. Despite the challenges that queer educational leaders face in today's society, which are well articulated in the body of research, the eight leaders in the case study continued to approach their lives and leadership with a disposition of unmistakable softness towards the world around them.

This unexpected finding ties together how their *queerness* and experiences have transformational impacts on their leadership. Queer leaders show up with authenticity in their relationships, an unwavering advocacy for equity and social justice and deep understanding and empathy woven together with an unmistakable softness towards others, which they explain is directly a result of what has happened to them. This defines the transformational aspect of their leadership.

Implications

Further research is needed to explore the intersectional experiences of queer educational leaders, particularly those from marginalized racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Understanding how these intersecting identities shape leadership practices and challenges is

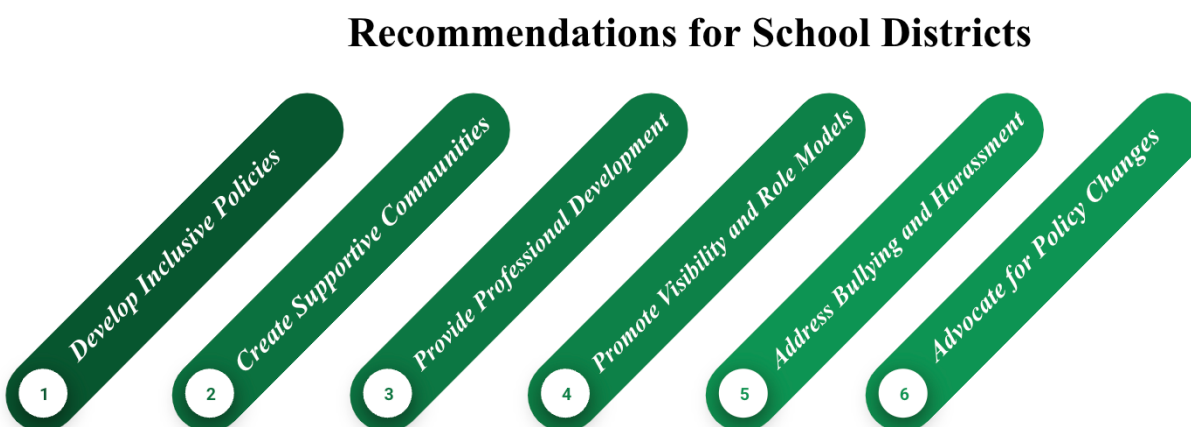
crucial for promoting equity and inclusion. Additionally, research should examine the long-term impact of political scrutiny on the well-being and career trajectories of queer educational leaders.

Recommendations for School Districts

In addition to answering the research questions, this phenomenological case study provides insights into recommendations that school districts and policymakers can take to create more equitable and inclusive communities. Several recommendations can be made based on the results of this study. Although the data demonstrated the resilience of queer leaders in education, it is important to note that these recommendations are meant to be acted upon by allies and not queer individuals. The burden of creating safe spaces for all staff and students in public educational settings should not rest on the shoulders of queer leaders. For school districts, there are series of recommendations that school officials can implement to foster more inclusive and equitable environments for queer educational leaders, staff, and students (see Figure 11).

Figure 11

Recommendations for School Districts



Develop Inclusive Policies. School districts must develop and implement inclusive policies that explicitly protect queer students and staff from discrimination, harassment, and bullying. These policies should be transformational in nature and comprehensive, addressing issues such as gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender expression. They should also be regularly reviewed and updated to reflect the current political and social landscape, sometimes combating discriminatory federal legislation.

Create Supportive Communities. Schools should establish safe spaces for both staff and students, as well as supportive communities that affirm queer identities. This can involve starting pride clubs, mentorship programs that pair queer people with allies, and affinity groups for queer students and staff. Furthermore, a more accepting and understanding school culture can be promoted by introducing inclusive curricula and providing professional development on queer issues and topics. Schools can support queer staff and students to succeed academically, socially, and professionally when they actively support visibility and inclusion.

Provide Professional Development. Professional learning is a key strategy to helping create more inclusive environments for students and staff in our public schools. Through engaged learning, staff and students can begin to understand their unconscious biases and increase their self-awareness. School districts should offer professional development opportunities for educators on queer issues, cultural responsiveness, and inclusive practices. This training can help to create more welcoming and supportive environments by increasing awareness, knowledge, and skills related to queer identities and experiences.

Promote Visibility and Role Models. As noted in the data, visibility is critically important to promoting safe spaces for queer leaders. Schools should actively promote the visibility of queer leaders and role models. This can include inviting queer speakers to school

events, showcasing the accomplishments of queer educators, and celebrating queer history and culture throughout the year. Although the recommendations offered to increase visibility seem simple, they are often not acted upon in public schools.

Address Bullying and Harassment. Policies about bullying and harassment are not new for schools. Still, the implementation of the policies from school leadership all the way down to the student level is often not aligned. Schools must take a zero-tolerance approach to bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity. This includes implementing clear reporting procedures, supporting victims of bullying or harassment, and holding perpetrators accountable for their actions.

Advocate for Policy Changes. Queer leaders and allies should advocate for policy changes at the state and federal levels that support queer rights and protections. While queer leaders need to share their experiences, the onus must not be upon them to do all the advocating to policymakers. Partnering with supportive allies, advocacy can include lobbying elected officials, participating in public demonstrations, and supporting organizations that advocate equality.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

Based on my findings, I also have recommendations for policymakers at a state and federal level. Elected officials should prioritize the implementation of policies that actively affirm the identities of queer individuals in education. This entails encouraging acceptance, exposure, and authenticity in both professional and community contexts. Among the suggestions are the creation of explicit policies and educational initiatives that promote the use of appropriate pronouns and names, the promotion of an inclusive curriculum that counters Project 2025's initiatives, and the maintenance of safe and affirming school environments. Legislators may

create a more accepting and encouraging school environment by supporting laws that acknowledge and promote the variety of queer identities.

Given the challenges and safety concerns highlighted by queer leaders, policymakers must address the obstacles that queer individuals face in leadership roles in public schools. These obstacles range from political scrutiny to concerns about personal safety in both the community and the workplace. The ACLU is tracking such attacks and working to support queer people. To mitigate these challenges, policymakers should enact and uphold comprehensive anti-discrimination laws that explicitly protect queer individuals from harassment, bullying, and discrimination in both the workplace and community. Additionally, they should ensure the existence of clear reporting mechanisms and support systems for those who experience discrimination or safety concerns.

Policymakers must fund more programs that promote community and resilience because of how crucial support networks are to the success and wellbeing of queer leaders in education. Support networks provide both professional and emotional support, allowing queer leaders to sustain their authenticity in their positions. Policymakers should allocate funds for professional development opportunities, mentorship programs, and affinity groups in order to enhance these support networks. To further this impact, legislators should encourage collaboration between academic institutions and community-based programs to give queer people access to resources and support systems such as mental health initiatives.

In light of potential threats to queer rights, especially transgender rights, at the federal level, state and local policymakers should proactively implement protective measures. With the ACLU, state and local officials can coordinate action to protect queer people from discrimination. This includes enacting laws to strengthen data privacy policies and limit

cooperation with federal authorities in discriminatory actions. By doing this, policymakers at a state level can ensure self-reporting of gender without medical documentation requirements and thus prohibit the use of state resources for discriminatory enforcement measures outlined by the federal government. Furthermore, state policymakers can protect access to gender-affirming healthcare by passing state laws and provisions to ensure consistent state funding for such care.

Taking the actions above, policymakers can ensure that queer educational leaders are supported in their work in promoting equity and inclusion in public schools. During this time of political turmoil, it is important that policymakers clearly understand the challenges marginalized communities face and advocate for policies and laws that protect their rights. By implementing these recommendations at school districts as well as at a policy level, more inclusive and equitable environments where queer educational leaders, staff, and students can feel seen and supported will be created. The stories of the leaders in the case study highlight the importance of visibility, advocacy, and community support in navigating a complex and often challenging landscape. As they continue to lead with courage and authenticity, they pave the way for a more just and equitable educational system for future generations.

Limitations

As with all research, this study has limitations. These limitations include the potential that researcher bias impacted findings, limited external validity due to the small sample size, and external circumstances.

Researcher Bias

As noted in the method chapter, I am an insider on this topic. I am a queer leader in public education and serve in an administrative role in Oregon. I fit the criteria to be selected as a participant in the study. The potential for researcher bias influencing the study was real, but I

took measures to combat my own biases. Throughout the process, I kept a researcher journal where I reflected on my own experiences and biases. I also met monthly with a trusted thought partner to check my feelings and thoughts while conducting the research. Both of these strategies allowed me to acknowledge my own biases and create space for the participants' stories to be shared.

Internal Validity Emphasized over External Validity

The intentional design of the study and results provide for internal validity. It could be argued that the small sample size of eight participants might jeopardize validity. However, the volume of data collected through 272 pages of transcripts is robust and a reliable representation of queer leaders' experiences. The credibility of the findings was further supported through the intentional practice of member checking and focus groups. Thus, although this study was not designed to generalize to all educators, or even to all queer educators, the depth of data and consistency of the findings across participants and data sources adds to the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

External Circumstances

Throughout the time when I was conducting this research, a United States presidential election was taking place, and my final data collection occurred after the election results were finalized. This election brought forth many strong feelings and emotions from the participants. It might be argued that conducting the research through the presidential election and inauguration phases could skew the data. However, the external circumstances of the presidential election added to deep conversations that allowed me to answer the research questions more holistically. The data collected might not have answered the research questions as comprehensively if this research were not done during a presidential election with so much focus on divisiveness and

where queer identity and even the legality of same sex marriage are once again being threatened. Therefore, it might be argued that the external circumstances added to the study's validity.

Study Significance

There is a need for research to tell the stories of the personal and professional lives of queer school administrators. Queer educational leaders exist in public schools today. Researchers focused on the history of homophobia and queerness in public schools (Blount, 2003; Lugg, 2003a, 2003b) and researchers detailing laws and the gay rights movement (Harbeck, 1997) have added to the body of literature on queer educational leaders. The data from this case study align with previous research on homophobia in education and challenges faced by queer educators. However, very few researchers have focused empirical research on the experiences of working queer administrators (deLeon & Brunner, 2009, 2013; Denton, 2009; Fraynd & Capper, 2003; Hernandez, 2009; Jones-Redmond, 2007; Watkins & Mooney, 2022). This lack of research underscores the significance of understanding how queer leaders' experiences shape their well-being given the challenges of today's public schools. In other words, this study's findings are timely and important.

Conclusion

The experience of conducting this research as a queer educational leader was cathartic. Because of the time in which we live, this topic became more timely throughout the research process. As queer Americans have become increasingly targeted by the federal government in the United States, I have had to take extra steps to protect the identities of the participants. For example, many things that would traditionally be included in an appendix are intentionally left out as a way to further increase protections for the participants in this study. Even with such measures in place, one of the selected participants is not included in the results and discussion of

this study because they became fearful that their identity could be linked back to this research. This participant chose to remove themselves from the study for their own safety. This incident was the most disheartening aspect of my research, as it made me face the reality of what is currently happening in the United States.

The concern for safety amongst the queer community is real. As noted, discriminatory legislation is on the rise, and spaces that once felt safe to queer Americans are no longer safe. Throughout the research process, I felt the heaviness of the fear and worry from participants increase before the inauguration of a new president. To be clear, I have reflected on the same fears I heard throughout the interview process and have felt an increase in my own anxiety about producing this research during a politically divisive time. However, the strength found in the stories of the participants from the study gives me the courage to make this statement.

A Call to Humanity

Queer Americans deserve the ability to live with respect, dignity, safety, and the freedom to be their authentic selves without worrying about discrimination or harm. Supporting them is a call to our shared humanity and not just an act of allyship. Everyone should have the chance to thrive, love openly, and fully participate in society, regardless of who they are. Justice and humanity require no less, so now is the moment to act with compassion, courage, and unwavering support.

APPENDIX A
DISSERTATION TIMELINE

Proposal Sent to Committee	May 30, 2024
Complete Competencies	June 7, 2024
Proposal Meeting	June 13, 2024
IRB Application completed	July 2024
Recruit Participants	August, 2024
Select and Send Survey to Participants	August, 2024
Schedule Interviews	August, 2024
Interview questions revised	August, 2024
Interviews Round 1	September, 2024
Complete Interviews with transcripts	September, 2024
Qualitative coding analysis completed	October, 2024
Interview questions revised	November, 2024
Interviews Round 2	November, 2024
Complete Interviews with transcripts	November, 2024
Qualitative coding analysis completed	December, 2024
Schedule Focus Group	December, 2024
Focus Group	January, 2025
Qualitative coding analysis completed	January, 2025
Results Section completed	February, 2025
Discussion Section completed	March, 2025

Application for Advanced Degree	March, 2025
Application of Defense completed	March, 2025
Abstract completed	April, 2025
ProQuest Dissertation account created	April, 2025
Dissertation Defense meeting	April, 2025
Post-Defense Committee approval	May, 2025
Final Committee Approval of Dissertation	May, 2025
Statement of Completion	June 2025
Graduation	June 2025

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