

# **Including LGBTQ Voice: A Narrative of Two Gay Music Teachers**

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## ABSTRACT

While the past few decades have shown promising societal trends for LGBTQ individuals, the workplace is still a space of discrimination for many LGBTQ music teachers. Our narrative tells the story of two gay music teachers (Kevin, nearing the end of his career; and James, in the first few years of teaching) meeting for the first time and dialoguing with one another about their lived experience, sexuality-specific challenges in the field of music education, and issues of resilience and support. This research reveals the transformative power of telling and retelling stories, specifically as James shared and re-shared details regarding past discrimination in the workplace and – with Kevin’s mentorship – reframed his old narrative into one of advice for other LGBTQ music teachers. This story of experience-sharing between James and Kevin highlights the importance of mentoring relationships as a means of support for LGBTQ music teachers in fostering a sense of resilience and optimism in their careers and personal lives.

**Keywords:** Education, Gay Teachers, LGBTQ, Mentorship, Music, Narrative, Story Retelling, Workplace Discrimination

## **INCLUDING LGBTQ VOICE: A NARRATIVE OF TWO GAY MUSIC TEACHERS**

4:02 p.m. Would they show? Our participants Kevin and James arrived at the restaurant almost at the same moment. After a few brief introductions, exchanges of signed consent forms, and polite inquiry into Kevin's day at work, we began the interview with these two music teachers. Kevin and James selected this particular location for the interview because of its private and relatively quiet dining area within a location they felt comfortable enough to talk openly about themselves. Even though we were in the center of a major Midwestern city, these gentlemen nevertheless lived in a part of the United States where one could be harassed or discriminated against for being gay.

### **LGBTQ DISCRIMINATION AND MUSIC EDUCATION**

Music education scholars have been relatively slow in embracing the charge by Gould (1994) to study "marginalized personalities" (p. 96), including people of color; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals; and differently-abled persons. According to Freer (2013), it is the responsibility of academic journals to represent the diversity inherent within the organizations they serve. Freer's (2013) analysis suggests, however, that music journals associated with the National Association for Music Education in the United States have been the least LGBTQ-inclusive of major arts education journals.

A groundbreaking article by Bergonzi (2009) has invited meaningful discourse regarding the erasure and discriminatory challenges faced by LGBTQ students and teachers. In his article and in subsequent symposia and writings on LGBTQ studies and music education, Bergonzi has appealed to music educators to consider the discrimination that is inherent in heterosexual privilege. Since the publication of Bergonzi's seminal article, other music education scholars have stepped forward to address such issues as harassment (Carter, 2011), bullying (Taylor, 2011b), and hazing (Carter, 2012; Freer, 2012).

For music teachers, LGBTQ discrimination runs the spectrum from an inability to speak freely about personal life, to more serious concerns such as job and life security (Bergonzi, 2009). Bergonzi (2015) also points to the stress for LGBTQ teachers as they continually re-negotiate their identities and relationship to the "closet" throughout their careers, including as preservice teachers, student teachers, job applicants, novice teachers, and even as experienced teachers moving to new jobs (see also Cavicchia, 2011; Fitzpatrick & Hansen, 2010; Furman, 2011; Natale-Abramo, 2011; Taylor, 2011a).

Presently, over half of music education programs reportedly include LGBTQ-related discussions in undergraduate coursework (Spano, 2011). However, music education scholars express the need for further awareness of issues of sexual orientation as part of teacher education curricula because of the particular and often critical nature of concerns related to LGBTQ discrimination in the workplace (Haywood, 2011; Sweet & Paparo, 2011; Bergonzi, 2015).

Music education scholars have attempted to explain the undesirable “othering” and discriminatory treatment experienced by gay men. For instance, Koza (1994) suggests that a social system of “compulsory heterosexuality” in tandem with a norm of maleness as the standard for superiority paint the male homosexual as an “undesirable other” (p. 50). Further, Gould (2012) attributes overt and covert “disappearing” of gays within music education as a result of “homosexual panic” (p. 46) stemming from an attempt to masculinize and emphasize rationality in a profession that is often perceived as “feminine” and/or “soft.”

As LGBTQ scholarship in music and education is yet in its infancy, there is a need for the sharing of individual narratives to illustrate the range of the challenges and experiences of teachers who identify somewhere within this spectrum. The traditional practice of educational research to generalize populations does not align with a queer theory stance, in which the point is to “disrupt normalizing discourses . . . such as those that have been used historically to police teachers, students, and administrators at all levels of education” (Renn, 2010, p. 132; see also Blount, 2005; Dilley, 2002; Tierney & Dilley, 1998; Quinn & Meiners, 2009). In this vein, Nichols (2013) asserts:

One of the unfortunate consequences of LGBT[Q] education scholarship is that it often subsumes the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons into one category, essentializing or obscuring the particular concerns of each group . . . One purpose of emancipatory story sharing is to bring forward the voices of those who are typically unheard in mainstream discourse. (pp. 263-4)

The sharing of unique narratives can, therefore, bring to light issues that may help music teacher educators more effectively approach the diversity of experiences they may encounter.

## METHOD

The need for better awareness in music education courses regarding issues of marginalization prompted us to arrange an afternoon interview with Kevin and James (each a friend and colleague of one of the authors), where they would meet for the first time and engage in dialogue with one another about the social, cultural, and political challenges they face as gay music teachers in the United States. Our intention for this meeting was to highlight support mechanisms for current and future music teachers so that we, as university professors, might be able to offer our own students a collection of practical insights.

We invited Kevin and James to share their own stories and advice, from which others could select ideas that they found to be helpful and/or relevant in their own lives. The topics we asked them to reflect on included their (a) lived experience (e.g., chosen profession, student teaching, classroom, and beyond); (b) sexuality-specific challenges in the field of music education (e.g., discrimination, differential treatment, and silence about personal life); and (c) issues of resilience and support (e.g., administrators, colleagues, students, alumni, student families, and support networks).

## APPROACHES AND PROCEDURES

Using a qualitative approach, our procedures included (a) simultaneous data collection and analysis; (b) construction of codes and themes from emergent data rather than preconceived hypotheses; (c) continual analysis and advancement of theories during each stage of data collection and analysis; and (d) memo-writing and/or dialogue between researchers and participants to elaborate, clarify, and define relationships between themes (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987).

We used the following research questions to guide our inquiry:

1. How has the social, cultural, and political climate changed over time for gay music teachers working in the United States?
2. What social, cultural, and political challenges do gay music teachers face today? What barriers existed and/or still exist?
3. What mechanisms of support were and/or are in place? What supports can LGBTQ teachers utilize to foster a sense of resilience in their teaching?

We developed interview questions in response to the call for proposals on these specific topics from the 2nd Symposium on LGBTQ Studies and Music Education held in 2012 at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The interview questions focused on lived experiences, sexuality specific challenges in the field of music education, and issues of resilience and support (see Interview Protocol in Appendix). We used our interview questions as a starting point for conversation; however, it was important to us that the questions be flexible enough to allow the interview to take on a life of its own and thereby allow principal issues – those that appeared to be most important to our interviewees – to emerge.

Immediately following the interview, we engaged in a reflective dialogue to determine our initial impressions of the most relevant issues and potential themes that would guide our later analysis. Within 24 hours after the interview, we created independent mind maps (see Mandolini, 2012; Wills, 2008) to highlight possible relationships between major ideas. Although we initially discussed emergent themes together, we chose to create independent mind maps in order to allow for complementary perspectives that were not obscured by the other researcher's influence. We then shared our maps with one another in order to discuss convergent themes and relationships, and synthesized individual ideas that we agreed were essential to telling this narrative.

Following our mind mapping exercise, we listened to the entire interview together, taking notes of important quotes and occasionally stopping the audio to discuss additional critical themes. During the listening, we noted the increasing familiarity and trust that the four of us experienced over this short time, including the expanding detail with which James and Kevin shared their personal stories. Of particular note was the telling, retelling, and third telling of a story of James's discrimination that became the focal point of our narrative, which invited a deeper level of intimacy and disclosure between us as the afternoon progressed. This increasing level of disclosure became fundamental to our conversation, as it provided a safe space for experiences of mentorship, empathy, understanding, and genuineness to emerge.

During our listening session, we wrote initial transcriptions of pertinent quotes and attached labels to segments of these transcriptions to depict what each segment was about. We also wrote memos regarding how these segments related to one another. As Charmaz (2006) describes:

Memo-writing is the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers... Memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue. (p. 72)

Following our listening session, we returned to our mind maps and began to separate, sort, and synthesize these data through qualitative coding and memo writing. This process helped us to extract, refine, and group our data into segments that could be compared and contrasted with other data groupings (see Charmaz, 2006).

Finally, in order to ensure an accurate representation of their opinions and experiences, we engaged in a process of member checks (Creswell & Miller, 2000) by providing our participants with copies of our manuscript and requesting feedback and subsequent approval for publication. Neither Kevin nor James offered any revisions.

**Narrative.** We used a narrative form of representation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Barrett & Stauffer, 2009; 2012) to describe the interview that took place, in order to allow the reader a more aesthetic and intimate lens from which to view the stories of these men, as well as our interaction and experiences with them. A narrative approach was especially relevant when considering the evolution of disclosure that we witnessed as the interview progressed—something we wanted our audience to witness as well.

Narrative has been cited as a promising approach for developing knowledge regarding LGBTQ issues in music education, in part due to the difficulty in “obtaining random, representative samples” of “a hidden, oppressed population” (Phillips, Ingram, Smith, & Mindes, 2003, p. 52; as cited in Freer, 2013). Perhaps more importantly, narrative provides a scholarly space for the revealing of unique and distinctive stories that challenge us to reconsider the various shapes and shades of queer experience.

Narratives are stories of who we are and who we want to be. At the core they are the discourse surrounding our lives, surrounding our identities, and they are powerfully shaped by the contexts, relationships, and activities in which we are most deeply invested. The telling and retelling of stories that we witnessed during the interview with Kevin and James was reminiscent of Blair’s (2009) description of the living, organic nature of narrative:

Never static and never finished, or better – always changing and ever evolving, the telling and retelling, living and reliving of one’s story enables growth and the realization of growth as one lives, shares and reflects upon both happenings and the meanings of happenings (p. 22; see also Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

This narrative highlights the telling and retelling of stories, and the subsequent personal growth and deepened understandings that emerged during our interview with Kevin and James. During our afternoon together, these men shared increasingly more intimate details of their professional and personal lives with us and with each other, which provided a forum in which the men offered advice to current and future gay teachers. Unexpectedly, we witnessed the two men gradually develop a shared sense of professional and emotional trust and mentorship that also became a story of its own.

## **TRANSFORMATION THROUGH THE TELLING AND RETELLING OF STORIES**

Once the food was served and initial small talk reached a stopping point, we asked Kevin and James to share their professional teaching histories with us. They did so, but with the kind of professional distance that one might share with an administrator or prospective employer. Kevin, who was in his mid-fifties, began teaching school choir in the early 1980s and in his free time had been the director of the gay men's choir in a nearby city. Kevin told us of his successful career that spanned over three decades, complete with stories of competition success. James, in his mid-twenties, had recently begun teaching in 2008. He expended more words in telling us about his first two years of teaching at Newtown, serving as an assistant orchestra director in a large, prestigious program. According to his account, he was hand-picked right out of college for this position by his mentor, Janice. James reported that he moved to Smithfield School after his second year because he felt ready to establish his own identity as a music education professional:

After two years I went to Smithfield, because I wanted to do it myself. I knew that staying in Newtown would keep me in the shadow of Janice. I didn't want to stay in the shadow of Janice forever, because she conducted the flagship ensemble—and I knew that I would never get to do that as long as she was there. So I decided it was time for me to go out and do it on my own. I learned so much from her that I thought I was ready to do it, and I think it was a good move.

When James first told us the above story, the other three of us did not think much of it except perhaps to consider that James was a young and budding star who was able to move quickly up the career ladder thanks to the respect, support, and mentorship of his older colleagues. With no further interest in this topic, we simply continued our conversation.

Keeping with our semi-structured interview prompt, we asked James and Kevin what social, cultural, and political challenges they had experienced as gay music teachers. This question welcomed a more intimate retelling of James's initial story about his move away from Newtown. In this second telling it became evident that James's sexual orientation had played an unwelcome role in the unfolding of events:

James: At Newtown, that was a pretty dark time in my life—professionally, not because of my teaching, but because of the way I was treated in that town. . . . The second year, there was a—I'll never forget it—there was a high school boy, and he, he came to me and wanted to talk to me about coming out. So I listened to him and talked to him, and actually the conversation was very short. It happened in a hallway with a bunch of other kids going by. But somehow the administration got wind of it, and, and they called, and I was actually put on administrative leave for a couple weeks.

Kevin: For that?

James: Yep, uh huh, yep.

Author 2: Wait, did I miss something? For a conversation?

James: Yep, a conversation that happened. They put me on administrative leave because they were absolutely positive that I was sleeping with this kid. The parents were saying, "Well, we think that, you know, this boy is sleeping with Mr. Davison, he's had this conversation with him; clearly there is much more than that. . . ." And of course I said, "NO, that's not it at all. This kid came and approached me and asked ME to talk to him." The kid said, "I need to talk to someone." I was told by the administration that I should have sent him to guidance. . . . So, I called the union rep right away, and what basically ended up happening was that they of course cleared me of anything because there was nothing to find. But I was informed that I would not be renewed at the end of my contract and that if I left, they would give me a glowing recommendation of my teaching, which was fine. It was one of those things, you know, "You're a great teacher, but we can't have you here, so go on and go somewhere else." It was an extremely painful situation for me, because I just didn't understand it. You hear about things like that happening to other people, but when it happens to YOU, it's very painful. And Janice, it devastated her, it broke her heart. . . . and I don't think she really knew how to respond to it. She told me, "I went into the principal's office, I went into the superintendent's office. . . . every day and begged them to keep you, but," she said, "there was a small group of parents that was not going to have it, and you had to go."

This time, the other three of us were so taken by this retelling of James's story of discriminatory treatment that it altered the direction of the rest of our interview. The authors caught each other's eyes across the table, as we recognized the potential for James's story to inspire a conversation about our third research question, particularly what supports gay teachers could utilize to foster a sense of resilience in their teaching. We mentioned to both gentlemen how useful their wisdom might be to preservice teachers at the universities where each of us taught. With this invitation, Kevin and James began to offer advice for present and future LGBTQ teachers based on the lessons James had learned from his experience, combined with insights that Kevin shared as an older and more experienced teacher.

## **KEVIN AND JAMES OFFER ADVICE TO LGBTQ MUSIC TEACHERS**

### **"Knowing Your Music Stuff"**

Kevin and James both stated that a music teacher's primary focus in the classroom should not be on the teacher's personal life, but on the students, their musicianship, and character development. According to Kevin and James, "knowing your music stuff" and preparing students to have good musicianship skills should be paramount, while also finding ways to allow students to be comfortable with themselves as people.

By focusing first on the music, both teachers felt they had earned the trust of students, parents, and administrators who could then come to love and accept who these teachers were. For example, Kevin had taught many students from conservative religious backgrounds who, he said, made their trust in him clear by making such comments as: "I may not necessarily agree with your lifestyle, but I want to learn from you." This demonstrates Kevin's ability to respond to individuals who may not have necessarily agreed with his sexual identity.

### **"YOU CAN'T TEACH CHARACTER. YOU HAVE TO MODEL IT."**

Once trust was developed, Kevin and James found that they were able to influence their students in ways beyond mere playing or singing of notes, and that expanded to the development of prosocial behaviors such as demonstrating kindness and respect for others. For example, Kevin was able to help his students understand the negative impact of hurtful words by speaking up when students used "bigoted slurs." He mentioned that it was taking time to address the "little things" that made a difference:

For a long time kids would say in the classroom, “Oh that’s so gay.” And I would always say, “Is it pink? Does it wear a boa? Does it have sequins?” you know; and they would just look at me and say, “Well you know what I mean.” And they would then say, “I mean that’s stupid.” And I would say [sarcastically], “Well I’m really glad that you equate the two,” and they were like, “Well, I didn’t think about it that way.” And I said, “Start.” So it’s those little things. I’m not going to be out there lead[ing] the gay parade down the center aisle of my school, but I think it’s more [leading] by example.

James’s impact on the social development of his students—without regard for his sexual orientation or theirs—was evident in a story he shared with us about an 8th grade student publicly recognizing him at an end-of-year concert. The student gave James a framed piece of prose she had written about him. He reported:

She said, you know, “class has been great, you’ve taught me so much about music and I really appreciate that, but I also appreciate how you have taught me about respecting other people, accepting other people, and just being a good person.” I always tell the kids that my classroom operates on a system of shared respect, of teamwork, of treating people the way you want to be treated. These are things I say every single day. And for me, even as a music teacher, hearing her say that, just brought tears to my eyes. I want to create good musicians, but more than that I want to help create good people, to shape good people. And for her to say, “I’m a better person because I was in your class” was just monumental to me, and that—maybe even more than the recruiting numbers—that may have been my crowning achievement thus far. I think we as teachers have the ability to inspire kids to be good people, and I think it’s a disservice to them if we don’t do that.

James finished by emphasizing that good musicianship and citizenship could create a more inclusive community:

Obviously we want to create good musicians, but we also want to create very good people who can go out into the world. And where these lines that have been drawn . . . for sexuality, for skin color, for religion, for all that stuff, just sort of start to blur and disappear.

Kevin recapped the crux of this conversation by stating succinctly, “You can’t teach character. You have to model it.”

## **"I'M NOT A GAY MUSIC TEACHER. I AM A MUSIC TEACHER WHO HAPPENS TO BE GAY."**

We told our interviewees that, as college professors, we often had LGBTQ students approach us and ask if they would be able to make it as teachers. James and Kevin shared their responses through a friendly dialogue:

James: I would say absolutely you can. I mean, that has little to no bearing on your ability to do your job. You don't hear straight people coming up to you and saying, I'm straight, can I be ...

Kevin: Can I be a hairdresser? (laughs)

James: Right, and to that we say, absolutely NOT, take a different job (laughs). No, but seriously I think I would counter and say to that person, "Why not? What would stop you from doing that? Do you have a heart for kids? Do you want to teach music? Are you passionate about this?" And if that's the case, then your sexuality can take a back seat. I think kids who say that are not really concerned about their ability to be a teacher. They are insecure with themselves; they're not secure in who they are. I say it again: Being gay or being straight, or being whatever you happen to be, is a small piece of a larger puzzle. It's not the most important thing in your life! And I think especially when you want to become a teacher, you just have to put that aside and say, "Am I a person who has the ability and the passion and the drive to teach?" If you have that, then your sexuality probably doesn't matter.

While they recognized the impact of their sexuality on their personal and even professional lives, both men emphasized that being a good teacher was much more important than one's sexual orientation. James, paraphrasing earlier comments from Kevin and expanding them to include his own opinions, stated:

I think our sexuality, while still important, is only a small piece of a much larger puzzle. Because even with my issue at Newtown, I still found that my primary concern is my kids and how I am going to give them the best musical experience I can. Like Kevin said, "How do I select literature for different ensembles, with different levels of playing or singing, how do I conduct these if I have to do it from the keyboard or if I have to be out playing with the kids, how can I lead them, how can I develop student leaders so that I don't have to do everything myself, how can I..." you know, those kinds of things are more important.

Kevin succinctly added: "I'm not a gay music teacher. I am a music teacher who happens to be gay." In other words, being gay or straight was not a factor in a person's ability to effectively instruct children.

Several times throughout the afternoon, Kevin stated the words, "I am who I am." As we came to know Kevin better, the meaning behind his words became clearer to us: If you are comfortable with who you are, others will be comfortable with you as well. When we asked the men if this perception was correct, they agreed, while James offered clarification:

I grew up in a time when things were really starting to change; the tide was really starting to shift. I knew who I was, I knew what I wanted, and I was ok with that. But I think the most important thing for [teachers] is feeling comfortable in their classes. Everyone likes to be comfortable, you know.

## **"YOU MIGHT AS WELL BE WHO YOU ARE AND OWN IT."**

Kevin emphasized the importance of being honest and genuine, recognizing the intelligence and intuitive nature of students who would "see through you anyway."

And really, there's not a lot you are going to hide from the kids anyway. I mean, they are very good at seeing through [you] . . . I mean they're like, "Come on, really?" "Is that really . . . ?" So why bother? I mean, you might as well be who you are and own it, because they're going to see false pretense in a heartbeat.

Kevin further shared how his reputation for being a genuine person, focused on teaching musicianship and character, helped to bring a change of heart from initially prejudiced individuals. He offered the following anecdote as an example:

Several years ago, [a colleague] was very uncomfortable around me for a long time. We ended up at lunch together alone, and I could tell he was squirming a little bit. He said, "Now Kevin, I really need to tell you something." And I was like, "Oh God, here it comes." He said, "I used to be the most discriminating man on the face of the earth until I had to put a face with the discrimination." And he said, "You really turned me around." So it wasn't a big thing, I wasn't out there waving the flag, I was just having lunch. And you know, I'm not perfect and I have my faults, and I am who I am—take me or leave me—but over the course of time I think you just do your job and move forward.

## **"IF THERE'S EVER A PROBLEM, I'M IN YOUR CORNER."**

Both James and Kevin recommended finding and encouraging support among straight allies (both students and colleagues). When James met with difficulty at Newtown, his union representative (incidentally, a lesbian) advised him, "We can either [fight this] or we can keep you employed the rest of your life." James chose to simply move on so that he could continue doing what he loves, in a new district where he would thrive and be accepted. He is now very supported in a larger city environment where people are more accepting of all kinds of difference. In fact, upon his hiring one of his colleagues reportedly boasted to a friend, "I've just hired this fabulous gay man!"

Kevin also found support in certain administrators in his school:

When I first started teaching here, I think the principal just didn't care about my sexuality. It wasn't an issue. The assistant principal at the time said, "If there's ever a problem, I'm in your corner." And he has. In fact, through a recent process of me splitting up with my partner, he has emailed a couple of times and said, "You're my hero, you always have been." . . .

Kevin suggested that students can be the biggest advocates for gay teachers:

The kids, believe it or not, the high school kids, are really in my corner. In fact, if I've been called a name, they're like, "Tell me who it is and I'll take them out." And I say, "You know, violence is never the answer," but they're always like, "Tell me who it is," and I'm like, "No, we've got it handled, don't worry."

Kevin described an experience where he was asked to be an advisor to a newly formed Gay-Straight Alliance at his school. His response to the student was, "Yes, as long as you find a straight advisor too." Three straight teachers were very excited about volunteering, so Kevin never needed to serve.

## **"WHEN SOMETHING HAPPENS . . . SHARE IT WITH SOMEONE ELSE."**

Both teachers mentioned multiple times throughout our interview that they considered it critical for teachers to document their experiences, especially any interaction with a student that could be perceived as questionable. They recommended going to colleagues, the principal, or a guidance person following any conversation with a student or parent that is sensitive in nature. This enables administrators, supervisors, and colleagues to be supportive and informed rather than blind-sided by discovering this information from a third-party source. The following conversation illustrates these ideas:

James: Appearances are everything. Because from the outside my incident appeared to be a

private conversation, that nobody else heard. Even though it happened in a crowded hallway, nobody else heard what was being said. I didn't tell anybody else about it, because I didn't think I had to at the time. But I really think it is better to be safe than sorry. Because there is nothing wrong with going to another teacher or guidance counselor and saying, "Hey, I just had this conversation with this kid. I just want you to know about it. What do you think we need to do about this? How should we respond to this so we can get this kid the resources that they need?" Regardless of what it is about. You know? . . . I think that if I had done that, then guidance could have said, "Hey James came to me and said... Here's what happened; here's this conversation, here's how I followed up on it," and there wouldn't have been a problem. I really think that that would have done it.

Karin: And that's one of those things you can tell pre-service teachers.

James: Yep, and I do. I'm always like, "Share these things, when something like that happens, share it with someone else."

Kevin: And it can be done in confidence. You're not ruining the trust of the student. The fact that this kid came to you and said this, shows that obviously they trust you. It's not like you are broadcasting it to the world. I go to the guidance person I trust the most or the dean I trust the most and say, "This is the conversation I just had." But it's an instinctual thing, and it's always been that way with me.

James: I'm so glad we brought this up, because if you have a conversation like that you have to share it with someone else. And 90% of the time nothing will come of it, but if you have shared it with someone else then it doesn't appear to be a private thing.

## RETELLING AND MENTORSHIP

Whether by accident or by providence, after about an hour of interviewing we looked down to discover that our recorder was paused. This device had recorded only one minute and seventeen seconds of the interview. Fortunately, we had a backup recording device running on our laptop. Afraid we may have lost part of these teacher's stories, James offered twice to retell his experience at Newtown, "just in case." We began to wonder if he had not just gone through a kind of therapeutic experience by being able to share his story among trusted, supportive, and empathetic listeners—especially in the presence of Kevin, a more experienced professional, whose words of support and advice provided a forum of mentorship for this novice teacher. With this in mind, we invited James to share his story for a third time. The third telling revealed yet another shift in language, as James's story became even more detailed and intimate. This telling was also interspersed with dialogue between James and Kevin, which allowed Kevin to support James in a mentoring capacity:

James: It's been several years and we're fine now and we have our old friendship back, and I can still call her and ask her for whatever I need. But there was a period I think where neither of us really knew; because I felt like I had let her down. By allowing this to happen, I had let her down, because I knew--you know--I knew why I was hired. I knew why I was there and why she was imparting so much on me, because she was trying to get me ready to take her job. And then for this to happen, I really felt like I had let her down. I really did. And I think that was the part that really hurt the most. I can go to another school. I can teach at another place. I can, whatever. But I have a real problem with letting people down in my life. I don't like to do it. I really, really don't.

Kevin: You didn't let her down.

James: Right, but I didn't realize that at the time. And it didn't feel like that at the time. And I kept thinking, like, well if I had only not talked to him. If I had only done something different...

Kevin: Yes, but how do you do that? When a kid—

James: Exactly.

Kevin: —Because I've had kids come to me several times, "Mr. Montello, I think I'm gay." Well, what makes you think that?

James: Yeah, right.

Kevin: And, you know, and it's always the first question. And, you know, if the kid comes to you,

he is... he or she is pretty desperate—

James: Yeah.

Kevin: —or somebody to talk to who understands, because there are people who will say, let's pray about this.

James: Yeah. Yeah.

Kevin: You know?—

James: OK, but...

Kevin: —You know, get the Bible out, and say, here are the verses you need to read young man...

Karin: Here are the rules you need to keep...

Kevin: Yeah. And my responses to that usually are, well, what makes you think it? And, uh, then I usually do say, you need to speak with someone who knows more about therapy than I do. I'm happy to listen to you...

James: Right, right.

Kevin: But, you know, and then I usually, immediately - and it's just my instinct—I go to my administrator or I go to guidance or one of the deans and say, this kid is having some issues. You need to call him in or call her in—

James: And discuss this. Yeah.

Kevin: —and discuss it.

James: And maybe that would be something that I would recommend that undergrads understand, and it doesn't even need to be about sexuality. It can be about anything. If the kid comes to you and says something like that, you need to cover your butt, and talk to somebody else about it. Because, looking back on that now, if I had e-mailed guidance and said, "this student came to me and said this; you may want to follow up with them"—that may have been enough to save me. Because then it wouldn't have looked, because as you said, appearances are everything. Because it appeared to be a private conversation that nobody else heard. Even though it happened in a crowded

hallway. I didn't tell anybody else about it because I didn't think I had to at the time. But I really think it's better to be safe than sorry. And there's nothing wrong with going to another teacher, going to guidance, and saying, hey, I just had this conversation with this kid. I just want you to know about it. Or, what do you think we need to do about this? How should we respond to this to get this kid the resources that they need, regardless of what it's about?

As James retold us about his relationship with Janice, Kevin helped him reframe this experience in a more positive light. Furthermore, we believe it allowed for a shift in James's perception of control from one of victim (as in the second telling) to one of empowerment and multi-generational mentoring, as James (with Kevin's encouragement) began to tell his story as one from which other younger teachers might be able to learn from his experience.

The difference in life experience between Kevin and James had become evident to us throughout the course of the afternoon. While Kevin referred several times to the "instinctual" nature of the professional decisions he had made, such as to document everything and be open about who he was, we also noted a kind of experience-based refining that was evident in his succinct answers, self-wit, candor, and generally positive sense of efficacy about teaching.

James appeared to have a strong self-esteem, while as a young teacher his sense of teacher efficacy appeared to be still developing. We witnessed the malleability of James's professional vision throughout the afternoon, as it became clear to us that James had listened and learned from the ideas his older mentor shared. This is perhaps made clearest by the third telling of James's professional story. While James expressed the impact of his sexual orientation in the second telling (setting himself up in this version of the story as a victim of a discriminatory system), the third version contained additional commentary based on conversations that we had shared earlier in the afternoon. For example, the story now emphasized the importance of documenting everything, as James told us how helpful it might have been if he had simply talked to someone about his conversation, or simply written down details of his brief conversation in the hallway.

We noted that James's third telling, as supported by Kevin's listening and support, morphed from one of victimhood to one of wisdom, in which James's newly gleaned ideas helped him to reframe his experience. James now took on the persona of an older, wiser teacher who could share with others the wisdom he had learned from his earlier years. We witnessed a kind of healing in progress as we listened to James find new and empowering ways in which to view his past experience. In this third telling, James appeared to perceive his past (as well as his present and future) professional life with a greater perception of control.

## **CONCLUSION AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

After two and a half hours of conversation, we hugged James and Kevin and said good-bye. We enjoyed our time together so much that we could have stayed for several more hours, yet James (to the surprise of none of us) had to rush off to another social event. We packed up our recording devices, got back in the car, and drove away—reflecting for days afterward about the unfolding of a narrative in which James, as supported by Kevin, turned a traumatic story of his discriminatory treatment as a gay music teacher into a story of empowerment: James, now older and wiser than he was at Newtown, had learned to transform the misfortune of his past into support for his current students and advice for future teachers.

As previously mentioned, one possible problem in writing narratives on marginalized populations is avoiding presenting their stories in a way that essentializes their individualities. Another possible problem, as Nichols (2013) suggests, “is that despite authorial intentions to preserve complexity, the textual framing can exclude significant events or impart an illusion of resolution” (p. 275). Therefore, although the direction of our interview and subsequent follow-up with the interviewees was shaped by our already-established working relationships with these men, the data we collected cannot possibly encompass the depth and complexity of their lives, challenges, and supports as gay music teachers.

An implication from this research that is based on support from extant literature is a critical need for mentorship and support for LGBTQ teachers, especially those who, similar to James, may face discrimination in the workplace. Recent research demonstrates the psychosocial effectiveness of both formal and naturally-emergent mentoring relationships for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning youth (Gastic & Johnson, 2009; Sheran & Arnold, 2012; Torres, Harper, Sánchez, & Fernández, 2012). After observing the natural emergence of a mentoring relationship between Kevin and James, and further how James was afforded a space to transform his past trauma into support material for other future teachers, we propose that mentoring relationships may be an effective means of support for other LGBTQ teachers as well.

Similarly, LGBTQ teachers may be served by having a place to share their stories in order to reframe

them in ways that provide them with a sense of empowerment. Psychologists point to the importance of perception of control in overcoming traumatic events (Benight & Bandura, 2004; Foa, 1997; Hobfoll et al., 2007), including among victims of bullying (Dombeck, 2012; Hunter & Boyle, 2002). As Dombeck (2012) states, "Rather than try to control the past (which is impossible), it might make more sense for hurting victims to . . . focus on what they can control in the present, for the benefit of their future happiness and fulfillment" (¶ 24).

Another implication suggests the importance of implementing educational and administrative supports for LGBTQ teachers at all levels, starting with preservice teacher curricula that include diversity education and the pedagogy of social skills. The gay men in this narrative, perhaps as a result of their membership in a marginalized population, spoke to us about the high priority they placed on teaching their students about kindness and respect for all individuals, without regard to aspects of "difference" such as sexual orientation, race, religion, etc. Some scholars have similarly suggested that music classrooms may be a particularly effective place for the teaching of prosocial skills and behaviors such as self-confidence, teamwork and leadership skills, tolerance, and self-discipline (Elliott, 1995; Gates, 2006; Hallam, 2006; Hendricks, 2015; Leonhard, 1985; Madsen, 2006).

The present study contributes to the scholarly literature regarding gay music teachers. The two teachers in this study offer practical advice for other music teachers, both regarding insights for preservice teachers as well as the importance of sharing of stories and communicating one's experiences with colleagues at any level of experience. However, these are only two voices of many gay teachers in our field, and their sound advice—although helpful—only paints a small part of a much larger picture. Future research could include more voices from different backgrounds and experiences, including lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer music teachers, as well as from those who have worked in supportive environments where they have thrived and felt accepted. Based on our findings regarding the importance of and need for mentorship and support mechanisms among LGBTQ faculty, future research could also explore the perspectives of administrators, teachers, and support staff with whom gay faculty associate.

While openly sharing their experiences, Kevin and James offered advice for other LGBTQ teachers, which included the importance of focusing on musicianship and character; exuding a sense of self-confidence; finding a place where you can thrive and be accepted; as well as documenting and sharing experiences to enable the support of others. As is common in qualitative research, these ideas are not intended to be generalized to all gay music teachers; the full impact of a personal story can, as Saldaña (2008) suggests, "be experienced by no one but [one's] self" (p. 189). As researchers who are situated in music teacher education contexts, we intend to share these ideas with our preservice teachers and other music educators and invite them to draw their own conclusions as well as tell their own stories.

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## APPENDIX

### **Interview Protocol: *Social, Cultural, and Political Experiences of***

#### ***Two Gay Music Teachers in a Midwestern State***

The two music teachers will participate together in a semi-structured interview with the researchers, to discuss their experiences as gay men, as they relate to music education.

The interview will focus on the following themes/issues:

- *Lived experience*: How long have you been in the field? When and how did you become interested in becoming music teacher? Student Teaching, Classroom, Beyond the classroom, Booster Organizations, Profession at large. What do you consider to be some of your greatest accomplishments as a music teacher?
- *Sexuality-specific challenges in the field of music education*: Discrimination, Differential treatment, Silence about personal life
- *Issues of resilience and support*: What has helped you to be able to function and thrive in the music education profession as a gay man?, What specific supports? Administrative support, Colleague support, Student support, Past student support, [Students'] parent, family support

We may also ask the participants to follow up with a Skype chat or email to verify our account of the interview.

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