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Student, Teacher, Mother, Wife: A Constant Learner's Education and Call to Action

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Introduction

“These are hard questions, Taylor!” Barb is a verbal processor who is rarely at a loss for words when discussing schools, education, and how individuals could be better partners and advocates for students. Ask her about herself, however, and the thoughts do not flow quite as seamlessly. This reflective single-subject case study explored Barb’s life as a constant learner whose intersectionalities, namely sexuality, shifted over time. The primary intent was to understand and express what shaped her identity as a student and learner, with a secondary focus on how she brings her experiences into her work as an educational consultant and her recommendations to serve and inspire students. Though focused on Barb’s experience, the data collection and analysis processes also provided the researcher an opportunity to reflect on her own learning and experiences as an emerging scholar. This paper begins with a review of existing literature, then delves into Barb’s lived experience as a gay woman at different stages of her life, and closes with the author’s reflections.

Review of Related Literature

Students who do not identify as heterosexual, like Barb, are often stigmatized, demonized, ignored, and excluded from the curriculum (Blackburn & Parker, 2021; McGarry, 2013; Lavietes, 2022; Snapp et al., 2015). While there has been improvement in student exposure to sexual and gender identities in some schools—where students learn about some LGBTQIA+ issues in health, social studies, or English courses—many educators continue to miss opportunities for inclusive teaching (Lavietes, 2022; Snapp et al., 2015). Barb maintained a constant learner’s spirit as she adapted to mainstream schooling, and her past experiences shaped her deeply felt desire for students who feel different to have the advocates she did not have in school.

While almost all states require some form of sex education, there is a lack of consistency in exposure to LGBTQIA+ issues. Geographical barriers, whether legally-defined borders or regionally-accepted norms and ideals, prevent LGBTQIA+ students from gaining critical information on sexual health and access to literature, history, and art that represents their experiences (Garg & Volerman, 2020). Across the United States, activists on both sides of the aisle have launched protests, boycotts, and legislation on everything from curriculum to school athletics. Attacks on “the other” are not new; legislation against the positive promotion of homosexuality have been around since the 1980s, though the majority of the laws have since been struck down as discriminatory (Laviertes, 2022). However, a resurgence of hostility targeting transgender individuals, in particular, is prevalent in deeply red states, particularly in the southern United States (Laviertes, 2022; Laviertes & Ramos, 2022).

Queer-focused educational research began in earnest in the 90s and has continued to surge, supported by an annual survey from the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Alliance (Blackburn & Parker, 2021). Queer theory encourages learners and educators to question, analyze, challenge, and reconsider normative structures in education, including “curriculum guides, learning standards and other policies, the school buildings themselves—it is a vital lens to consider how teachers, students, researchers, and other stakeholders uphold, push against, and circumvent these norms” (Pennell, 2021, p. 574). One must consider the spectrum of queerness and intersectionalities when critically analyzing the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students. While greater acceptance of homosexuality is present in some regional, cultural, and generational pockets of the United States, transgenderism, pansexuality, and Queerness of Color are met with fear, disgust, and hostility (Blackburn & Parker, 2021; Garg & Volerman, 2020). This is especially true in rural areas where there are fewer resources for LGBTQIA+ students in the

classroom and cisheteronormative values are dictated by conservative Christian traditions. However, urban queerness is also subject to inequitable discrimination, with school programs benefiting middle-class White queer students to a great extent than their peers of Color (Blackburn & Parker, 2021).

Failing to recognize and honor the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students has profound consequences on their mental, physical, and academic health (Laviertes & Ramos, 2022). This “othering” promotes a culture of stigmatization and discrimination that also robs heterosexual and cisgender children from learning about diverse people, perspectives, and cultures (Lambda Legal, n.d.). Understanding the experiences of queer learners allows educators to better support them in their social and academic development (Freire, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

This reflective single-subject case study was grounded in Paolo Freire’s (1970) theory of conscientization. As the subject’s favorite educational theorist, Friere’s conscientization was a natural fit for her beliefs about education, both her own and how she educates others. Freire believed culture and knowledge changed constantly, causing learners to be in a constant state of learning, growing, and becoming. Rather than empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge, students were autonomous agents able to transform their worlds through critical consciousness. Freire also stressed that education is never neutral. When hegemonic ideals force an oppressed learner to internalize the ideal of their oppressor, problem-posing education gives learners the tools to find freedom. Freire wanted learners to read the word and read the world (Freire, 2018).

Additionally, Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (1986) emerged as a supporting framework during data collection and analysis. Bandura’s framework centers on observation and personal agency in cognition and learning, noting the reciprocal relationships among a person,

their behavior, and the environment (Bandura, 1989; Bandura, 2001). Learners act based on the consequences they observe when behaviors are directly and vicariously reinforced, punished, or ignored (Bandura, 2001; Ormrod, 2020). Like other students, the participant learned over time to adjust her behavior based on the conditions and stimuli she observed.

Methodology

Data Collection and Analysis

As an emerging scholar, the researcher conducted this single-subject case study as a reflective, reflexive assignment in a doctoral course on issues in diversity. The qualitative case study featured a narrow focus on one individual's lived experiences. While bound to a brief moment in time, the researcher sought to deeply understand the participant's current perspectives on learning as she reflected on critical teachable moments in her past (Yin, 2017).

The researcher conducted semi-structured phone interviews on November 27, 2018 and November 29, 2018 with a follow-up email sent on December 1, 2018 to clarify information and check for understanding. The purpose was to understand the perspective of someone with a different worldview and lived experience from the researcher. The central research question and starting point for the interviews was, "How do you view yourself as a learner?" To that end, interview questions explored the participant's learning experiences in childhood, early adulthood, and middle age. She thoughtfully expressed how her family, personality, and identity affected her in these stages, and how they have impacted her current worldview.

The researcher followed Creswell and Poth's (2017) data spiral to organize data, develop substantial codes, and identify themes. Three themes emerged: misalignment in childhood, rationalization in early adulthood, and reflection in middle age. These distinct phases represented the participant's emerging and changing understanding of herself as a learner and a woman. Over

time, it became clear to her that her sexuality drove much of her development, confusion, and disconnection as she struggled to fit in with her environment.

Participant Selection and Description

Throughout her life, Barb has been a New Hampshire pastor's stubborn daughter, a gregarious student who looked like the other kids without quite fitting in, and a spirited girl's equally proud and exasperated mother. Married thrice, her sexual identity shifted from bisexual with a kind-hearted deaf man with whom she is still close friends, to a slightly-reserved lesbian with a wife she rarely discusses, to the unashamed queer wife of a Jewish one-percenter who did not share Barb's willingness to "flaunt" their relationship on the streets of Atlanta. In her professional life, she was appointed associate dean of a university at 27 years old, spent a year at sea as the dean of a study-abroad program with her husband and 4th-grade daughter in tow, and designed a school in the Middle East for wealthy American oilmen's children. At the time of these interviews, she was an out lesbian democrat coaching struggling schools in conservative Louisiana. She has been on fascinating adventures and brings a wealth of experience, passion, and professional maturity to her work as an educator, school leader, and consultant.

Barb is a competent, confident leader who does not let her deep knowledge and wealth of experiences prevent her from learning from others, no matter their age, experience level, or position. Her instinct is to build relationships, and this is where she excels. She has called herself a "down and dirty" learner whose learning style has not changed much over time, though how she presents herself and lives her life have changed considerably. She is creative and appreciates opportunities to dive in and try new things. She thrives on personally connecting with the schools she serves and can be impatient with organization leaders who maintain distance from the client. She quickly assesses how to build relationships with individuals and uses her personal

connections as currency to move work forward. She is easily frustrated by school leaders who are more interested in awards than lasting change, feeling strongly herself that every decision made at a school or education consultancy should be about the students first and foremost. She can be bullish when pushing against something she feels is wrong or misguided, though she is incredibly open to feedback and self-reflective about how she delivers her opinions on these matters, so they can be heard and processed. Her understanding of culturally responsive teaching comes from a deep connection to Paulo Freire's seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and her own experiences both in childhood, as a student who was different and did not have the language or resources to explain herself, and now as a coach and influencer who is about as different from the schools and students she serves as one could be.

Findings

Misalignment

Barb was a sweet child, but the verbosity that ingratiated her to teachers manifested as defiance and naughtiness at home. This was not appreciated by her father, a pastor and school board member, or her mother, a high school teacher, both of whom prized compliance and obedience. Though consistent, her behaviors were liberating in one setting but oppressed in another, causing Barb confusion and frustration (Freire, 2018). She had not learned to appropriately align her behaviors with her environment to avoid negative consequences (Bandura, 1989; Bandura, 2001; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Her home life was tumultuous and oppressive, and she rarely talks about her nuclear family. She found comfort and liberation at school, though, and learned quickly she could use her charm, memory, and popularity to succeed. She was a diligent student who wanted to be the star of the class; though she felt different from other kids, she shined in the classroom and felt great comfort at school.

Unfortunately, her success was based on her skill as a relationship builder and general likeability, not due to mastery of the content.

Looking back, Barb feels her teachers did not understand how to evaluate student mastery and she was passed on because she was a good kid, not because she was ready. For example, she was a straight-A student in math and made it to 8th grade without understanding fractions. This lack of understanding and grading misalignment was later disabling as a high school and college student. Still, this was an important time in her childhood that allowed her to form her personal identity and build some of the relational skills that would serve her well later in life (Bandura, 2001; Freire, 2018).

It was in fifth grade that she developed a crush on her teacher, a beautiful, shapely woman, and Barb started to understand why she felt different. She had a new sense of self, but she did not have the capability of explaining who she was at school, where she felt safe and comfortable, and it was not any easier at home. She said, “I had no frame of reference to me as I was coming of age. [I] knew I was different, but I was only exposed to different gender images”. The misalignment between the images she saw at school and her image of herself forced an internal struggle that led her to attempt to project what seemed to be a socially-accepted version of womanhood. Though it did not feel authentic, she acted the role of a “normal” female student.

Rationalization

Barb never had a crush on a boy. Though she knew she felt an attraction to females from a young age, the hegemonic femininity (Schippers, 2007) imposed on her by her family and schooling made an impression she could not ignore. In college, nobody looked like her. She was small, skinny, and wore her hair very short. She wore, and still wears, little makeup or adornment. She felt different because she was not enamored of men, but she did not see an

alternative. She knew she was expected to get married and have a child because that is what women do. So, that is what she did. David was a sweet, wonderful man who was a great friend and partner; she still considers him family. They got married at age 21 and had their daughter, Quinn, at 24. Barb identified as bisexual when they married, though she likely knew she was only attracted to women and bisexuality was a way to meet in the middle to fit into a world that made her feel different, and somehow wrong, for what she wanted. As Freire stated, “[S]ince people ‘receive’ the world as passive entities, education should make them more passive still, and adapt them to the world. The educated individual is the adapted person, because he or she is better ‘fit’ for the world” (2018, p. 76). As a student, Barb had learned to adapt and continued adapting to fit what the influencers in her life told her she should be (Bandura, 1989; Freire, 2018). She rationalized the adaptation as what she needed to do to fit in, inauthentic and disingenuous as it felt.

Both Barb and David were educators who now had a very smart daughter to guide through the world. Barb’s parents were not ideal role models, but they contributed mightily to the funds of knowledge she brought to parenting Quinn. She was on a steep learning curve with parenting, but she was a brave, sometimes arrogant, learner during this time of her life. Coming from a family who valued compliance as a way to do well in school and life, Barb foisted a niceness on her daughter that was at times oppressive and restrictive. She was put in a school that demanded mastery in addition to good citizenship, combining what Barb missed out on with what she was taught to value, but Barb was the enforcer who expected Quinn to be a good girl, do what authority figures said, and avoid causing problems, just as she had been taught at home and had observed at school (Bandura, 1989; Bandura, 2001; Schippers, 2007; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2021). When Quinn was reduced to tears over a math assignment that took her

math-teacher father two hours to complete, Barb told her to suck it up and get it done. When Quinn's zest for life resulted in her streaking naked across her college campus, her father thought it was hilarious while her mother remains furious and embarrassed to this day. Barb was hard on her daughter because she wanted the best for her; the authority figures who should have been honest with Barb growing up did not give her the gift of high expectations she wished to instill in her daughter (Bandura, 1989; Bandura, 2001; Freire, 2018; Ormrod, 2020). She is also very hard on herself when she does not believe she is learning quickly enough or doing her best work. It can be easy to rationalize high expectations and rigidity when one has the best intentions.

It was during this time of her life, as a graduate student, that Barb discovered the work of Freire, marking up and dog-earring the copy of the book that would become the primary source of her thesis. She was becoming more aware of being a minority and not quite fitting in with the world. The book provided a way to understand her experiences theoretically and intellectually when she lacked the language to process her personal experiences. She could not understand why she was not, in her words, "blissed out" when she seemingly had it all – a great job, a supportive husband, an intelligent daughter – and she had no one to talk to about her challenges. On one hand, she was a celebrated scholar and practitioner whose professors and associates believed she could conquer the world. On the other, as her understanding of her differences and the points of oppression she had survived growing up increased, she experienced increasing discomfort. As it became harder to rationalize her situation, she and David began leading more separate lives.

Reflection

At the time of the interviews, Barb was happily married to an incredibly wealthy woman and was adjusting to a very different lifestyle than she had ever experienced. Together, the women circumnavigated Mont Blanc and climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro with no expenses spared, but

they would drive their cars until the wheels fell off and Barb wore a winter coat that was duct-taped at the seams. That was not where young Barb, with her first crush on her fifth-grade teacher, thought she would be in middle age. She says she has been transforming for 25 years and wakes up grateful every day.

Reflecting on her past experiences as a learner, Barb is still the natural relationship-builder she was as a child, and she still likes to learn by creatively engaging in topics that are important to her, though she has less need for rewards than she did when she was a young student. She has more empathy and humility as a learner now, and she is more honest with herself about what she has mastered, though it is not always easy.

I have been so rewarded for the things I have done well that it's hard to turn around and face what I haven't done well. I woke up sick this morning and said to Margie, "There are some things hanging over my head that I haven't done well," and Margie said, "What have you done about it?", and I said, "I have shied away from the challenge." I shied away from the data.

She brought this sense of accountability, self-reflection, and focus on mastery to the schools she coached as an educational consultant, and it made a difference in the school's results. She is stretching and having to reconnect with the brave learner she was when she was 20, leaning in on things that are hard. As she is stretching and growing, she uses her experience to inspire her schools to stretch and grow and encourages them to inspire the same grit in their students. She did not benefit from high expectations when she was in school, but she has seen her daughter thrive and wants other mother's daughters to have the same sense of confidence and accomplishment as her own.

Discussion

Barb shared that she has been transforming for decades. As a student who felt different, she learned to hide who she was and exhibit the behaviors that earned praise from her teachers, even at the expense of her authentic identity and her academic development. Students who feel different today still face the same challenges in school that she faced, such as exclusion from the curriculum—students still do not see their images reflected in classroom imagery, nor do they learn about people like them. Gay students face othering, bullying, harassment, and bigotry. States including Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas all have laws restricting teachers and staff from talking about LGBTQIA+ issues at school, not to mention Florida, whose so-called “Don’t Say Gay” bill has been in the news for months, sparking fierce division in the political, religious, corporate, and entertainment arenas (Lambda Legal, n.d.; Lavietes, 2022). Barb coached schools in a state that does not allow her life to be addressed at school. This perpetuates a message that gay students are wrong, immoral, and taboo to an extent that they should cease being who they are from bell to bell. Not only is this damaging to their self-worth, it also means we are choosing not to educate these students about serious health issues that cisgender heterosexual students learn through sexual education (Lambda Legal, n.d.; Pennell, 2022). This is a dangerous omission that affects lives. What can be done about this to ensure teachers validate all students and teach them what they need to know to stay healthy?? Barb said:

I think that sexuality education starts and ends with the emotional elements about intimacy. It validates all forms of love, and then you can get into the parts about health. First and foremost in my mind is to allow images of both in the middle-school years. Had I seen same-gender images, it may have helped me come to terms with my sexuality earlier. Second, all pairings need health education about the physical act of sex. Super

important, but again, I think that the talk related to how sexual intimacy works is overlooked.

Schools and teachers have an opportunity to provide windows and mirrors to students, rather than ignoring, demonizing, or stigmatizing LGBTQIA+ students and their lives.

By serving as a mirror for LGBT youth, curriculum that includes LGBT people validates the existence of an often-invisible population. LGBT students are able to see themselves or, at least, have the opportunity to see people with whom they share an aspect of their identity. Meanwhile, teaching about LGBT-related issues and including LGBT people in the curriculum gives other students a window into a world they might not otherwise have access to prepares them for eventual interactions with that world. (McGarry, 2013)

As a gay woman living in Atlanta and working in Baton Rouge and parts of rural Louisiana, Barb was pleasantly surprised by the amount of support she received. She chose not to hide her identity, but she also did not advertise it. When she shared the news of her wedding with staff at different schools, she was greeted with sincere congratulations and well wishes. The fact that she was so warmly celebrated in the same state that outlaws discussion of same-sex issues in the classroom echoes the misalignment she felt as a child who was promoted for being nice instead of mastering the material. It is no better to deny multicultural educational experiences to LGBTQIA+ students, or any student in a nondominant culture, than it is to promote them to the next grade for the wrong reasons. Barb adapted and has become very successful, just as many of today's multicultural students will adapt and become successful. If we as educators are truly committed to serving all students, we will no longer ask them to adapt, but will honor what they bring to the classroom as valuable contributors.

Implications

Barb provided much to think about and learn from in these interviews. On culturally responsive teaching, she believes perspective is paramount and that teachers must be sensitive, aware, and conversant in their students' cultures. She stated, "I taught history in my early career, and it is absolutely relevant. From whose perspective was I presenting information? How did it relate to my students? How did I help them make sense of the information?" As a student recognizing she was different at an early age, how much more would she have learned about herself with teachers who could help her find the language to communicate and help her understand how to navigate her world? This is true of LGBTQIA+ students, racially diverse students, religiously diverse students, language learners, students with different abilities and learning styles, and all teachers who share these diversities.

Additionally, Barb was put in a position where she was promoted to the next grade level without mastery of what she needed to know. This caused her distress and embarrassment in later grades and could have had a lasting impact. School is not neutral, and there is a significant amount of politicking in public schools that can negatively impact students. We must be compassionate, but we must also ensure we are honest with students about what they know and where they need more focus to gain mastery. It is a disservice to students to pretend they know more than they do because they are nice, different, related to a school board member, or for any other reason.

One way schools have supported LGBTQIA+ students is through on-campus alliance organizations such as the Gay-Straight Alliance. These organizations help students feel greater senses of safety and belonging, especially when combined with affirming curriculum and supportive school policies (Blackburn & Parker, 2021). Mindfully decreasing gender- and sexuality-normative language in sports, clubs, and curriculum could further create positive

feelings of security and acceptance for LGBTQIA+ students, increase access to critical health education for all students, and build teacher self-efficacy in discussing the sexual spectrum and providing meaningful resources for students (Blackburn & Parker, 2021; Brant & Wilcox, 2020; Garg & Volerman, 2020). For Barb, like Freire, education is a combination of reflection and action. Reflective participation in culture circles and codification, for example, allow students and teachers to collaborate to identify and decode complex challenges by posing the problem, engaging in critical dialog, posing solutions, and planning actions (Freire, 2018). In this way, students and teacher allies can push back on hetero- and cisnormative curricula and teaching practices that oppress LGBTQIA+ students (Brant & Wilcox, 2020; Freire, 2018).

Researcher Reflections

Qualitative research is an inherently reflexive process through which “the researcher invites the reader to consider their own assumptions, experiences and practical knowledge, adding a raised self-awareness for the reader of their interpretation of the research and its findings” (Lees et al., 2022, p. 2). While asking Barb to reflect on her experiences, I was able to reflect on my own experiences as a learner and as an emerging scholar with a close connection to my case study participant. This reflection inspired connections that undoubtedly shaped my understanding of the findings and implications of this study and my role as the researcher. Likewise, the reader will bring themselves into this narrative (Freire, 2018; Lees et al., 2022).

I first met Barb when interviewing her for a job in March of 2018 and liked her immediately. After these interviews, I had a better understanding of who she is as a person, how she learns, and the things that are most important to her in her work. Her favorite Freire quote is, “While no one liberates himself by his own efforts alone, neither is he liberated by others” (2018, p. 66). She and I both find it relevant to our work in schools. As her direct supervisor at the time

of data collection, Barb and I talked multiple times every week, and I had frequent opportunities to observe her work with her schools. These experiences shaped my conceptual understanding of how she brought herself into her work in schools. I also consider her a friend, confidant, and accountability partner, and appreciate how open, honest, and vulnerable she was throughout the data collection process for this paper. As her supervisor, I was better able to differentiate based on her needs and access her knowledge, experiences, and interests in ways that benefitted the whole team. She is a natural leader with much to teach other educators.

Barb's experiences with feeling different led her to be a cultural explorer in her professional and personal lives. When working in a new geographic area, she took extra steps to understand the culture of her region: "I have worked hard to listen. Most of my School Directors are native to southern [Louisiana], and their experiences inform me about culture and education. Additionally, I have taken to exploring the towns, cities, and waterways of this area." She models what it means to be culturally aware and responsive in ways all educators should embrace. We can access so much information on curriculum, training, resources, and strategic partnerships; her commitment to cultural understanding could be the key to better understanding the schools we serve as educators and coaching them toward sustainable change that benefits all students. It is my hope that soon our students will be respected, included, and celebrated for all of the cultures, funds of knowledge, and differences they bring to school, and not just for their ability to adapt to mainstream educational ideals.

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