The Lived Experiences of a Lesbian Instrumental Music Educator

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ABSTRACT

In response to studies that reveal that multiple factors may impact the teaching experiences and personal and professional lives of lesbian and gay educators, the purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of Pamela, (pseudonym) a lesbian instrumental music educator. Pamela, a self-identified lesbian, was a married woman and mother teaching in multiple school environments including public and university settings in Midwest and Southern states while discovering her sexual identity. Based on the literature of LGBT issues in education which examines the personal and professional lives of lesbian and gay educators, the research questions for the study are: (a) How does Pamela describe her professional life in past and current school environments? (b) How does she describe her identity as a lesbian music educator in relation to her personal life? and (c) What meanings emerge as Pamela describes her experience as a lesbian instrumental music educator?

The Seidman (2006) interviewing as qualitative research process was used as the design for the study. Data included three phenomenological interviews and a classroom observation. The narrative describes the identity disclosure process and suggests Pamela’s shift from an exclusively professional life focus to a balanced approach that includes both the personal and professional. A renewed perspective on teaching was an outcome of Pamela’s acknowledged lesbian identity. Recommendations for instrumental music education and future research are provided.
The Lived Experiences of a Lesbian Instrumental Music Educator

Research in the area of LGBT issues in education suggests that the teaching experiences, and personal lives and professional lives of lesbian and gay educators may differ significantly from those of heterosexual educators. Fearing job loss and discrimination in relation to their gay or lesbian identity, many gay and lesbian educators devote tremendous time and energy toward keeping their sexual identity hidden in the workplace; express the need to maintain a strict separation between their personal and professional lives; and suggest that the need to maintain their hidden identity inhibits their ability to develop professional relationships with students, faculty and parents (Duke, 2007; Griffin, 1992; Jackson, 2006, 2007; Kissen, 1996; Lewis & Taylor, 2001; Lipkin, 1999; Olson, 1987). Many gay and lesbian teachers, as a result, express feeling trapped between wanting to live their lives openly and honestly, with concerns related to the disclosure of their sexual identities (Griffin, 1994; Jackson, 2006, 2007; Olson, 1987).

LGBT research in education reveals that the lived experiences of gay and lesbian educators have largely been excluded from the professional and empirical discourse that is guiding and informing public school education in the United States (Duke, 2007). Although a number of scholars have examined the experiences of gay and lesbian educators, much of the literature has been published in texts as opposed to professional education journals, thus limiting the dissemination and effects of published research concerning gay and lesbian teachers (Duke, 2007). Ferfolja (2009) suggests that despite the fact that lesbian and gay research has been an active field of inquiry in education for the past two decades, few research studies have specifically examined the professional lives of lesbian educators. Likewise, although an active line of inquiry in musicology, and gender studies in music education, the lived experiences of gay and lesbian music educators remains largely absent.
Purpose and Research Questions

In response to studies that reveal that multiple factors may impact the teaching experiences and personal and professional lives of lesbian and gay educators, the purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of Pamela, (pseudonym) a lesbian instrumental music educator. Pamela, a self-identified lesbian, was a married woman and mother teaching in multiple school environments including public and university settings in Midwest and Southern states while uncovering her sexual identity.

Based on the literature of LGBT issues in education which examines the personal and professional lives of lesbian and gay educators, the research questions for this study are: (a) How does Pamela describe her professional life in past and current school environments? (b) How does she describe her identity as a lesbian music educator in relation to her personal life? and (c) What meanings emerge as Pamela describes her experience as a lesbian instrumental music educator?

Method

The Seidman (2006) three-stage interview process was utilized for the study. Seidman (2006) suggests that an individual’s behavior becomes understandable and meaningful when placed in the context of their lives and in the lives surrounding the individual. The three-stage interview process is offered as a means of providing context to participant’s experiences. In the first interview, the task is to place the experience into context by asking the participant to tell about himself or herself in the phenomenon up to the present time. What Seidman refers to as the “focused life history” of the participant (p. 17). The second interview examines the phenomenon within the context of the present lived experience of the participant and focuses on the details of the experience. In the final interview the participant is asked to reflect on the meaning of their experiences by addressing the emotional and intellectual connections between the participant’s personal and professional life.
Design

Interviewing as a method of inquiry into the lives of gay and lesbian educators can be particularly compelling and informative, as interviewing “is a powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues” (Seidman, 2006, 14). The Seidman (2006) interviewing as qualitative research process was used as the design for the study. The purpose of interviewing as qualitative research suggests Seidman, is not to search out answers to questions, or to evaluate or test hypotheses; interviewing leads to an understanding of the everyday lived experiences of others and of the meaning they make of those experiences.

Participant and Research Setting

Pamela, (pseudonym) a self-identified lesbian, taught instrumental music education in multiple school environments including public and university settings in Midwest and Southern states while discovering her sexual identity. As an accomplished instrumental music educator on the national level, Pamela’s ability to negotiate her lesbian identity with her highly visible professional identity in a largely male dominated profession (secondary and university band conducting positions), is particularly intriguing. Having taught both in the public and university settings in the Midwest and in the South while discovering her sexual identity, Pamela’s story reveals that multiple factors both inhibited and facilitated the disclosure of her sexual identity as a lesbian instrumental music educator.

Data collected for this study includes three, semi-structured interviews, occurring in January and March 2010, and one (two –hour) classroom observation in the month of March. The time between the first two interviews allowed for a preliminary analysis of the data (transcription and coding) to inform questions for the second and third interviews, as documents to effect participant stimulated recall and reflection for interviews two and three, and to allow the participant to offer input into data analysis and interpretation. The classroom observation served to provide the researcher with a glimpse into the daily work life of Pamela and offered a fuller view of her teaching practices.
The researcher first met Pamela while a student in her instrumental music program year’s prior. At this stage in her career, Pamela was an instrumental music educator teaching in a public school setting in the Midwest, a married woman and the mother of a small child. Having parted ways for a number of years, it was exciting and emotional to reconnect with Pamela. When initially contacting her regarding the proposed study she quickly responded with an emphatic yes, suggesting that having had both positive and negative experiences as a lesbian instrumental music educator she felt as though her story may be valuable to others who may be struggling with similar issues and could serve to bring awareness to heterosexual teachers, students, and parents, of the struggles and issues regularly faced by gay and lesbian educators.

**Interview 1**

The first one-hour interview occurred in January 2010. The initial interview was transcribed and coded by the researcher. A preliminary analysis of the data (transcription and coding) from the first interview informed further questioning for the second and third interviews, and were also used as documents to effect participant stimulated recall and reflection for interviews two and three, and allowed the participant to offer input into data analysis and interpretation.

**Interview 2 and Classroom Observation**

A classroom observation occurred hours prior to the second interview in the month of March. The two-hour classroom observation served to provide the researcher with a glimpse into the current daily work life of Pamela and offered a view of her teaching practices and interactions with students and faculty.

The second interview occurred in the month of March in the participant’s home and was also videotaped. The time lapse between interviews one and two allowed the participant time to reflect on the first interview. The participant suggested that this time of reflection allowed her to process her past experiences and to bring new meaning to her lived experiences as a lesbian instrumental music educator.
Interview 3

For convenience purposes and due to time and scheduling constraints, the third and final interview occurred and was videotaped in the month of March in Pamela’s home hours after the second interview. Prior to the final interview, the participant reviewed the complete transcript of the first interview session.

Analysis and Trustworthiness

The three interviews were transcribed and coded exclusively by the researcher. These materials along with the field notes from a classroom observation were then categorized to determine emergent themes. The use of member checks provides trustworthiness and internal validity to this study. Data collection from the initial contact and maintained correspondence throughout the study extends over a five-month period also supporting the validity/trustworthiness of the study. Also supporting the claims of validity is a previously established relationship between the research participant and the researcher, which fostered a comfortable setting for the interviews. The research participant expressed feeling safe sharing the intimate details of her personal and professional life providing richness and depth to the study.

Presentation of Findings

The data for the study will be presented using Seidman’s (2006) participant profile format. The participant profile format allows the researcher the opportunity to present the experiences of a lesbian instrumental music educator through the words of someone who has lived those experiences. Pamela is able to describe in her words, her professional life in past and current school environments, her identity as a lesbian instrumental music educator in relation to her personal life, and the meanings that emerge as she describes and reflects upon her experiences. A discussion related to Pamela’s experiences and to connections with past research will be presented.
Professional Experiences

Pamela was in the eighth grade when she decided that she wanted to pursue a career in instrumental music education and from that point onward this became her life goal and purpose. In fact, Pamela’s career consumed her life for a number of years and provided her with an accomplished career as an instrumental music educator, but an unsatisfactory and troubled personal life.

Her teaching career began in a small consolidated school district in a rural conservative community in the Midwest in the late 1970’s. Pamela described this as a very lonely time in her life, perhaps due at least in part to her almost exclusive career focus. In the early 1980’s, Pamela obtained a position at a larger school in a rural working-class or blue-collar community. The teaching position was in the town in which she had lived as a child. During both of these early teaching positions located in two Midwest communities, Pamela expressed feelings of isolation and inner turmoil.

Her career selection in a field largely dominated by males may have contributed to Pamela’s reported feelings of separation and lonesomeness. She noted that upon electing to pursue a career in instrumental music education that she was not aware of any other female instrumental music educators in the profession. Gender research in music education suggests a definitive lack of female presence in secondary and college level instrumental music education historically and currently (Sheldon & Hartley, 2010). Reasons offered for the apparent dearth of women in these band conducting positions include: lack of female role models, sociological prejudices concerning women and minorities, the historical connections between the bands and the military, and the stereotypical belief of the podium as a male domain (Eisenmann, 2004; Gould; 2001; Sheldon & Hartley, 2010). It is unclear in what ways specifically the lack of female presence in the profession affected Pamela’s experiences as a secondary instrumental music educator, although it may have contributed to her expressed feelings of isolation and loneliness in her early teaching.

Statements by Pamela in relation to this period in her life reveals that issues of identity in addition to gender may have also been contributing factors to her expressed feelings of disconnection from others and feelings of loneliness:

So I asked my former high school principal would you ever hire a female band director... because I had always had trouble with this identity thing...I always had trouble and I’d never known any female band directors...I didn’t know any...even when I decided I wanted to do it... and he at that
time said I would hire you...so 4 years of college and 3 years of teaching later he did hire me. (Interview #1)

Pamela was extremely driven in her professional life desiring to eventually obtain a college level conducting position. During her career pursuits, Pamela gained state recognition for her accomplishments including her band’s performance at a state music conference, and despite her success, statements reveal that issues related to gender and identity also appeared to be affecting Pamela’s professional relationships with students:

I always really cared about my students. I always really enjoyed my students but I always felt like I had to keep a certain distance...because I was always afraid...that they would get too close and find out...that I was vulnerable, and that I was afraid of some things...and it scared me. (Interview #1)

And professional relationships with faculty:

I think it was harder to have relationships like I wanted...with the faculty... I had a few relationships with a few of the faculty...we did a few things with the faculty...[my husband] and I socially with a few of them...later...but not many...we stayed at home mostly...it was just the two of us...we didn’t have a lot of relationships and I didn’t have any close relationships with anybody...(clears her throat)...especially with women...I didn’t have any close relationships with women at all...ever. (Interview #1)

As Pamela described her professional life in past school environments, the expressed need to maintain strict boundaries between her self and her students and comments related to concerns regarding relationships with colleagues and in her personal life, suggest that despite her unrecognized lesbian identity, Pamela’s relationships with others was affected by issues of gender and sexuality. Although she could not identify the source of her inner turmoil and isolation from others, recognition of the need to remain distant from her students and colleagues is consistent with the research examining the experiences of gay and lesbian educators. Research suggests that a strict separation between one’s personal and professional life is common among closeted gay and lesbian educators inhibiting their ability to develop relationships with students, colleagues, and parents (Ferfolja, 2009; Griffin, 1992; Jackson, 2006, 2007; Kissen, 1996; Lipkin, 1999; Mayo, 2008; Sanlo, 1999).

Pamela’s intense drive and career recognition on a state level led to a teaching position in a mid size city in the same state in the Midwest in the mid-1980’s. Located in a college town, she suggested
that it was the type of job she had always wanted; the students were better players most having taken private lessons from an early age; it was a larger school (1800 students) and a bigger and more progressive community. Although the position and community appeared to be what Pamela was searching for professionally, a more advanced music program in a larger school, she stated that her inner crisis continued to intensify and reached a peak while teaching in this setting:

We played at the [state music conference] and I looked at the picture of me standing in front of the band... and I thought...that shouldn’t be me...I don’t look right in front of that band. I was having a crisis of sexuality...of I don’t fit here...I don’t fit in my body...Somehow there is something wrong with me and I’m not fitting...and of course I couldn’t share that with anyone. But somehow I didn’t feel right...I didn’t feel right as a woman, but I wasn’t a man...and I didn’t want to be a man...you know...I didn’t want that. But I didn’t feel right as a woman being married... And I had had it...I was depressed... I was still having trouble figuring out who I was and how I fit in and being insecure about things...so I took a couple of months off. (Interview #1)

Pamela remained focused on her career despite the continued inner crisis. She accepted an offer in the late 1980’s for a university conducting position in a Southern state at a public university. Pamela developed a successful music program at the university level expanding the music program and receiving recognition for her accomplishments. This new community offered unanticipated challenges for Pamela: “So I went to [the Southern University]. The south was a whole new level of oh, my god...racism, sexism, the man do I not fit here at all...the big hair, tons of makeup...the southern ladies.” (Interview #1)

Professional and Personal Life Convergence

The intense professional drive that had provided much success and recognition for Pamela leading to the desired university conducting position, had left her with a troubled and lonely professional life and largely absent personal life. Pamela’s transition to the South and to a university conducting position appears to have led to a convergence of her personal and professional life. While teaching in this Southern location, Pamela for the first time developed close personal friendships and as a result eventually uncovered the source of her inner conflict: “So I told my therapist at the time...I think
I’m falling in love with [a female friend]... and she said, no you’ve just never had a close friendship with somebody... so you’re just misconstruing this as love... so I said okay.” (Interview #1)

Pamela eventually recognized that the relationship with the female was in fact a love relationship, so she ended her troubled marriage, accepted and embraced her lesbian identity, and developed a large group of supportive gay and lesbian friends. She expressed that locating the source of the inner turmoil that had plagued her personal and professional life for so many years was a truly freeing experience:

I felt good about myself... for the first time in my life... because for the first time in my life I fit somewhere... it was hey... I belong here! I fit... I finally fit someplace and I identified with something that was me... you know... I could identify someplace and didn’t have to feel like I was some sort of oddity... there were another group of people that were just like me. (Interview #1)

Having readily and contentedly accepted her lesbian identity in her personal life, Pamela quickly and dramatically experienced the negative effects of her newly accepted lesbian identity in relation to her professional life:

So the rumors are out that I’m a lesbian... I got called in by my department chair who tells me that my contract will not be renewed. I had gotten the highest merit pay raise four years in a row and I took the department from three instrumental music majors to 130 in four years... and I said why... and he wouldn’t give me an answer... and I pushed him and finally he said because of the rumors you’re a lesbian... we can’t have that [here]. So I got fired... for something I struggled to come to terms with myself and something that caused so much pain... you know. (Interview #1)

Having successfully negotiated a career in instrumental music education for many years despite the inner conflicts that had plagued her personal and professional life, Pamela was understandably distraught by her dismissal:

I was devastated. I’d never been treated this way... I had never had a failure... I had never not gotten a job before... every job I applied for I got... nobody had ever been unhappy with what I had done... nobody’d ever been displeased... you know, and now I’d been fired for Gods sake... it still hurts to say that... for something I struggled to come to terms with myself and something that caused so much pain... you know... so I didn’t know what to do. (Interview #1)

The unidentified lesbian identity that had troubled so much of Pamela’s personal and professional life, that had caused years of emotional distress, feelings of detachment, loneliness and
isolation, troubled relationships in her personal life, distant relationships with students and colleagues, had now severely damaged her accomplished career and stellar reputation. Fired from a position in which she had excelled, simply for accepting and embracing the resolution to the pain and agony and she had long suffered with. A survey by Woods and Lucas (1993) reports that nearly one-third of gays and lesbians have experienced job discrimination related to their sexual orientation, three-fifths reported related job stress, and two-thirds feared discrimination if their sexual orientation were to become known in the workplace.

After being relieved of her position at the university due to her sexual identity, Pamela decided to return to graduate school in a neighboring state. As a graduate student conductor in the new university setting, Pamela elected to disclose her lesbian identity to students and faculty and developed healthy and positive personal and professional relationships. The acceptance of her lesbian identity served to facilitate positive personal and professional relationships and allowed for a balanced personal and professional life.

**Acknowledged Lesbian Identity and New Perspectives on Teaching**

After completing her graduate coursework, Pamela decided to return to public school instrumental music teaching. After the devastating experience of being relieved of her position at the [Southern] university, and having fully embraced and successfully integrated her lesbian identity within her graduate student conducting position, Pamela expressed a strong desire to live her life openly as a lesbian instrumental music educator, and to integrate her lesbian identity with her teacher identity:

So I interviewed for the job [a public school in the Midwest] and they offered me the job and I said ok...but I’m not going through this again...you need to know something. I said I’m a lesbian...my partner is also a band director...she’ll be coming with me. I said I’m not going to blatantly go around telling everybody I’m gay, but I’m also not going to hide it. She is my partner, she is going to be living with me and I need to know if that’s a problem because if it is I’m not going to take the job. (Interview #1)

Pamela accepted the teaching position located in the Midwest in a suburban school setting of approximately 1800 students. As Pamela negotiated the integration of her lesbian identity with her teaching identity in the new setting, she found noticeably different results from past teaching
experiences and developed a renewed perspective on instrumental music teaching. The intense career drive that existed for much of Pamela’s adult life greatly diminished and can be directly attributed to the acceptance and integration of her lesbian and teacher identities:

Because I found out who I really am...and I didn’t know what I was searching for...because I wasn’t happy with who I was...I wasn’t happy with who I was and I thought maybe I just didn’t have the right band yet...or maybe I needed to go one step further...or maybe if I just got that college band, that university band...maybe that would make me happy...maybe that would be the thing that made me happy. When all along, the thing that would make me happy was figuring out who I was. (Interview #2)

During the two-hour classroom observation it was apparent that Pamela had developed positive professional relationships with faculty and students in this new setting. Pamela acknowledged the effects of the acceptance of her lesbian identity to her relationships with students stating: “It has changed the way I feel about my students...it has allowed me to feel closer to my students...and I’m more likely if I see a student struggling to take them aside and say, are you okay? I could have never done that before, because I wasn’t doing okay!” (Interview #3)

The acceptance and integration of her lesbian and teacher identity has impacted Pamela’s approach to classroom teaching as she is now less concerned with her own teaching career and pursuit of musical excellence and more concerned with offering students: important experiences that that are going to last them a lifetime...that they can take with them... that are meaningful, and not superficial and short-lived... more about the big picture and less about the little minutiae things...that there are bigger life lessons and less about little rules and regulations...more about how we look at life... I do more with my kids about whatever you end up being and doing. (Interview #3).

When Pamela reflected upon her past experiences and her efforts to identify the source of the inner turmoil and pain endured while learning to accept her lesbian identity, she recognized and shared how these experiences impacted her current approach to teaching instrumental music education: “I think the thing that makes me more compassionate toward my students now...is just simply knowing what I went through and being able to look back on it now”, (Interview #3).

A study by Jackson (2007) that examined the experiences of gay and lesbian educators focusing on how they connect their gay identity to their teaching identity reveals that the integration of a gay or lesbian identity with a teacher identity directly influences the classroom.
teaching practices of gay and lesbian educators. Jackson argues that the more gay and lesbian teachers are able to integrate their full-selves into their teaching, the more student-centered their teaching will become. She suggests that an integration of a gay or lesbian identity into a teacher identity serves to free teachers from monitoring their own behavior in the classroom allowing them the freedom and opportunity to focus on student needs. Therefore, the integration of these two identities (gay and teacher) serves as a gateway to more effective teaching.

Conclusion

Although Pamela’s story is not generalizable to the experiences of gay and lesbian music educators, the sharing of her story raises awareness to the issues facing gay and lesbian instrumental music educators and leads to further questions regarding the implications of her story to instrumental music education. How for example, was Pamela able to successfully integrate her lesbian identity with her teaching identity in her current teaching position? How did the location of a teaching position impact her past and current experiences, and how did the acceptance of and commitment to integrating her lesbian and teaching identities affect her current experiences and the experiences of her students?

As Pamela described her professional life in past and current school environments, it is clear that the tension between her lesbian and teaching identity dramatically constricted her teaching experiences. As a result of the acceptance and integration of her lesbian identity in relation to her personal and professional life Pamela was able to develop positive relationships personally and professionally, a balanced personal and professional life, and a renewed perspective on instrumental music education. Pamela’s story is important as it represents her dedication and commitment to public school music education despite the difficulties endured, and her devotion to the integration of her lesbian and teacher identity in efforts to effect positive change toward a more inclusive music education for all music students and teachers. As Pamela’s story has revealed, the integration of gay or lesbian identity with a teacher identity dramatically impacts the experiences of instrumental music educators and the experiences of instrumental music students: “Knowing what I struggled with I can only imagine what they [struggle] with. I have more compassion for those kids who might be struggling with the same stuff.” (Interview #3)
References:


