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In Secondary Schools: A Phenomenological Study Of  
Preparedness, Self-Evaluation, And Reflection Of Professional  
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EDUCATIONAL LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES OF WORKING WITH LGBTQ  
YOUTH IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF  
PREPAREDNESS, SELF-EVALUATION, AND REFLECTION OF  
PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

A Dissertation

by

SABRINA MCLEMORE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies  
Prairie View A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2020

Major Subject: Educational Leadership

EDUCATIONAL LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES OF WORKING WITH LGBTQ  
YOUTH IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF  
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Approved as to style and content by:

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Dr. Pamela T. Barber-Freeman  
Chair of Committee

---

Dr. Patricia Hoffman-Miller  
Member

---

Dr. Arthur Petterway  
Member

---

Dr. Charlotte Davis  
Member

---

Dr. Pamela T. Barber-Freeman  
Head of Department

---

Dr. Michael McFraizer  
Dean of the College of Education

---

Dr. Dorie J. Gilbert  
Dean of Graduate Studies

December 2020

## **ABSTRACT**

Educational Leaders' Perspectives of Working with LGBTQ Youth in Secondary Schools: A  
Phenomenological Study of Preparedness, Self-Evaluation, and Reflection of

Professional Experiences (December 2020)

Sabrina McLemore, B.S., Sam Houston State University;

M.A. in Counseling, Prairie View A&M University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Pamela Barber-Freeman

The challenge of ensuring educational equality is formidable (United States Department of Education, 2020). The quest to ensure equal educational opportunities and experiences for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) has lasted for decades. The late Congressman John Lewis in 2016 stated “I fought too long and too hard against discrimination based on race and color, not to fight against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity” (Skiles, 2016, p. 1). Many school leaders have a genuine interest in ensuring the school environment is safe, secure and conducive to learning for all students however, many studies reveal a school leader’s self-efficacy is challenged when working with students who identify as LGBTQ. Studies reveal the lack of resources and training as being the main reason leaders shy away from interacting with LGBTQ youth (Bishop, Russell, & Ioverno, 2019).

This qualitative phenomenological descriptive study set out to provide current and future educational leaders with basic tools to use while interacting with LGBTQ students. The study was guided by one central and supporting questions that aligned with five of the seven Keys for Social Justice Leadership Theory. The overarching question for this study was: What are the beliefs, values, experiences, and perceptions of principals and counselors who work with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning? The study consisted of principals, assistant principals, and counselors who all participated in an interview containing a series of questions about their experience of working with students who are LGBTQ. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and data gathered from each participant was analyzed in which five main themes and eight subthemes emerged. Experiences and Learning, Relationships, Acceptance, Welcoming, Self-reflection and Training were the main themes that emerged from the research.

The results from this study revealed several ideas that will support educational leaders while working with LGBTQ youth. One suggestion was that leaders need time to reflect and interact with other professionals about successful practices in education, to get ideas for leading the staff and students at their campuses. Because the field of education is consistently changing, the need for more studies to address specific areas of concerns, such as a teacher's experience in working with LGBTQ youth while in the classroom are greatly needed. More importantly derived from the literature and this study is the need to have educational leaders who have a heart to lead and nurture all students for positive change.

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Experiences

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this to my loving husband Erick McLemore, my beautiful daughters Chase & Leah McLemore, and my amazing parents Arthur & Mamie Lane. You all have stood firmly with me throughout this process, providing me with the prayer and encouragement necessary to accomplish my goal. It is due to your unwavering love and support that I have been afforded the opportunity to transform my dreams into reality.

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Throughout my educational matriculation, I realize that I would not be able to be as successful as I am without the unconditional love and support from my family members.

I would like to pay my special regards to my brother and sister in love Duane and DeLisa Lane, my Grandparents who are resting with our Father in Heaven Arthur T. Lane Sr., Jewel Lane, Marshall Williams Sr. and my loving Grandmother who is still here with me today Mildred Williams. To my Nieces & Nephews, Aunts & Uncles, and my beloved cousins, I love you dearly and cannot thank you enough for loving me.

I hope to inspire the younger generation that surely if I can obtain this goal, you too can make this an attainable goal as you seek success.

“If you go looking for a friend, you’re going to find they’re very scarce. If you go out to be a friend, you’ll find them everywhere.”

– Zig Ziglar

I wish to express my kindest regards to my supportive friends Katrina Cargile, Pereshama Johnson, Shawanna Goffney, Delorean Hogan, & Jessica Broussard. For you all have equipped me with your endless love and support as I have embarked on this educational journey.

Friendship defines the significance of our bond; Our sisterhood defines the significance of the love within our hearts for one another. I am beyond grateful to have friends who have



encouraged me, advised me as well as lifted me in prayer when needed the most. I admire you all for your strength, courage, and diligence, which has served as the fuel to ignite the flame within myself to manifest my potential. Thank you for being my support system throughout this educational expedition.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background**

For the last two decades, research has concluded that school climate, defined as “the quality and character of school life,” has lasting effects on student learning and achievement (Education World, 2019, p. 1). According to Brooke (2017) and Kutsyuruba et al. (2015) with the academic attainment of a student as the top priority in education and during a time when school districts and school leaders are being held responsible for high standards of educating, strong leadership is imperative. Strong leaders foster great experiences for students, which renders academic success. The powerful phrase by Nelson Mandela, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world,” supports obtaining an education is vital, makes individuals dutiful, and helps students gain skills and knowledge to support development in their lives (Sharma, 2015, p. 1). The value of an education is significant, which supports the tremendous amount of responsibility and influence school leadership has over the culture and sets the tone for their districts and schools (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Mendels, 2012; The Wallace Foundation, 2013). A school’s climate, culture, school experiences, leadership, and more all work together and are dependent on one another to ensure the goal of student achievement is met. Fostering academic excellence and ensuring equal access for all students is paramount, making leadership in a school setting of modeling and setting standards for the students and staff they serve crucial (United States Department of Education, 2019).

Today's public schools are visually known as melting pots, comprised of many cultures, races, and creeds. The changes due to the various differences presented among the student body pose a challenge for educational leaders to guarantee all students are afforded a chance to have a stellar education and opportunity to learn (Kemp-Graham, 2015). In addition to the demographic makeup changing in public schools, according to Kemp-Graham (2015) and Kutsyuruba et al. (2015) leadership must also recognize the influences that gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, education, and schooling have on student achievement. The United States Department of Education's School Climate and Safety survey conducted by the Office of Civil Rights reported roughly 135,200 individuals were harassed or tormenting dependent on sex, race, sexual direction, incapacity, or religion during the 2015-2016 school year (United States Department of Education, 2019). Sixteen percent of the allegations reported involved harassment or bullying based on sexual orientation, which is alarming and suggests the need for education leaders to revisit the laws, policies, mandates, and practices currently in place to create new practices that promote a positive school climate for all youth (United States Department of Education, 2019).

According to Kransnoff (2015), quality learning environments for youth are in jeopardy if school leaders, teachers, and all stakeholders are not committed to creating and sustaining teaching practices that enhance learning. Along with a commitment to education, researchers exploring the characteristics of effective school leadership often begin with examining how well the leaders know the students' needs in their school (Brooke, 2017). Mendels (2012) and Wahlstrom et al. (2010), revealed that school



leaders are just as important as classroom instruction, with both areas having a great influence on student learning; however, the indirect workings of school leaders have a statistically significant effect on student achievement.

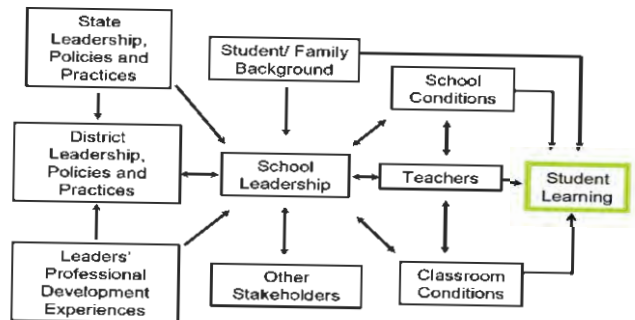
Education research shows that when all components of a school that impact learning are examined separately, student achievement does not suffer (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). However, success is seen when all stakeholders who have a genuine interest in children work together to reach all students, including LGBTQ students, which suggest more collaboration among principals, counselors, faculty, and the school community to invest in student learning (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2013; The Wallace Foundation, 2013). The American School Counselor Association (2019), reported that a school's principal/counselor relationship working collaboratively leads to school reform efforts to increase achievement for all students.

Lashley and Stickl (2016) in their study, reported that creating a positive and collaborative relationship between the building leader and school counselor is an integral component of reaching a common goal, and it has the potential to improve the effective use of data significantly and is a critical element in promoting the achievement of every student. Lowery et al. (2019) suggested in their study that collaboration strengthens the core of a school and renders positive student outcomes. This leadership partnership between a principal and counselor fosters change and effectively enhance advocacy that develops a village of supporters for students. Also, Beck (2017) in his study added that the principal/counselor collaboration encourages policymakers or school districts to

support Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) students and offers thoughtful partnership and strategic planning.

The importance of the principal/counselor relationship brought together the College Board's National Office for School Counselor Advocacy, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the American School Counselor Association. The organizations recognized that although their roles differ, they wanted to see students succeed and shared the belief that when all leaders collaborate and work together, they can significantly impact student achievement (American School Counselors Association, 2019). Therefore, throughout this research, educational leaders and school leaders will be used interchangeably and are defined herein as principals, assistant principals, and counselors. School leaders have a great responsibility for leading the staff they supervise and serving as role models for teachers to foster students' academic success.

Educational leaders such as principals and counselors are valuable and provide the tools needed for improving school climates to ensure they are safe for students to learn and grow (American School Counselors Association, 2019; Finkelstein, 2019; Gonzalez, 2016; Kransnoff, 2015; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019). According to Leithwood et al. (2004) school leadership is vital, centrally positioned, and strongly impacts the structuring of social settings, learning, and minimizing external factors that may hinder student performance. Figure 1 depicts how school leadership is central to all other stakeholders in a school setting.

**Figure 1***Leadership Influences on Student Learning*

*Note:* This figure shows the complex relationships that exist for school leaders and the many hats they must wear daily to achieve the overall end goal of students being successful and learning. Adapted from “How Leadership influences student Learning,” by K. Leithwood, K. Louis, Anderson, S. Anderson, and K. Wahlstrom, 2004, The Wallace Foundation. Copyright 2004 by the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement.

Principals and counselors not only have to establish a relationship with school and district personnel, but they must also make connections with a student’s family and stakeholders in the community. School leadership is key and is a central component in determining the success of school leaders and how well a school performs and ensures learning for all students (Leithwood et al., 2004). All variables depicted in Figure 1 show the importance of school leadership and, subsequently, how they can directly or indirectly lead to student learning.

What remains unclear is whether educational leaders are currently and consistently trained, assessed, and provided updated tools for professional and personal development to address all student concerns, especially the needs of students that identify as LGBTQ (Goodrich, 2017; Troutman & Packer-Williams, 2014). Despite the

uncertainty, the village of educators working collaboratively towards student achievement is a common goal among all educators and those individuals who impact children (American School Counselors Association, 2019). This research took a closer, more in-depth look at the roles and the experiences of principals, assistant principals, and counselors within the village towards the educational experience of LGBTQ youth.

### **Background of the Problem**

School climate, safety, and students' well-being are essential antecedents of academic achievement (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). Research conducted by Biegel and Kuehl (2010) and Kosciw et al. (2015) showed that students who are comfortable and are encouraged by educators have better educational and school experiences. Studies also show that school climate is a factor in determining how well students interact with their peers and learning. Robinson and Espelage (2011) stated, "When school climates are perceived as positive, it may serve to buffer against the experience of negative psychological and social concerns among sexual minority youth" (p. 316). According to the United States Department of Education (2019), "school climate is generally referred to as interrelated aspects of the quality and character of school life or safety" (p. 2). Biegel & Kuehl (2010) also stated that "the term school climate generally encompasses school culture, mood, the degree to which people get along, respect for differences, motivation, pride, and vision" (p.10).

To ensure schools are free from violence, bullying, and drugs, school districts worldwide have adopted zero-tolerance policies and severe behavior consequences to ensure schools are conducive to learning for all students (Bell, 2015). Although policies

and research that foster positive behavior are currently being implemented to provide safeguards that protect the safety of all students, Biegel and Kuehl (2010), Gonzalez (2016), and Kosciw et al. (2015) reported the difficulties that LGBTQ youth in America's public schools face are extensive. LGBTQ students have a fear of not being protected every day, with less than 15% reporting not being targeted because of their sexual or gender preference, and more than 20% reporting being physically attacked (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2015).

The ethical treatment and support of LGBTQ students remain a concern that leaders need to address (Cimpian & Herrington, 2017; Kemp-Graham, 2015). The need for policies insists researchers like Biegel & Kuehl (2010), Kull et al. (2015), and Russell et al. (2016) that specifically address the academic, mental, and physical welfare of LGBTQ students is evident. However, school leaders responsible for implementing policies and curriculum for LGBTQ students have personal struggles with understanding what is needed and how to professionally and appropriately address the needs of LGBTQ students with positive outcomes (Goodrich, 2017; Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Kemp-Graham, 2015; Troutman & Packer-Williams, 2014). "Education cannot be divorced from its connection to emerging multicultural dynamics that shape the context of society in general and for public education" (Arlington Public Schools, 2009, p. 14).

Biases dealing with race, gender, and religious beliefs exist everywhere in today's society, causing an unwelcoming, disconnected climate and community (Arlington Public Schools, 2009). However, the expectation from school leaders, parents, and students regarding a school environment is one that should be safe, welcoming to all, and fosters

learning (Kull et al., 2019). Subconsciously, the same biases in today's society interfere with a student who identifies as LGBTQ ability to perform a task, feel secure, and part of the team more than their heterosexual peers (Kosciw et al., 2018).

According to Boyland et al. (2016) and GLSEN (2016), LGBTQ students encounter startling rates of unfair judgment, name-calling, and physical altercations due to their sexual orientation or gender expression. The research is concerning for leaders due to the growing number of students in America who identify themselves as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Questioning/Queer Kosciw et al. (2018). In 2015, 10,528 students participated in the National School Climate Biennial Survey, which increased drastically in 2017 to a total of 23,001 participants. In two years, the increased number of LGBTQ participants between the ages of 13-21 surveyed revealed an increase in the percentage of LGBTQ participants in 2017 who reported feeling unsafe in school (Kosciw et al., 2018). With reports of harassment among LGBTQ students steadily increasing and the LGBTQ student population growing, one could argue that school districts and school leaders may be unequipped to meet all students' needs, including students who identify as LGBTQ.

Research by Gonzalez (2016) and Simon et al. (2017) indicated that the high rates of discrimination against the LGBTQ student community support the proposition that there is a need for trained, skilled educational leaders who serve students with diverse sexual orientations and gender expression. According to the 2017 National School Climate Survey, "59.5% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, 44.6% because of their gender expression, and 35% because of their

gender” (p.14). Unlike other anti-discrimination procedures where leaders are responsive, LGBTQ laws of protection and policies have yet to be created globally (Kull et al., 2015), possibly due to the deficiency of knowledge about being oppressed, an absence of LGBTQ issues overall being in the forefront, and the ability of many LGBTQ students to become nonexistent to the public (DeWitt, 2018; Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014).

Seventy-nine percent of the student participants in the National School Climate Survey (2017) reported having a school policy against bullying, with only 12.6% saying their school has comprehensive rules and practices that address in detail sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Fewer, vague, or one policy for all or, in some instances, the absence of systems as a whole explicitly related to LGBTQ issues in the majority of schools renders an insufficient amount of protection for LGBTQ students (Kull et al., 2015). Data collected from various studies like Day et al. (2018), Gonzalez (2016), and Goodrich and Luke (2016) called for solutions and specific policies to address the problems LGBTQ students encounter in schools. Furthermore, data also suggest the need for educational leaders to establish a positive climate and be adequately equipped to address all student issues, including the concerns of LGBTQ students (Goodrich & Luke, 2016).

The safety and well-being of LGBTQ youth are important yet they continue to suffer, according to research (Kosciw et al., 2018). The quest to improve the school experiences and academic success of LGBTQ youth has been sought after for some time. Despite the increased interest and the need to shed light on the specific needs of LGBTQ students in the nation’s schools, educational leaders who have the legal and professional

responsibility to protect and educate all youth, including LGBTQ students, have failed in finding consistent solutions (American School Counselors Association, 2019; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019).

### **Statement of the Problem**

While many decisions cast are beyond the control of the educational leaders who spend countless hours with LGBTQ youth, one idea expressed among many is their moral obligation to guarantee a nonviolent learning setting for all students (American School Counselors Association, 2019; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). National attention towards bullying in schools has grown over the past 20 years, along with many states recognizing the need for implementing anti-bullying laws and policies to keep LGBTQ youth safe (Kull et al., 2015). Nevertheless, “despite ongoing progress on the legal and public policy fronts, gay and gender non-conforming students continue to face violence, dangerous circumstances, and significant impediments to learning” (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010, p.4; Kosciw et al., 2015). The barriers educational leaders face in a public school setting of not having instituted policies of protections at the district level for LGBTQ students, along with the lack of formal training ranging from very minimal to none, makes it difficult for school leaders to properly handle and feel prepared to address issues relating to sexual orientation presented in a K-12th grade school setting (Arora et al., 2016; Boyland et al., 2016; Kull et al., 2015; Troutman & Packer-Williams, 2014).

At a minimum, according to Boroughs et al. (2015) cultural competence or the ability to accept and understand different cultures and provide professional care for



individuals from diverse groups, including (LGBTQ) individuals is, needed. However, with the institution of laws such as the “No Homo Promo” and the absence of a curriculum that educates youth in states, particularly in Texas, leaders in schools often shy away from education as a whole or misapply these laws; in practice, by barring more than they are required to do (Lambda Legal, 2020). With the absence of supportive laws and policies that protect LGBTQ youth along with Texas schools being reported as not being welcoming, safe, and conducive to learning for most LGBTQ 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade school students in the National School Climate Survey in 2017, educational leaders in Texas were the focus of this study and thus the state, the optimal location to explore solutions to a persistent problem.

Studies have shown that professionals who work with LGBTQ individuals lack cultural competence, training, and often feel underprepared (Boroughs et al., 2015; Goodrich, 2017; Simon et al., 2017). In addition, previous studies also indicate the need for college courses, professional development, and training courses specifically addressing LGBTQ youth, tools, and best practices to implement that will aid in properly and professionally addressing the informational gaps school leaders possess while engaging with LGBTQ youth (DeWitt, 2018; Goodrich & Luke, 2016; Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Kemp-Graham, 2015; Troutman & Packer-Williams, 2014).

“Extant research from across the world has demonstrated that school environments can be challenging places for students to negotiate their identity or identities, particularly LGBTQ students” (Goodrich & Luke, 2016, p. 145). Also, implications for future research call for more studies to investigate the experiences of

stakeholders who interact and work with LGBTQ students (DeWitt, 2018; Goodrich & Luke, 2016; Singh & Kosciw, 2017). The critical questions of whether the knowledge obtained from graduate programs, professional developments, or developed over the years regarding working with LGBTQ students by educational leaders being adequate or inadequate is relevant; however, this research sought to uncover an exhaustive understanding of educational leaders' personal involvements and perceptions of what it is like from experience, and what they believed it would take for educational leaders to encounter success when working with students who are LGBTQ from a social justice leader's perspective.

### **Origin of the Problem**

Research by Capper et al. (2006) indicated the positive strides and continuous progress the educational system is making by improving the leadership curriculum that addresses issues such as race, socio-economic status, and sexual characteristics for students while attending schools in America. While the focus has been on academic achievement among economically disadvantaged students, non-native speakers of English, and students of color, little consideration has been given to students who identify or are perceived as LGBTQ (Arora et al., 2016; Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Kemp-Graham, 2015). Despite the recent increase of acceptance from society and the few states that have implemented supportive policies mandating equal treatment for individuals who are LGBTQ, there remains an overwhelming concern for those students who are subjected to homophobic and transphobic verbal harassment while in school from their peers and school (Kosciw et al., 2018). Finding creative ideas leaders can protect and

ensure a positive school experience and climate for LGBTQ students is essential. However, when there is a lack of understanding of what and why the knowledge and skills possessed by school leaders are lacking, left unresolved and educational leaders are not given the opportunity to engage in deep reflective thinking regarding areas that are deficit as it related to students who are LGBTQ, the problems LGBTQ students face in a school setting continues.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to analyze the lived encounters of educational leaders, licensed by the state of Texas as principals and counselors, responsible for serving LGBTQ students to identify which cognitive and affective knowledge is required to serve LGBTQ students successfully. This qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to recognize what it is like to walk in educational leaders' shoes in the 21st Century and allow leaders to reflect on professional experiences and training while working with LGBTQ youth. Kemp-Graham (2015) noted that leaders must first reflect and conduct a critical assessment of self to understand their beliefs, values, gifts, and shortcomings to make an impact and enact change for underserved students.

The objective was to gain a full understanding of the knowledge and skills educational leaders have acquired in their academic and professional careers of working with LGBTQ students. This study also sought to uncover whether there are specific areas educational leaders are competent, need more knowledge, or see as problematic and or successful when working with students who identify as LGBTQ. This study allowed educational leaders to gain a personal insight into the knowledge and formal training they

have or do not have to evaluate why specific informational gaps exist to address and increase the level of understanding for educational leaders related to the diversity of students beyond race and ethnicity.

### **Significance of the Study**

Educational leaders have the ethical responsibility to be non-judgmental, unbiased, and professional when working with students, families, and faculty with various backgrounds (American Counseling Association, 2014; American School Counselors Association, 2019; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019). Unfortunately, for students who identify as LGBTQ, bias remarks from their peers or school personnel are not uncommon (Kosciw et al., 2018). Several studies, such as Arora et al. (2016), Gower et al. (2017), and Kosciw et al. (2018) have indicated the need for more training and ongoing professional development, specifically addressing gender identity or individuals in nontraditional relationships. However, DeWitt (2018) and Kull et al. (2017) stated scholarship that specially addresses leadership experiences or areas they feel inadequate to address when working with LGBTQ students is minimal.

In pursuing this research study, the end goal was to understand leadership experiences that build and challenge self-efficacy as educational leaders work with students who identify as LGBTQ. Identifying specific successes and challenges leadership encounter while working with students who identify as LGBTQ can contribute to the body of literature for current and future educational leaders. Besides, this study can also serve as a model for preparation programs and school districts to follow through implementing the specific skills and practices that educational leader participants have

found to be successful in promoting a positive school experience for students who identify as LGBTQ.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Roberts (2010) stated, “a conceptual or theoretical framework is the lens through which a research problem is viewed” (p.129). This study was viewed through the theoretical lens of the Social Justice Educational Leadership or Social Justice Leadership Framework. The Social Justice Educational Leadership Theory is comprised of concepts from both social justice and educational leadership. Bogotch (2002) challenged educational leaders by developing the definition of social justice that could not operate separately from the practices of educational leadership (Theoharis, 2007); therefore, for this study, the definition for SJL was rooted in the day-to-day experiences of principals, assistant principals, and counselors (Theoharis, 2007).

Social justice leadership defined in this study means “educational leaders will make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (Theoharis, 2007, p 223). According to Jean-Marie et al. (2009), Kemp-Graham (2015), and Theoharis (2009), social justice school leaders embrace the role of being in leadership to be the voice for the voiceless; underserved students who have been deprived of their privileges and rights for some time. In addition, social justice leadership for school leaders has also been compared to inclusive education practices from disability education. Turhan (2010) suggested that “social justice may be understood more usefully as a process or a way of ethical living in a diverse society” (p.

1358). Because society is forever changing, and the needs of students today may not be the needs of students tomorrow, Turhan (2010) also suggested the concepts and characteristics of what is entailed to be a social justice leader be continuously reviewed. This study, which explored and focused on school leaders who worked with youth who self-identified as LGBTQ, demonstrated and further revealed the need for social justice school leaders to make sexual orientation central to their advocacy.

Theoharis (2009) outlined a context for leaders to really comprehend what social justice leadership looks like in schools. The framework is comprised of the following four components: the social justice leader, challenging injustice, facing barriers, and developing resistance. These components are associated with the following keys that are vital for social justice leadership:

Key 1: acquisition of broad, reconceptualized consciousness/knowledge/skill based

Key 2: possession of core leadership traits

Key 3: advancement of inclusion, access, and opportunity

Key 4: improvement of the core learning context-both teaching and the curriculum

Key 5: creation of a climate of belonging

Key 6: raising student achievement

Key 7: sustaining one's self professionally and personally (Theoharis, 2009, pp. 14-16).

The four components outlined by Theoharis of the social justice leadership model together show social justice leadership in action. This study will address all components, starting with the social justice leader, how they challenge injustices, face barriers as it related to the principles established in keys 1, 2, 3, 5, and 7 while developing resistance. The four components along with the keys for established in each component together formed the following research questions.

### **Research Questions**

There was one guiding research question central to this study: What are the beliefs, values, experiences, and perspectives of principals and counselors who work with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?

The following questions were sub-questions for this research study:

- (a) What experiences in leadership and leadership traits promote inclusion, access, and opportunity for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?
- (b) How do educational leaders employ professional and personal beliefs, knowledge, and skills while working with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?
- (c) How do educational leaders create a welcoming climate and sense of belonging for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?

- (d) How do educational leaders recognize and react to policies and practices that do not support inclusion, access, and opportunity of for students who identify as LGBTQ?
- (e) To what extent do educational leaders view and sustain themselves as qualified, trained professionals who work with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning?
- (f) What is the leadership experience of working with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning?

### **Researcher's Perspective**

My interest in this topic stems from my love for people and interest in a concern that is prominent in schools that can no longer be ignored. I am a wife and a mother of children who are both in secondary grade levels. The most important of all the roles I serve in, I am a Christian and leader of a group at church for middle and high school girls. My personal life and the roles I serve in, specifically at church, instantly lends itself for personal beliefs and biases to occur. Though my Christian beliefs are pivotal in raising my children and living my life, they are also central in how I choose to love and treat people despite being of a different gender, race, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, or creed.

After spending a total of 16 years in education and ten years as a middle and high school counselor, I have once witnessed and, in several cases, experienced some of the same issues highlighted in the research when it comes to working with our LGBTQ youth. I have seen students continually having feelings of uncertainty and questioning



who they are every day because of their sexuality. I have experienced the aftermath of the damage done to students who have fallen victim to unequal treatment at school due to their sexual preference or how they dress. Further, I have witnessed students who were bold, proud, and who outwardly expressed who they are, and they wanted the world to know. Additionally, I have sat in leadership meetings where the overall focus was to figure out *what to do* when a young man's preference is to wear women's clothing. I have also sat in my office with families needing assistance with their children who *act differently*. However, the most frustrating experience in all of my 16 years in education is sitting in my office, wondering if I had done enough to help and, in most cases, feeling a strong sense of inadequacy.

While walking through my day-to-day profession as a school counselor, with little training on how to specifically work with children who identify as LGBTQ, my ethical obligation to *Do No Harm* has always been at the forefront of my thoughts while interacting with students. Despite having a religious background and a strong following for the principles outlined in the Bible, I have been intentional about not allowing my religious beliefs to interfere with the views of those I counsel. I would like to believe that I am doing right by the individuals I encounter daily but often feel that I am winging it when trying to figure out the appropriate way to handle the situations I encounter daily. Kull et al. (2017) reported that the lack of counselor preparedness and staff development opportunities for school counselors has caused counselor to question their ability to serve and support LGBTQ students. In addition, the research identified the barriers school

counselors encounter daily in providing complete programs to LGBT students are lacking, causing them to question self-efficacy (Kull et al., 2017).

My lack of self-efficacy and the lack of research highlighting the barriers counselors face in their inability to service LGBTQ students pique my interest. Understanding the existing barriers counselors and other leaders experience while working with LGBTQ youth in secondary schools will lead to educational leaders feeling more equipped and confident when interacting with LGBTQ students. By addressing the informational gaps and replacing them with best practices, and providing solutions for improving and overcoming the obstacles experienced in schools with the LGBTQ youth, the student succeeds.

### **Definition of Terms (in alphabetical order)**

To ensure clarity, the following terms and concepts are defined as they are used in the study.

**Ally:** an individual who speaks out and stands up for a person or group targeted and discriminated against (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2016, p. 5).

**Bisexual:** attraction to both male/female (Chase & Ressler, 2009).

**Gay:** same-sex attraction among males (Chase & Ressler, 2009).

**Gender Expression:** an individual's presentation, including physical appearance, clothing choice and accessories, and behavior that communicates aspects of gender or gender role (American Psychological Association, 2019, p. 20).

**Gender Identity:** internal sense of being a male, female, or some other identity (Youth.Gov, 2019, p. 1).

**Intersex:** individuals may be born with chromosomes, genitals, and/or gonads that do not fit typical female or male presentations (American Psychological Association, 2019, p. 21).

**Lesbian:** same-sex attraction among females (Chase & Ressler, 2009).

**LGBTQ:** acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, or Questioning (Youth.Gov, 2019, p. 1).

**No Promo Homo Laws:** prohibit the positive portrayal of homosexuality in schools (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2018).

**Queer:** an umbrella term that individuals may use to describe a sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression (American Psychological Association, 2019, p. 22).

**Questioning:** used to describe people who are unsure about their sexual and/or gender identity (Youth.Gov, 2019, p. 1).

**School Climate:** generally referred to as interrelated aspects of the quality and character of school life or safety (United States Department of Education, 2019). School climate generally encompasses school culture, mood, the degree to which people get along, respect for differences, motivation, pride, and vision (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010, p. 4).

**Sexual Orientation:** refers to the sex of those to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted (American Psychological Association, 2019, p. 22).

**Social Justice Leadership:** when leaders make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223).

**Transgender:** differences in gender identity wherein one's assigned biological sex does not match their felt identity (American Psychological Association, 2019, p. 22).

### **Summary of Study**

Education in the 21st Century calls for leaders who are competent, resourceful, and possess unique characteristics that are welcoming for all students. Extant research has revealed that the needs and concerns of LGBTQQI youth in schools have been ignored, and leaders have failed to acknowledge and address the concern (Capers & Young, 2014; DeWitt, 2018; Goodrich, 2017). The National School Climate Survey (2017) highlighted the need for more data regarding school experiences and the environment of LGBTQ youth. To understand and support the school experiences of LGBTQ youth, this study set out to discover the missing pieces or gaps educational leaders possess when interacting with the LGBTQ student community.

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) over 20 years ago identified that the school experiences of LGBTQ youth were unknown and that this population of students was nearly absent from national studies of adolescence (Kosciw et al., 2018). GLSEN responded to the need by conducting the National School Climate Survey biennial, which has been vital in understanding the experiences of LGBTQ youth. In conjunction with understanding LGBTQ youth, GLSEN has taken it a step further over the years and have also surveyed students about staff or personnel in a school setting to understand if students feel they have allies or someone they can reach out to for help when they are faced with issues at school. However, the scholarship on the principal and

school counselor's role concerning the school experiences of LGBTQ students is nascent (Singh & Kosciw, 2017).

Therefore, this study sought to have school leaders conduct a self-evaluation to assess their mindsets, behaviors, and practices to inform their professional development from a social justice leadership perspective to provide data for current and future educational leaders. Allowing educational leaders to reflect on their personal experiences of working with LGBTQ students in secondary schools may inform leaders and future leaders about the ongoing work for LGBTQ students. The results of the study may be used to address the specific competencies or gaps in knowledge educational leaders have when working with LGBTQ students to improve the overall knowledge, skills, and practices for current and future educational leaders who have or will one day in leadership interact with students who identify as LGBTQ.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

“With successful school leadership, schools become effective incubators of learning, places where students are not only educated but challenged, nurtured, and encouraged” (Lathan, 2019, p. 1). The Wallace Foundation (2013), stated “leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning” (p. 5). However, educational leaders are vital and key players in setting the tone, the climate, attitudes, and reputations of their schools (Lathan, 2019).

Studies revealed that when educators are trained or attend workshops specific to the knowledge or how to appropriately resolve issues related to the bullying or harassment of LGBTQ students, positive results are rendered (Kull et al., 2015). Nonetheless, studies show that the lack of knowledge and content possessed by the professionals charged with implementing programs is limited, causing self-efficacy to be questioned when working with LGBTQ students (Day, Perez-Brumer, & Russell, 2018; DeWitt, 2018; Kemp-Graham, 2015). Research by Arora et al. (2016) and Kull et al. (2019) suggested that not only do school counselors feel unprepared to work with LGBTQ students but mental health professionals also struggle with feeling equipped and competent when working with LGBTQ clients.

Kull et al. (2017) and Poirier et al. (2014) suggested that school counselors and mental health professionals may question their self-efficacy or ability to work with LGBTQ students due to not having LGBTQ-specific training in graduate programs and professional development. Arora et al. (2016) reported that 85% of school psychologists

stated that they were not exposed nor received coursework or training regarding LGBTQ youth's needs during graduate programs. Research also suggested that colleges and universities created to prepare principals and other leaders as insufficient for the vital role they will play in the school leadership related to LGBTQ issues (Boyland et al., 2016). Graham, Carney, and Kluck (2012), reported that several graduate programs, when preparing future educational leaders, used a generalist education approach, in which they incorporated LGBTQ-related curriculum into existing courses work such as multicultural counseling rather than offering specific courses or more applied content.

The need for training and coursework in graduate programs that specifically addressed the background and needs of LGBTQ individuals was a consistent observation among many researchers due to the increasing number of referrals and incidents occurring in educational institutions (Kull et al., 2017). The research is evident in expressing the need for more training, professional development, or a curriculum that specifically addresses LGBTQ related issues; however, what remains unclear is whether there are specific areas where educational leaders lack competence, need more knowledge, or what they see as problematic when working with students who are LGBTQ. The research examined the lived experiences of educational leaders licensed by the state as principals and counselors responsible for serving LGBTQ students to highlight which cognitive and affective information is needed and lacking to serve LGBTQ students successfully.

## History

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) relationships date back to 2450 BCE, when Khnumhotep and Niankhkhnum, both Egyptian royal servants in the Palace of King Nyuserre Ini, were buried together in a tomb (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2019). It is argued that the two were one of the first same-gender couples in history due to drawings that pictured the two men embracing and nose kissing, while an inscription in the tomb read “joined in life and joined in death” (Mills, 2020, p. 2). In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe, same-sex couples and the freedom to dress in clothing based on your gender-expression was prohibited and considered a crime under sodomy and sumptuary laws (Creating Just Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth, 2019). Sodomy laws in the United States established in the 1600s sought to control the sexual behaviors or same-sex sexual activities outside of marriage by making it a capital crime punishable by death to men only if convicted, but later changed by Thomas Jefferson in the 1700s as a crime punishable to men and women by mutilation instead of dying (Creating Just Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth, 2019; Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2019).

The Society for Human Rights, formed by Henry Gerber in the 1900s, is known as the first gay activist group in the United States. The organization published *Friendship and Freedom*, the first known American gay publication, which was immediately dismantled and shut down (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2019). The use of the term *homosexuality* made its way into its first major publication, *The New York Times*, in 1924 without controversy, in addition to the first gay rights group, The



Mattachine Society formed in the United States by activist Harry Hay in the 1950s (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2019). Illinois was the first state to decriminalize homosexuality in the 1960s by removing sodomy laws from the criminal code, which sparked several gay rights demonstrations (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2019).

Fast-forward from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, same-sex relationships continue to be viewed negatively, raising concerns for educational leaders and others who must confront today's reality with an open mind. Despite the negativity lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBTQ) people experience, LGBTQ people and the people who support them advocate to be accepted and treated equally. The campaigns or social movements that started years ago are what we know as *LGBTQ rights*, sometimes also called *gay rights* or *gay and lesbian rights* (History, 2020).

In schools, leaders and staff members positively impact the school experiences for LGBTQ students, with 96.9% of students reporting that they could identify one supportive staff member in their school (Kosciw et al., 2018). In many ways, asserted Mikalson et al. (2018), the development of LGBTQ culturally competent school leaders, mental health professionals, state and federal leaders are still in its infancy. With about four percent of people in America identifying as LGB and the slow start towards implementing policies specifically for LGBTQ individuals, the idea of displaying biases towards students in schools raises concerns for educational leaders who are charged professionally to create a safe, welcoming atmosphere conducive for learning for all children (Hart, 2018).

### *History of LGBTQ in Schools*

The first appearance of LGBTQ mentions made in the educational sector on a college campus happened between 1966-1967 when The Student Homophile League, known today as the Columbia Queer Alliance, became the first lesbian and gay group on Columbia University's campus (Creating Just Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth, 2019; Columbia College, 2019). Additionally, Virginia Uribe began Project 10, a program to support LGBT students in a Los Angeles, California high school. The project was later implemented by the entire Los Angeles School District (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2019). Kelli Peterson, in 1996, founded Gay-Straight Alliance at East High School in Salt Lake City, Utah (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2019), which is similar to the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs organized in schools today.

When the Gay-Straight Alliance was formed, Salt Lake City's school headquarters prohibited all *service-oriented* clubs from meeting to stop GSAs (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2019). Due to the lack of comfort experienced by LGBTQ youth, frequency of homophobic remarks, and lack of support for LGBTQ groups at schools, GLSEN in 1999 conducted its initial School Climate Survey to hear directly from LGBTQ youth about their experiences at school (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2019). GLSEN, an organization established in 1990 by a group of committed teachers, has dedicated over 25 years to improving the education system for

LGBTQ youth and is known nationwide as an organization that advocates for the equal treatment of LGBTQ students in schools (GLSEN, 2019).

### **Laws and Policies**

The United States Constitution guarantees inclusiveness and “equal protection of the laws,” for LGBTQ students. This means students who experience unfair treatment at school because of their sexual preferences have their constitutional rights violated (Lambda Legal, 2019, p. 1). The Constitution’s efforts to outline equal rights for all have no precise specification of race, gender, religion (Lambda Legal, 2019). Despite the pressure to improve the school environment for all youth being placed on legislative and policymakers, the factors influencing policy adoption, and the potential effects of policies on student experiences, urgently need to understand what policies states and local school districts are mandating to protect students. (Kull et al., 2015).

State laws and policies play a critical role in the education system. They can influence how schools are funded, governed, the school's climate, and student experiences (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Network, 2018; Kull et al., 2015). Designed to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, state laws, and policies are sometimes counterproductive in guaranteeing that LGBTQ youth are safe and free from harassment at school.

### ***Federal Laws***

In America, laws at the federal level for education are limited due to the 10th amendment; therefore, most education policies are decided at the state and local levels (United States Department of Education, 2019). Though there are limitations at the

federal level, the Office of Civil Rights ensures equal educational opportunities and serves the student population facing discrimination (United States Department of Education, 2019). Title IX, a federal civil rights law in the United States, was passed as part of the Education Amendments of 1972 that stated “no person in the United States based on sex, shall be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (Movement Advancement Project, 2019, p. 1; United States Department of Education, 2019, p. 1). Title IX protects students at schools and has successfully been implemented for protection in several court cases involving LGBTQ students facing sex discrimination and harassment (Lambda Legal, 2019).

The First Amendment of the Constitution protects students’ freedom of speech and expression. This amendment gives students the right to talk openly about their sexual preference or how they identify, dress according to their identity, and express gender freely (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2019). Under the Obama administration, ideals and guidance were given to explain that transsexual youth were shielded from sex-based segregation under Title IX and showed how the Department of Education was closely aligned to the First Amendment (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2019). This idea suddenly changed starting in 2017 with the Trump administration, when the Departments of Justice and Education withdrew guidance on gender identity cases related to transgender youth’s access to facilities (DeWitt, 2018; United States Department of Education, 2019; Villalpando, 2018). The Trump administration’s decision to rescind the Title IX guidance clarifying the rights of

transgender students heightened the promotion of discrimination in the United States, which further created a strain and barriers for education leaders while working with LGBTQ youth in schools (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2019).

### ***State Laws***

State law “is the law of each separate state as passed by the state legislature that applies to residents, visitors, businesses, organizations residing or operating in that state” (Diffen, 2020, p. 1). Given that the United States does not have a federalized education system and due to the increasing concern for LGBTQ youth, many states have taken the initiative to include sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression laws to protect LGBTQ youth against harassment, bullying, and discrimination while at school. (Lambda Legal, 2019; Kull et al., 2015). The federal government has minimum power over public schools predominantly through federal civil rights protections and federal funding streams, making public school governance primarily falling upon the states, causing various structure, application, and enforcement of the law (Lambda Legal, 2019; Kull et al., 2015).

Some laws that have been implemented and vary from state to state used to protect LGBTQ students include anti-bullying laws, anti-LGBTQ school laws, and school non-discrimination laws (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). Anti-bullying laws provide protection and safeguard LGBTQ students from harassment by their peers and faculty based on sexual orientation or gender identity (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). Twenty-one states, one territory, and Washington DC have laws in place that prohibit bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity. In contrast, 24 states

and one-territory do not have laws protecting LGBTQ students (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). See Appendix A.

School non-separation laws shield LGBTQ students from segregation in school, being treated unfairly, or denied access to facilities, sports teams, or clubs based on sexual orientation or gender identity (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). An overwhelming majority of states, 31, and four territories do not have school non-discrimination laws protecting LGBTQ students (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). Out of the 50 states, four states, Michigan, California, Rhode Island, and Maryland issued detailed guidelines that outline how to include transgender individuals at school facilities (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). Anti-LGBTQ school laws prohibit enumeration or explicitly stated protections of sexual orientation or gender identity in school anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies (Kull et al., 2015; Movement Advancement Project, 2019). *Don't Say Gay* laws restrict teachers and staff from talking about LGBTQ issues and people and are written to prohibit any discussion of same-sex relationships within sex education programming (Movement Advancement Project, 2019).

Many states explicitly have laws that bar the “promotion of homosexuality” in schools, which are known as “no promo homo” laws (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2018, p. 1). “No promo homo” laws restrict all depictions of homosexuality and, in some cases, actively stipulate a restriction on positive representation, meaning that homosexuality can only be taught or talked about in a negative light (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2018, p. 1). As of January 2018, there were seven of 50

states that have *no promo homo* laws, with one states laws just recently being repealed (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2018). Despite states being given the authority to govern the school districts/schools, educational leaders must understand that Title IX overrides state laws that conflict with it. Schools that refuse to follow Title IX can face severe consequences from the federal government, even if they rely on the state law (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2019).

**LGBTQ Laws in Texas.** According to Conron et al. (2020), 1,053,000 youth ages 13 years and above identify as LGBTQ. In reviewing the literature related to Texas, the fight on behalf of LGBTQ students continues. Bishop et al. (2019) and the Movement Advancement Project (2019) reported that Texas is one of the few states with no state-level protection laws based on sexual orientation or gender identity (See Appendices B&C). According to Carlino et al. (2018) and the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Network (2018), Texas is among the few states that enforce the *no promo homo* laws, which require that educational materials for minors describe homosexual conduct as an unacceptable lifestyle and a criminal offense. “For at least a decade, Fort Worth, Dallas, and Austin were counted among cities with ordinances offering LGBTQ residents some degree of protection against discrimination in employment, housing, and other public areas such as buses and restaurants. San Antonio and Plano joined that list in 2014” (Ura, 2015, p. 3). The cities of Austin, Dallas, Brownsville, El Paso, and Walker and Dallas counties have laws to protect individuals from discrimination based on their sexual orientation and gender identity (Freedom for All Americans, 2019).

**School Districts in Texas.** Although the Texas Legislature has not passed laws that would protect LGBTQ students, the Texas Education Agency and more Texas school districts now prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in schools (Carlino et al., 2018; Texas Education Agency, 2019). Several students, parents, and teachers in many school districts throughout the state have no protection, despite some of the state's largest school districts implementing policies that prohibit discrimination and allows protection for LGBTQ students (Protecting Youth, 2019). Texas school districts have comprehensive LGBTQ protection policies intertwined with bullying and other systems that prohibit separating or singling out students, but nothing specifically addresses LGBTQ youth alone. The Texas Education Agency in 2010, "added sexual orientation to its Code of Ethics, prohibits certified educators in the state from discriminating against gay, lesbian and bisexual students and colleagues. Since 2012, more than 900 Texas school districts have quietly and, in some cases, perhaps unknowingly added references to sexual orientation and gender identity in their anti-harassment policies" (Observer, 2015, p. 1). The Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) in 2018 made attempts to address questions and concerns about policies related to transgender students in Texas. Admittedly, due to the increased interest and awareness about the legal rights of transgender students, the organization attempted to address concerns using a question and answer document for educators' leaders to use as a guide about policies related to transgender students' rights in Texas (Texas Association of School Boards, 2018).



Multiple studies at the state, national, and international levels find that enumerated school policies are associated with improved school experiences and health for LGBTQ and all (Bishop et al., 2019; Kull et al., 2015). Texas does not have enumerated school policies, which might explain why school attendance is suffering, and many students hate going to school to face harassment, bullying, and public humiliation in front of peers (Protecting Youth, 2019). More than three in four or 70% of LGBTQ youth in Texas reported experiencing a form of anti-LGBTQ discrimination at school (Kosciw et al., 2018). The lack of safety for LGBTQ Texas classrooms, public accommodations, health care facilities, and other spaces makes Texas school unsafe and fosters an unwelcoming, prejudice environment for students to endure while attending school, which ultimately causes learning not to take place (Kosciw et al., 2018; Protecting Youth, 2019).

### **School Climate**

Studies indicate that students who attend schools that are welcoming and have an overall positive school climate have better educational outcomes both academically and socially than students who attend schools with an adverse school climate (Gower, et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2018; Singh & Kosciw, 2017). School climate and safety are essential factors in the academic success of students (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2018). Studies show that a school's climate directly impacts how well students interact with their peers and learning.

### ***LGBTQ and School Climate Data***

Inconsistencies in health and academic outcomes regarding adverse school experiences for LGBTQ youth than their non-LGBTQ peers continue to be an issue highlighted in many research studies (Day et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2015). For years, GLSEN has taken an active role in examining life at school for LGBTQ students to educate and find best practices for educators to implement in schools (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2019). The organization seeks to understand the type of harassment LGBTQ students' experiences, why students feel unsafe, why they miss school, and their feelings and concerns regarding the treatment (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2016).

According to the National School Climate Survey (2015) conducted by GLSEN, 70.8% of the students reported that they experienced verbal assault because of their sexual orientation instead of 70.1% of youth in 2017. Also, 55% of students experienced verbal harassment because of gender expression in 2015, as opposed to an increasing 59.1% in 2017 (Kosciw et al., 2015; Kosciw et al., 2018). In 2015, 57.6%, as opposed to 59.5% in 2017, LGBTQ students felt uncomfortable and in danger at school because of their sexual orientation, while 43.3 % in 2015 and 44.6% in 2017 felt unprotected because of their gender expression. Approximately 64% of the students surveyed in 2015 did report an incident at school because when they reported previous encounters, they were told to ignore it, and faculty did nothing to try and resolve the claim (Kosciw et al., 2016), as opposed to 60.4% of students in 2017( Kosciw et al., 2018).

Non-responsive or ill-equipped educators have led many students to avoid school activities or to avoid attending school altogether. If students in a month's time period experienced higher victimizations occurrences related to sexual orientation or gender expression, they were at least three times more likely to miss school (Kosciw et al., 2016; Kosciw, 2018; Kull et al., 2017). Students surveyed also reported avoiding extra curriculum activities for fear of being harassed and not protected at events (Kosciw, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2016). Results from the National School Climate Survey in 2015 and 2017 reported students being physically harassed and assaulted while at school. Over one-third of the LGBTQ students surveyed in 2015 reported they were shoved or pushed and 15.5% stated they were punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon. The same questions were asked of students surveyed in 2017, and numbers increased to 36.7% and 16.4%.

From 2001 to 2015, school climate overtime related to the experiences of students who identify as LGBTQ indicated a steady decrease in which students heard homophobic comments or experienced verbal and physical harassment. (Kosciw et al., 2018). In comparing the National School Climate Survey reports from 2015 and 2017, there was a slight overall increase, indicating more investigative efforts on how to guarantee schools are secure and welcoming for LGBTQ students (Kosciw, 2018). Despite the overall slight increase of LGBTQ school climate-related incidents, the interventions' effectiveness did not change. The availability and number of Gay Student Alliances (GSAs) increased since GLSEN began tracking LGBTQ students and their school experiences (Kosciw et al., 2018).

**School Climate in Texas for LGBTQ Students.** The state of Texas currently does not have specific laws that protect LGBTQ individuals from discrimination (Freedom For All Americans, 2019). In addition to not having non-discrimination laws to protect LGBTQ students, Texas is considered a “No Promo Homo” state that prohibits discussions and curriculum regarding homosexuality in schools (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2018). In Texas, an estimated 158,500 out of 7 million youth (two percent) identify as LGBTQ, including 13,800 transgender youth (Carlino et al., 2018).

GLSEN’s National School Climate Survey results (2017) revealed that Texas schools were not safe for most LGBTQ secondary school students (GLSEN, 2019). The majority of LGBTQ students in Texas regularly hear anti-LGBTQ remarks at an overwhelming rate compared to other states. Of the students surveyed in the School Climate Survey (2017) from Texas, 27% stated hearing homophobic comments from school personnel, and 45% heard negative comments about someone’s gender expression (Protecting Youth, 2019; GLSEN, 2019). Most LGBTQ students in Texas experience anti-LGBTQ victimizations and report discriminatory policies or practices at their school, with (70%) experiencing at least some form of anti-discrimination (GLSEN, 2019). Many LGBTQ students in Texas also reported having no knowledge or availability to in-school resources and support, which shows how the implementation of “No Promo Homo” laws impact school climate for LGBTQ students (GLSEN, 2018; GLSEN, 2019).

“Given the high percentages of LGBTQ students in Texas who experience harassment at school, there is limited access to crucial resources and supports that can positively affect their school experiences (GLSEN, 2019, p. 1)”. Texas school pioneers,

instruction policymakers, and others must give safe learning conditions to all students. The future of LGBTQ students is at-risk. Hence, there is a challenge for Texas school pioneers to guarantee youth the chance to learn and prevail in school despite their sexual preference or identity (GLSEN, 2019).

### ***School Personnel and School Climate***

Although policies are in place to protect the overall welfare of the student body, studies show the need for laws and practices that protect, specifically addressing the school involvement for LGBTQ students (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2018). Leading the charge of establishing a positive school climate is building principals and other school leaders such as counselors and teachers (Dewitt, 2018; Boyland et al., 2016; Kosciw, 2018). Despite all efforts to ensure all students are in a climate that is welcoming, the findings from GLSEN's National School Climate Survey (2017) (NSCS) indicated a need for more staff support when verbal and physical harassment occurs (Kosciw et al., 2018; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019).

Since educators have the professional duty to establish a climate where all students are free to learn, it is disturbing that the percentages of LGBTQ students who reported hearing homophobic comments from educators is more than half, and more than 66% heard negative remarks from educators about students' gender expression (Kosciw, 2018). In addition to the negative comments from staff, students who reported being badgered and attacked to staff members felt the problems continued and were not resolved. Students also thought that some of the staff members' responses to the presented issues were ineffective, which prevented them from reporting future issues.

Educators have the ethical responsibility to ensure that schools are positive learning environments and safe (Boyland et al., 2016). The findings presented in the National School Climate (2017) survey suggested a challenge for school districts and leaders to seek improvement. Researchers who set out to find solutions to the issues regarding the school experiences of LGBTQ students agree that a change in practices and policies will require a collective effort from all educators (Kransnoff, 2015; Mendels, 2012; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2013).

### **Allies in a School Setting**

The idea of knowing that you have someone to confide in, trust, and support you while at school makes a difference for children. Research shows that LGBTQ students need allies and feel safer at schools when supportive educators are present (GLSEN, 2019). GLSEN (2016) stated that “an ally is an individual who speaks out and stands up for a person or group targeted or experienced discrimination” (p. 5). Principals, assistant principals, and counselors can all serve as allies for students who are LGBTQ (American School Counselors Association, 2019; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019). The presence of supportive leaders who serve as allies to LGBTQ students is vital for positive school experiences (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2016).

As school leaders, school administrators are central and are key components to the school experiences of LGBTQ youth. They establish the school's mood and determine which specific policies, programs, and procedures are better for the school's climate, all while nurturing and providing a support system for students. (Kosciw et al., 2016).

Studies revealed that LGBTQ students had a better school experience when they identified at least one trusted adult or ally at school (Kosciw, 2018).

The literature suggested that educational leaders be intentional and instrumental in setting the standard for the attitudes, behaviors, and practices implemented on their campus. Beck (2017) conducted a phenomenological study highlighting the importance of school leaders working together to promote a positive school environment for LGBTQ students. Beck's (2017) research supports GLSEN's vision that together, leaders can change the nation's schools into a safe learning environment for all youth.

### ***The Principal Ally***

Seen as the vital ingredient for schools' success, principals have a great influence on creating a caring, positive school climate, free from violence, and the feeling of uncertainty for the schools they serve (Bishop & McClellan, 2016; Kransnoff, 2015). School administrators should prompt social change, especially on the side of helpless or underestimated youth (Boyland et al., 2016). Therefore, identifying how leaders can help LGBTQ students is critical as more students experience harassment at school (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014). School principals are expected to set the tone for the campus. Therefore, their main task is to develop and maintain a school environment, which includes creating an inviting atmosphere for all students and staff (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019). For principals and counselors, this means that they should possess leadership characteristics and implement school practices and arrangements that address tormenting, promotes variety, and offer help to LGBTQ youth (Boyland et al., 2016). Principals are charged with ensuring that staff members are

educated and adhering to policies and anti-bullying procedures established on campus (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014). As the leader, the staff must be provided with on-going professional development, training, and growth opportunities to ensure they are well informed. Principals overseeing the implementation of curriculum, programs, and clubs that support all students, including LGBTQ individuals, make them a key player on the leadership team.

Findings from GLSEN's School Climate Surveys reminded secondary leaders of the harassment LGBTQ students experience in schools daily, which sparked the advancement of new expert norms for instructive pioneers. In addition to maintaining an environment in which students feel safe, accepted, and are free to be themselves, school leaders are charged with ensuring LGBTQ students also feel appreciated, cared for, and inspired to participate and be active citizens in their school community. School leaders are encouraged to dismantle the biases associated with underserved students, race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, and deficit-based schooling (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019). As suggested in the National School Climate Survey (2017), these actions of the principal ally begin with first declaring it unacceptable to harass LGBTQ students and next by empowering staff members to intervene every time incidents of harassment of LGBTQ students are seen and reported (Kosciw et al., 2018; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019).

**Principalship in Texas.** School principals serve as the leaders and supervisors of the school. Therefore, according to the Texas Education Agency (2019), a school principal must hold a master's degree from a university that is accredited by an



accrediting agency recognized by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board or the United States Department of Education Database for Accredited Colleges and Universities, hold a valid classroom teaching certificate, have two years of creditable teaching experience as a classroom teacher and have completed an approved principal educator preparation program and required exam. Since administrators impact the school culture in significant manners, explicitly in values, and underscore their practices (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019), it is essential to have professional standards for principals to follow.

### ***The Counselor Ally***

School counselors are viewed as the “glue” of a campus team, ensuring all members involved are collaborating and working together to ensure students are successful academically, socially, and emotionally. (American School Counselors Association, 2019). The school counseling profession has grasped a more proactive, backing centered methodology that calls upon school guides to be social equity promoters and specialists for foundational change (Gonzalez, 2016; Troutman & Packer-Williams, 2014). School counselors are invaluable resources for LGBTQ youth and all students and are known to be the main ally or advocate for students by supporting them when their academic or psychological well-being is at-risk (Kull et al., 2017). In addition to the day to day work of helping all students apply scholarly accomplishment procedures, overseeing feelings and apply relational abilities, and assisting with plans for post-high school alternatives, school psychologists and counselors serve as a resource for the LGBT community by getting the word out and providing school-wide training and parent

workshops on how to serve as allies to stop LGBTQ discrimination, bias, and harassment (Arora et al., 2016; American School Counselor Association, 2019).

Like principals, counselors also are charged with intervening and creating positive, safe spaces for all students (Kull, 2017). Counselors serve as advocates for the student body but often feel inadequate when addressing the concerns of LGBTQ students (Goodrich, 2017). A School counselor's mission is to dismantle the barriers preventing LGBTQ student's development and achievement but with the understanding that working through the stages of identity development with LGBTQ youth poses many challenges (American School Counselors Association, 2016). While the principal as an ally provides the staff with the appropriate resources and tools that positively enhance the school climate for LGBTQ students, the counselor ally utilizes them daily, working one on one with students and their families.

Counselors act as liaisons between the school and the community and with the students and other staff members (American School Counselors Association, 2019). They work with LGBTQ students and their families by providing various resources to parents and work to expand awareness and to expand the knowledge of campus staff about issues prevalent in the school environment (American School Counselors Association, 2019). Counselors are critical allies for LGBTQ students. They seek to understand the concerns of LGBTQ students and work to relieve the pressures experienced by creating and maintaining a safe learning environment. Consistent with the literature review, counselors serving as allies for LGBTQ students make the school experiences better.

**Counselors in Texas.** According to the Texas Education Agency (2019), to be qualified as a school counselor, an individual must complete an approved Education Preparation Program for School Counseling, hold a master's degree from an institution of higher education that is accredited by an accrediting agency, as recognized by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. In addition to schooling, school counselors in Texas must pass the Texas School Counselor Exam, a required test and have at least two years of classroom teaching experience in a public or accredited private school. Candidates that meet all the criteria earn a Pre-K-12 standard school counselor certificate from the Texas Education Agency (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

More importantly than the credentials that qualify a person to be a school counselor, school counselors, as outlined by ASCA (2019), “have an ethical obligation to support underserved and oppressed populations. School counselor training programs emphasize the role of school counselors as agents of change within the school system and professional leaders. They must act as allies and advocates for all students” (American School Counselors Association, 2020, p. 4). Though the school counselor’s role is inclusive to all stakeholders, the following responsibilities of a school counselor as it relates specifically to LGBTQ students are outlined: (a) must be aware of the challenges that LGBTQ students face within the school system; (b) design a developmental, comprehensive school counseling program to support the LGBTQ student population; (c) advocate for policies and practices that address inequities regarding academic, career, and social/emotional domains for LGBTQ students (Abreu et al., 2019).

## Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL)

According to the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, changes create a myriad of challenges for educational leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). However, at the same time, they encourage educational leaders and the staff to take part in the development of new ideas for improving school and promoting learning by allowing them the freedom to be creative and innovative. Therefore, there is a need for a guidepost so that critical questions are answered and challenges are met effectively, consistently, and professionally. Several standards are implemented to achieve this task; however, for the sake of this study, the three Professional Standards for Educational Leaders adopted in October 2015 that will have a direct impact on how educational leaders (principals and assistant principals) can support LGBTQ youth are listed in Table 1 which is an explanation of the standards.

**Table 1**

### *Standards for the Principal Leaders Who Support LGBTQ Youth*

Standard	Description
Standard 1	States that effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Students should be able to enter school free of judgment from school officials and their peers. Therefore, the principal must affirm the school environment where each student is treated fairly, respectfully, and understand each student's culture and context.
Standard 2	States that effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student's academic success and well-being (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). The principal places children at the center of education and accept responsibility for each students' well-being. Besides, the Principal safeguards and promote the values of democracy, individual freedom and responsibility, equity, social justice, community, and diversity (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

- Standard 3 States that effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). The principal is responsible for building and maintaining a safe, caring, and healthy school environment that meets each student's academic, social, emotional, and physical needs. The principal also shows support for a school environment where diversity is valued and accepted and where students from diverse backgrounds and identities are affirmed, supported, and assured equitable educational opportunities and access to school and community-based support services (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

### ***Professional Standards and Competencies for School Counselors***

The ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies outline the attitudes and practices school counselors need to satisfy the thorough needs of the school counseling profession and the academic and social needs of pre-K–12 students (American School Counselors Association, 2019). Because school counselors possess their own set of unique qualifications and skills to address pre-K-12 students, standards and competencies are developed and implemented to ensure school counseling programs are uniformed, maintain high standards of integrity, leadership, and professionalism for all counselors (American School Counselors Association, 2019). The school counseling profession, as a whole, is broad. The standards outlined tend to be broader topics that focus on the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of a school counselor.

In contrast, the competencies are specific behaviors or actions counselors take that are also measurable (American School Counselors Association, 2019). Due to the complexity of the counseling profession, the American School Counseling Association

has developed and outlined several standards/competencies a school counselor should adhere to; however, for the sake of this study, there are three specific standards or behaviors the school counselor implements listed in Table 2 that have a direct impact on how educational leaders in this case counselors can support LGBTQ youth. Table 2 is an explanation of the standards.

**Table 2**

*Standards for the Counselor Leaders Who Lend Support to LGBTQ Youth*

Standard	Description
Standard 1	<p>Apply school counseling professional standards and competencies:</p> <p>Counselors consistently analyze and conduct self-assessments of effectiveness concerning the school counseling professional standards and competencies and use personal reflection, consultation, and supervision to promote professional growth and development (American School Counselors Association, 2019)</p>
Standard 2	<p>Demonstrate understanding of the impact of cultural, social, and environmental influences on student success and opportunities:</p> <p>Demonstrate basic knowledge and respect of differences in customs, communications, traditions, values, and other traits among students based on race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical or intellectual ability and other factors</p> <p>Explain how students cultural, social, and economic backgrounds may affect their academic achievement, behavior, relationships and overall performance in school</p> <p>Maintain and communicate high expectations for every student, regardless of cultural, social, or economic background (American School Counselors Association, 2019)</p>
Standard 3	<p>Demonstrate leadership through the development and implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program:</p> <p>Use leadership skills to produce a positive change for the the comprehensive school counseling program</p>

Serve as a leader in the school and community to promote and support student success (American School Counselors Association, 2019)

Standard 4

Create systemic change through the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program:

Counselors emphasize and implement positive change for students. (American School Counselors Association, 2019)

According to Abreu et al. (2019), supporting LGBTQ students and advancing social equity activities ought to be done through individual intercessions to establish a positive school atmosphere for everybody. While principals and counselors are primarily responsible for ensuring a school's atmosphere is conducive to learning, the classroom teachers are also vital. They are charged with having a classroom climate that promotes learning. Educational leaders know they cannot support LGBTQ students on their own; therefore, they depend on the skills and knowledge of other staff members and teachers to advance a positive school atmosphere for everyone, including LGBTQ students in the classroom (Mendels, 2012; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2013). All students, including LGBTQ students, thrive in school when they feel accepted by their peers and have a classroom climate that allows them the freedom to be creative and learn. As advocates, leaders, collaborators, and consultants for LGBTQ students, counselors create an environment that is inviting for learning to take place in school (American School Counselors Association, 2020).

### **Organizations That Serve as Allies**

Establishing a school atmosphere that is welcoming and allows instruction to take place with the goal that security, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of interaction

prevail describes what leaders seek to implement on campus to foster student learning (Kransnoff, 2015). Research indicates that GSAs (Gender and Sexuality Alliances) improve the school atmosphere, singular prosperity, and instructive results for LGBTQ youth (GLSEN, 2020). The school's atmosphere for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, and Questioning or Queer (LGBTQ) youth has improved somewhat throughout the long term, yet remains very unfriendly for some (Kosciw, 2016).

### ***Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network***

The Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network or GLSEN is an association that looks to end segregation, badgering, and harassing dependent on sexual direction, sex personality, and sex articulation in K-12 school (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Network, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2018). The organization's National School Climate Survey remains one of the few studies to examine the school experiences of LGBTQ students nationally, and its results have been vital to GLSEN's understanding of the issues that LGBTQ students face (Kosciw, 2018). Several studies highlight the problems LGBTQ students encounter, using data collected from GLSEN's National School Climate.

Studies such as The National School Climate Survey (2017) shown by GLSEN, the School and Climate Safety Data Collection (2018) conducted by the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights and the National Education Policy Center conducted with The Williams Institute, and Great Lakes Center all suggested through their findings that students who attend schools that are welcoming and have an overall positive school climate have better educational outcomes both academically and socially than students who attend schools with an adverse school climate. GLSEN works to



ensure that LGBTQ students are part of an environment they can blossom, be included, learn and grow free from bullying and harassment (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2019). School climate and safety are essential factors in the academic success and school experiences of students (Kosciw et al., 2018). A school's environment directly impacts how well students interact with their peers and learning (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). Because of these findings and research consistently reporting that LGBTQ youth experience bullying and harassment more than their heterosexual peers, GLSEN since 1990, has made its mission to be the voice for LGBTQ youth to improve their school experiences (Kosciw et al., 2018).

### ***Human Rights Campaign and Foundation***

The Human Rights Campaign or HRC is the nation's largest Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/questioning civil rights organization (Human Rights Campaign, 2018). The HRC works to ensure LGBTQ equality and works to educate the public about LGBTQ issues. The foundation, whose mission aligns with HRC, seeks to improve LGBTQ people's lives by working to encourage the implementation of LGBTQ-policies and practices that promotes inclusion and an increased understanding (Human Rights Campaign, 2018). Like GLSEN, HRC, along with the University of Connecticut, conducted a survey in 2017 with more than 12,000 respondents, ranging in age from 13 to 17, representing all 50 states and Washington, DC. Findings revealed in detail the ongoing challenges LGBTQ individuals face in their day to day lives, at school, and in their communities (Human Rights Campaign, 2018). Since being founded in 1980, HRC has led the way in the United States in promoting fairness for LGBTQ Americans.

### ***Equality Texas and TENT***

Equality Texas and The Transgender Education Network of Texas (TENT) are organizations that work to obtain equality in Texas for the LGBTQ community. Formerly called the Lesbian/Gay Rights Lobby of Texas (LGRL), Equality Texas has been defending the rights and promoting advocacy for LGBTQ Texans for 30 years (Equality Texas, 2019). Stemming from its name, the organizations' primary focus is for LGBTQ Texans and their families to be treated equally through political action, education, community organization, and collaboration (Equality Texas, 2019). Equality Texas advocates and lobbies for the adoption of legislation that addresses critical issues for the LGBTQ community. The organization aims to stop laws that make the lives of LGBTQ Texans harder and more dangerous through rapid response communications, mobilization, and direct advocacy to lawmakers (Equality Texas, 2019).

The Transgender Education Network of Texas or TENT is dedicated to furthering diverse gender equality in Texas (Transgender Education Network of Texas, 2019). The organization has been instrumental in educating individuals through programs that enhance cultural competency and advocacy practices. TENT's TransSafe Program offers seminars and workshops to businesses, schools, other organizations, and anyone interested in gaining knowledge about working with LGBTQ individuals. TENT, in partnership with Equality Texas, also aims to advocate for students in classrooms, particularly transgender students, and has worked to expand ordinances around the state of Texas to include protection of gender identity and expression (Transgender Education Network of Texas, 2019).

### **Educational Leader Preparedness and Experiences**

The literature regarding the school experiences of LGBTQ students has consistently highlighted the need for educational leaders to establish a positive school environment that promotes student learning (Abreu et al., 2019; Boyland et al., 2016; DeWitt, 2018). Not only does the research express the importance of having a positive school environment, but also highlighted is a requirement for instructive pioneers to be knowledgeable and prepared when they encounter issues on campus about sexual orientation (American School Counselors Association, 2019; Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2019; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019). Within the counseling profession, there is a consensus among its professionals that there is a need for counselors who work with LGBTQ individuals to be adequately and appropriately trained (American Counseling Association, 2014). However, the literature reviewed regarding leaders working with LGBTQ students and if they are professionally prepared to provide adequate support to students at school is inconsistent.

In addition, leadership feels unprepared to work with LGBTQ students due to the lack of professional training or exposure to LGBTQ-specific curriculum while pursuing a higher education (DeWitt, 2018; Kull et al., 2017). In reviewing the literature on the perception of LGBTQ students or client's perceptions, the findings indicated they too felt leaders, particularly counselors, are not equipped or prepared to work with them nor meet their specific needs (Goodrich, 2017; Kosciw, 2018; Kull et al., 2017). The literature about whether educational leaders are prepared or unprepared to work with LGBTQ youth is minimum and is not present.

### ***Educator Preparation Programs***

Before obtaining leadership positions in education, individuals are required to have a graduate-level degree that encompasses pertinent information and coursework about administration, counseling, or master's level teaching (Texas Education Agency, 2019). Professional and educational mandates have clearly articulated the responsibilities for principals and school counselors to create a safe and welcoming school atmosphere for all student groups, including LGBTQ youth. Consistent information relating to preparing leaders to work with LGBTQ students is either merged with multicultural or diversity course curricula or are obsolete. For example, Luke, Goodrich, and Scarborough (2011) found that graduate counseling trainees got LGBTQ-related data inside a solitary class or discussion. Other studies suggested that an educational institution prepare leaders for working with LGBTQ students adequately. There is a need to incorporate courses or curriculum about sexual orientation in all education programs. Research indicates that educational leaders and professionals working with youth today will encounter students and staff with differing sexual orientations and beliefs; therefore, educators responsible for educating and training future principals, counselors, teachers need to identify and have resources and relevant material to support the development of future leaders to adequately address the concerns 21<sup>st</sup> Century students have regarding sexual orientation.

### ***Professional Development***

To maintain professional status and to ensure that educational professionals are knowledgeable about changes and current information (academic and social) pertinent to today's youth, educators are required to attend professional development and training

exercises annually (Texas Education Agency, 2019). The expectation for educational leaders in seeking professional development is to broaden their understanding of their field, implement new programs, and share best practices that have rendered success in education. A review of the research states that when educators participate in professional development and training, self-efficacy increases, and positive results are produced in resolving issues with LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2018; Simon et al., 2017). Unfortunately, the limited amount of LGBTQ-specific training creates a barrier for educators and contributes to educators feeling unprepared to work with LGBTQ students (Kull et al., 2017).

The review of literature expresses concerns for the leaders who are charged with working with LGBTQ students. The lack of LGBTQ-specific curricula present in administrative and counseling programs and professional development opportunities for current leaders continues to be a concern for many of the problems experienced in schools (Kull et al., 2017). The literature is consistent that knowledgeable leaders are vital components of a school's success academically and socially.

### ***Best Practices***

Identifying universal best practices for educational leaders to implement with staff and students regarding LGBTQ issues is difficult to identify due to the unique needs of school districts and schools. Despite the differences across the country, studies indicate some basic best practices educational leaders should consider implementing in schools. The literature showed several best practices school leaders could consider; however, the

common way identified in the research is the implementation of Gay Student Alliance (GSA) groups and Positive Space (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2019).

GSA is a student-led initiative club where LGBTQ students and their allies work together to promote a positive school climate to combat discrimination and harassment towards LGBTQ individuals (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2019).

Positive Space is a program designed for the development of current and future educators. According to Kearns et al., (2014), the program is designed to create an understanding of LGBTQ individuals, their lives, LGBTQ expression, and the challenges they face with heterosexual individuals and their views. The workshop is divided into many sessions due to the vast amount of information needed to be addressed; Positive Space I: LGBTQ Awareness and Terminology and Positive Space II: LGBTQ Oppression and Ally Building (GLSEN, 2019). By evaluating programs by its users, studies show that both programs have experienced success in the development of educators and school climate for LGBTQ students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

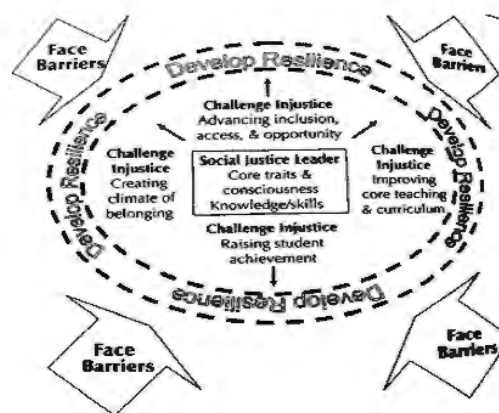
Social equity supports a cycle based on regard, care, acknowledgment, and compassion (Theoharis, 2007) and cannot be separated from educational leadership (Bogotch, 2002). Turhan (2010) added that social equity should be examined in any climate where there are financial and social disparities among individuals; accordingly, organizations and leaders in schools have a fundamental function in being social equity pioneers. The literature is clear in showing how LGBTQ and perceived-LGBTQ students are routinely tormented and pestered in schools, which emphasizes the overwhelming

need for social justice leaders in schools (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014). Social justice leaders are the leaders students deserve, are appropriate, and serve as the framework for studying educational leaders experiences when working with LGBTQ students.

“Research shows that the concept of leadership for social justice has enabled school leaders to think and act in productive ways so that their school communities are more democratic and inclusive” (Grogan, 2014, p. 1). George Theoharis, a former school principal, has committed his life to research on school reform, restoring the visions of leadership and social justice. Through his research of a mix of theory and practice, Theoharis developed a framework (see Figure 2) for social justice leadership and also identified seven principles that are crucial for social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2009).

**Figure 2**

*Framework for Social Justice Leadership*



*Note:* Figure 2 is a visual of the Social Justice Leadership Model in action. As pictured, the Social Justice Leader is central. While remaining central, the leader challenges injustices, face barriers, all while being resilient. Adapted from *The School Leaders Our Children Deserve: Seven Keys to Equality, Social Justice, and School Reform* (p.13) by G. Theoharis, 2009, Teachers College Press. Copyright 2009 by Teachers College Press. Reprinted with permission.

## **Social Justice Leadership Model**

Theoharis (2009) outlined a framework for understanding how social justice leadership plays out in schools. The framework is made up of the following four components: the social justice leader, challenging injustice, facing barriers, and developing resistance. These components are associated with the following seven keys to social justice leadership:

Key 1 - acquire broad, reconceptualized consciousness/knowledge/skill base.

Key 2 - possess core leadership traits.

Key 3 - advance inclusion, access, and opportunity.

Key 4 - improve the core learning context-both teaching and the curriculum.

Key 5 - create a climate of belonging.

Key 6 - raise student achievement.

Key 7 - sustain oneself professionally and personally.

Though all seven keys are vital attributes that contribute to SJL, this study only focused on the principles of 1, 2, 3, 5, and 7. They are discussed in detail next.

### ***The Social Justice Leader***

The social justice leader (SJL), specifically for this study, the principal, assistant principal, or counselor, is positioned as the central component of the framework for SJL (Theoharis, 2009). SJL begins and ends with its leader, who remains central to all aspects at the campus level and who is generally responsible for the equity and injustice of school policies and practices (Grogan, 2014; Theoharis, 2009). Leadership is a personal endeavor, and those leaders who provide social justice leadership are vital in



implementing justice on campus (Theoharis, 2009). Obtaining expansive, reconceptualized consciousness/information/skill and possessing core leadership attributes are the two characteristics of the social justice leader. Keys 1 and 2 will be discussed further for this study.

The first key encompasses broad, reconceptualize consciousness/knowledge/skills and means the social justice leader possesses a sense of awareness, a profound comprehension of intensity relations and social development, and the ability to develop inclusive school norms (Capper et al., 2006; Theoharis, 2009). The SJL also possess enough knowledge and skills to effectively lead (Theoharis, 2009). Kemp-Graham (2015) argued that the bold leadership, the consciousness, skills, and knowledge of social justice leaders are needed to viably change 21st Century schools into learning organizations that elevate value and admittance to top-notch instruction.

Key 2 is the possession of core leadership traits, or understanding leadership traits, which the social justice leaders are and how they work is vital to social justice work (Theoharis, 2009). The leadership styles and personalities of a social justice leader vary greatly but translate into a passionate vision. Leadership traits central to social justice work state that:

The social justice leaders possess a complicated mix of humility and confidence that is often viewed as arrogance, lead with intense visionary passion, and maintain a tenacious commitment to a vision of social justice while nurturing and empowering staff. (Theoharis, 2009, p. 143)

### *Challenging Injustice*

Challenging injustices on campus and in the community is the social justice leader at work. The social justice leader challenges injustices to advance an agenda more oriented toward equality and social justice (Theoharis, 2009). SJL challenges injustices by enacting change towards school reform that protects all, paying little heed to race, sex, sex articulation, and sexual direction (De Witt, 2018; Theoharis, 2007). Keys 3 through 6 all demonstrate attributes of how the social justice leader challenges inequities in schools; however, to illustrate how the social justice leader challenges injustices in schools, Keys 3 and 5 will be discussed more in this study.

Key 3 is the advancement of inclusion, access, and opportunity for all, specifically LGBTQ students, as it relates to this study and are what social justice leaders seek to establish in their schools. Leaders committed to equity and justice create a better educational environment for historically marginalized students (Capper et al., 2006; Theoharis, 2006). Theoharis (2009) noted that it is crucial to understand that leaders must first articulate a vision that makes a basic association between social equity and comprehensive administrations and furthermore purposefully destroys school structures that minimize, isolate, and hinder accomplishment. Once the connection is made, the SJL can begin the task of creating an environment inclusive for students.

The 2017 National School Climate Survey reported that students who have been victims of harassment based on sexual orientation or gender expression reported having little to no attachment to the school. Developing an authentic sense of belonging for all students is central to developing socially just classrooms and schools (Theoharis, 2009).

To successfully create an environment of belonging, SJL must recognize the connection between belonging and discipline and understand that creating a climate of belonging will decrease discipline and create peaceful, fair, and just schools for all (Theoharis, 2009).

When challenging injustices, social justice leaders, as a result, will encounter barriers (Theoharis, 2009). Barriers leaders face in their day-to-day efforts to challenge injustices affect a leader both professionally and personally. To deal with barriers, Theoharis (2009) suggest strategies that develop resilience that enables the SJL to continue their work to make more just and equitable schools.

### ***Developing Resilience***

Key 7 is sustaining oneself professionally and personally. To maintain oneself professionally and personally when challenges exist requires the social justice leader to be resilient to continue the work of social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2009). Theoharis (2009) suggested professional strategies social justice leaders can use to advance their career toward social justice by: (a) communicating purposefully and authentically; (b) developing a supportive network; (c) working together for change; (d) keeping their eye on the prize; (e) prioritizing their work; (f) engaging in professional learning; and (g) building relationships. A key lesson is the importance of bringing people together to work while sustaining oneself professionally and personally (Theoharis, 2009). Creating supportive structures in schools that foster learning for all students is key for social justice leadership (Capper et al., 2006; Theoharis, 2009).

Researchers have distinctive perspectives about the idea of information and reality dependent on their philosophical direction. Hence, researchers should clearly understand

the philosophical argument guiding their research study (Tuli, 2010). The framework of Social Justice Leadership, along with five of the seven keys a social justice leader possesses, served as the foundation for the research questions and data analysis for this study.

### **Summary of Literature Review**

Unlike other anti-discrimination practices where educational leaders are attentive, LGBTQ policies have yet to be created and carried out due to components such as a lack of knowledge about the damage of bullying, “a lack of awareness about LGBTQ issues, and the ability of many LGBTQ students to hide and to blend in as an invisible minority” (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014, p. 117). Recently, public spotlight on LGBTQ youth has made the school experiences better for some students; however, elevated risk levels persist, suggesting that improvements on average do not imply improvements for all and making it clear that more needs to be done to bring LGBTQ issues to the forefront (Cimpian & Herrington, 2017). Due to the nonexistence of policies explicitly related to LGBTQ issues for the educational system and the insufficient amount of information presented to current and future principals, assistant principals, and counselors, the students who are LGBTQ in school systems continue to suffer. Data collected from various studies calls for solutions to the problems LGBTQ students encounter in schools (Kosciw et al., 2018). Furthermore, data also suggested the need for educational leaders to establish a positive climate and be adequately equipped and ready to address LGBTQ issues.

Findings from the literature reviewed unanimously revealed the need for more support from leaders at the school, district, and state levels of the educational system. Hernandez and Fraynd (2014) concluded “if schools are to become truly inclusive, leaders must examine and take appropriate action to improve the policy landscape for the protection and care of LGBTQ individuals at the school, district, state, and federal levels” (p.121). The research results also revealed a need for more training for school staff and the establishment of programs like GSA and Positive Space to help alleviate the everyday pressures of LGBTQ students. Overall, the results were consistent in the area of the need for more support to address LGBTQ issues but inconclusive on established procedures for current and future leaders to consider when dealing with the problems LGBTQ students face.

The literature is saturated with data that supports that positive school staff and positive relationships improve the school experience for youth but scratches the surface of how positivity from school leaders improves the school experience of LGBTQ youth. What is missing is information for current and future educators that illustrates the role school leaders play in fostering and maintaining a positive school experience specifically for LGBTQ youth. Investigating how school leaders (the principal, assistant principal, and counselor) using the keys outlined from the social justice leadership model adds another dimension to existent literature that will show how school leaders influence the academic and social outcomes of marginalized students, specifically LGBTQ students. Over the years leaders have been faced with the pressures associated with high stakes testing and have forgotten the basic psychological needs indicated by Maslow that fosters

a stable foundation for all. The success of a school and the students in school starts with its leadership; therefore, this study aims to investigate the successes and opportunities for growth for school leaders in addressing the needs of LGBTQ students from a social justice leadership perspective.

### **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Educational leaders, for some time, have had to find unique ways of educating youth in an environment that is more diverse. The challenge of ensuring that no child is left behind academically while possessing a strong, professional arsenal regarding the social and emotional development of 21<sup>st</sup> Century youth remains an area of interest for researchers and leaders who have a genuine interest in growing professionally (Kemp-Graham, 2015). The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of educational leaders licensed by the state as principals and counselors responsible for serving LGBTQ students to identify which cognitive and affective knowledge is required to serve LGBTQ students successfully (Kemp-Graham, 2015). The intent of conducting the study with this core group of educational leaders was to understand the knowledge, skills, barriers, and successes educational leaders have acquired in their academic and professional careers of working with LGBTQ youth.

The objective of this study was to give current and future educational leaders an in-depth understanding of the day-to-day experience educational leaders encounter in secondary school when serving youth who identify as LGBTQ. Kull et al. (2019) suggested that the willingness to provide support to LGBTQ students lies within the educators' beliefs, values, and attitudes towards LGBTQ youth. If mental health professionals or school leaders are homophobic or heterosexist, their sense of obligation to create safer schools for LGBTQ will not be important. Therefore, by exploring what occurs in a school setting and the self-assessment of knowledge, cultural beliefs, and the

training educational leaders possess, this study sought to understand from an educational leader's perspective the successes and challenges that exist among leaders who serve this student population.

### **Re-Statement of the Research Questions**

Creswell (2013) stated that “qualitative research questions intend to narrow the purpose to several questions that will be addressed in the study” (p.138). The following overarching and research questions served as a blueprint for the research: What are the cultural beliefs, values, experiences, and perceptions of principals and counselors who work with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?

- (a) What experiences in leadership and leadership traits promote inclusion, access, and opportunity for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?
- (b) How do educational leaders employ professional and personal beliefs, knowledge, and skills while working with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?
- (c) How do educational leaders create a welcoming climate and sense of belonging for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?
- (d) How do educational leaders recognize and react to policies and practices that do not support inclusion, access, and opportunity for students who identify as LGBTQ?



- (e) To what extent do educational leaders view and sustain themselves as qualified, trained professionals who work with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning?
- (f) What is the leadership experience of working with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning?

### **Research Design**

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is conducted when an issue or problem-related to human phenomena needs to be investigated from a non-statistical perspective. The persistent problem of challenging learning and the social school environment for LGBTQ students can meet this threshold (Kosciw et al., 2015). Biegel and Kuehl (2010) reported court records and academia revealed a profoundly continuous pattern of mistreatment, different punishment, and in some instances, a total disregard concerning numerous instructive establishments to address LGBT-related issues and concerns adequately. Ten years later, research still recommends the need for graduate programs to incorporate more course work that is specifically LGBTQ-related content to assess the outcomes in student competencies and hold schools accountable to accreditation standards requiring the inclusion of LGBTQ issues in curricula (Boyland et al., 2016; Kull et al., 2017; Kull et al., 2019). This study used a qualitative research design.

Singh and Shelton (2011) analyzed 12 qualitative articles published in four professional counseling journals (JCD, Journal of Counseling Psychology, Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling, and The Counseling Psychologist) between 1998 and 2008

that specifically examined LGBTQ issues. Qualitative research was scarce in counseling journals regarding LGBTQ students but focused more on multicultural training and diverse populations. (Woo & Heo, 2013). Qualitative research is good at making relevant data simple and comes to life without destroying the context (Ochieng, 2009). To provide a meaningful and in-depth understanding of educational leaders' experiences working with LGBTQ youth, a qualitative research design method was appropriate in fulfilling the reason for leading this investigation.

Qualitative research designs are used to understand and explore a phenomenon of interest through an inductive process of human meaning (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). This research design allows for exploration, and its foundation of thick, detailed descriptions supports the effort of understanding a new phenomenon in a forever changing society (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Creswell (2014) added that qualitative research provides the opportunity for researchers to comprehend and identify where individuals or groups stand regarding the social or human problem making this research design excellent for this study.

The structure of qualitative research offered several features for the researcher. The first is the philosophical assumptions that ground qualitative research: ontology, epistemology, and axiology (Creswell, 2013). Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggested that ontology concerns the nature of reality and the researcher knowing firsthand that many ideas, views, opinions, and experiences are present in the human experience. From an ontological perspective, participants determine what constitutes reality, and reality is

multiple, as seen through many views (Creswell, 2013). The researcher then can make meaning of their understanding (Raddon, 2019).

Epistemology involves determining, as the researcher, what constitutes valid knowledge and how it can be obtained (Raddon, 2019). The researcher gains knowledge through the subjective lens and experiences of their participants but tries to maintain a “distance” or “objective separateness” between the researcher and those being researched (Creswell, 2013, p. 21). A qualitative epistemological perspective was beneficial for the researcher whose study benefited from total immersion by conducting the study in the environment or where the participants reside and work.

Axiological assumptions, or values, acknowledges that biases occur and are present in the research (Creswell, 2013). The researcher takes an active role in how the researchers’ worldviews influence the types of questions asked. The examination of the results and the concluding of themes are also influenced by the researchers’ principles, personal experiences, and worldviews (Research Philosophy and Assumptions, 2019). Nevertheless, the principles, experiences, and worldviews of the participants are interrelated with those of the researchers to deepen the analysis (Research Philosophy and Assumptions, 2019).

The intent and outcome of qualitative research is the second feature that made a qualitative research design optimal for this study. Qualitative research “takes a nuanced approach to inquiry, allowing the researcher to develop a multifaceted, comprehensive understanding of phenomenon into how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Creswell,

1997, p. 15). Qualitative research sets practices that allow for the problems and issues of this world to be visible and transformed (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) stated that “qualitative research is a field of inquiry in its own right” (p.3), allowing the researcher the flexibility to explore a wide range of subject matter that educational leaders encounter to gain more information and to comprehend more about the experiences or issues that exist.

Qualitative research is used to gain an understanding of how humans behave socially (Merriam, 2009). Specifically, a qualitative methodology “...analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1997, p. 15). A qualitative research design allowed the researcher an opportunity to gain a wealth of information from the participants and a genuine feel for the school experiences of the educational leader regarding LGBTQ students.

### **Phenomenological Research Approach**

A phenomenological research approach was appropriate for this investigation. Phenomenological research is “a qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences from a group of people about a phenomenon described by participants in the story” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). A phenomenological study, said Fraenkel et al. (2016), explores various reactions to, or perceptions of, a particular phenomenon, which in this study consisted of secondary educational leaders who work with LGBTQ students. Creswell (2013), Hays and Wood (2011), and Hunt (2011) contended the main goal for conducting phenomenology research is to provide a detailed

depiction of significance to member encounters of a phenomenon and to decrease singular encounters with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence.

Examining the individual experiences of educational leader participants as they work with LGBTQ youth revealed to the researcher detailed information about professional encounters with youth. In addition, the research with several participants was able to understand how the personal experiences of leader participants played a significant role in the professional experiences/encounters with LGBTQ youth, thus revealing the why and giving meaning to their experience as a leader. Many of the participants, as they currently interact with LGBTQ youth, described how they are often reminded about a time, place or past negative experience with LGBTQ individuals and intentional approach current issues with care due to past encounters. Phenomenology studies are subjective and examine the conscious experiences from the participant's point of view (Smith, 2018). Phenomenology was chosen as the approach for this study because the researcher wanted to capture the leader participants' perspectives as they see and lived through them, despite educational and social justice leaders often having to remain open and objective professionally. Exploring the leader experiences and intentional practices they implore daily while working with LGBTQ youth was the intent of this study. Phenomenology studies are designed to investigate the conscious experiences from a first-person point of view. Smith (2018) describes this as "we experience them, we live through them or perform them" (p. 3). The awareness of self and of personal and professional experiences past and present of the participants is what the researcher describes as the conscious. In many scenarios, the participants' awareness

of experiences from their past shaped how they encounter current LGBTQ issues. However, as described in the research by the pioneers of Phenomenology, conscious experiences are the starting point of phenomenology studies, but often the unconscious of how we feel or think comes to the forefront when being questioned (Smith, 2018). When the participants were allowed time to reflect on their experiences, a few revealed feelings, and ideas they were not aware of “unconsciously” that have led to their current practices as a leader.

Much of what is known about phenomenological research is credited to the late Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a Moravian-born mathematician and philosopher who devoted his life to exhaustive phenomenological investigations (Moran, 2013). Husserl (1913), developed a method called descriptive phenomenology to offer some of the most sustained and relevant discussions of central topics in the philosophy of mind found in 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophy (Merriam, 2009; Moran, 2013; Patton, 2002). Phenomenology, in Husserl's conception in 1913, implied the investigation of how individuals see, decipher, and experience them through their faculties (Moran, 2013; Patton, 2002).

Husserl's (1913) most basic philosophical assumption is that “we can only know what we experience by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness” (Patton, 2002, p. 105). Others, such as Moustakas (1994), who followed Husserl's ideas, stated that research should focus on the wholeness of experiences, "what" they encountered, and "how" they encountered it (Creswell, 2013, p. 76), in search for the essences of experiences. Specifically, Christensen et al. (2017) explained that descriptive phenomenology was the research method used in the study to explore and

describe individuals' lived experiences. Husserl (1913), developed descriptive phenomenology, for individuals to reflect on everyday experiences, describe them while remaining open and disregarding opinions. (Reiners, 2012). The idea of examining the experiences and learning the perspectives of several educational leaders who work in secondary schools instead of one individual's experience of working with LGBTQ students provides a fresh and unbiased description of subject matter and is central to Husserl's (1913) descriptive phenomenological approach to qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Wertz, 2005). Aforementioned, during this phenomenology study, the ideas of Husserl were apparent when participants described their personal, professional, past and present interactions openly with LGBTQ individuals and how those experiences shaped who they are as a leader.

Phenomenological researchers investigate the experiences of study participants and how they contribute to the world (Hays & Wood, 2011; Patton, 2002; Wertz, 2005). Through extensive and direct contact with the study participants in their element, researchers look for experience commonalities across study participant stories and experiences of the phenomenon (Hays & Wood, 2011; Fraenkel et al., 2016; Patton, 2002; Wertz, 2005). Standard features of the phenomenological research approach include a strong emphasis on the phenomenon and the experiences of many people with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Wertz, 2005). In this study, the phenomenon is working with LGBTQ youth in secondary schools and educational leaders' involvement or lived experiences. "Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76); therefore, this study

sought to reveal the everyday experiences, successes, barriers, practices, and so forth, educational leaders have when working with LGBTQ youth.

Another common key feature of descriptive phenomenology is epoche or bracketing. Epoche, the Greek word which means to refrain from judgment, requires the researcher before interviewing participants to explore their own experiences to the phenomenon in part to become aware of personal biases and views (Merriam, 2009). The researcher then brackets or sets aside their personal experiences, biases, and assumptions to focus on the encounters of the study participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). As the researcher, all judgments were set aside to allow for the research to present a new perspective of the experience education leaders have when working with LGBTQ students who are consistently harassed while at schools. Moustakas (1994) added that with the epoche, deep reflection and a great interpretation of its meaning must take place for things to be felt and known in advance or felt to be known.

Researchers must remain objective throughout the study to determine what data belongs to the researcher or the study participant involved in the research (Finlay, 2009). The researcher's perspective stated in the first chapter of this study served as the epoche or how the personal understanding of the phenomenon was introduced (Creswell, 2013). Introducing the researchers' knowledge and experiences of the phenomenon from the researcher's perspective allowed for prejudgments and unbiases to be known before conducting the research. The researcher understood and identified the preconceptions that could have influenced the analysis. Sundler et al. (2019) concluded that a reflective



attitude is critical towards understanding the data and its meaning, which may cause the researcher to understand the studied phenomenon in a new light.

Data collection and analysis procedures served as another common feature of phenomenological research. The principal data collection source for phenomenological studies typically involves interviewing individuals who have encountered the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Patton (2009) stated that the only way for the researcher to know and understand a person's experience is to become an actual participant in the phenomenon as directly as possible through in-depth interviews.

In phenomenological studies, the process of collecting data for the study often consists of several interviews with participants to gain a greater understanding of experiences (Creswell, 2013). Data analysis for phenomenological research follows systematic procedures that move through units of data to form a detailed depiction of *what* the participants have experienced and *how* they have experienced the phenomenon. At the conclusion of the experience, the researcher writes a distinct entry that traces the quintessence of the members' insight and their encounters from the examination (Creswell, 2013).

### **Study Participants**

The researcher's first step before individuals was selected for the study was to obtain permission from the Instructional Review Boards to conduct the research. Once approval was granted, the targeted leaders who served as participants in this study were comprised of secondary level principals, assistant principals, and counselors who work at traditional campuses who serve students in grades 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>. Because this study called for

leaders to describe their experience in working with LGBTQ youth in their perspective fields, the participants needed to meet the following criteria: (a) hold a principal or counselor certification from the State Board of Educators; (b) have three or more years of experience in a leadership position, and (c) have had direct involvement in working with students who are LGBTQ.

Purposeful sampling with a criterion strategy was used to recruit participants (Merriam, 2009). Commonly used in qualitative research is purposeful sampling to identify and select information-rich cases related to the phenomenon (Palinkas, et al., 2013; Patton, 2002). The main goal for purposeful sampling in qualitative research is to select study participants or locations to ultimately help the researcher understand the problem and the research question (Creswell, 2009). The criterion strategy entails identifying participants known to the researcher (Creswell, 2013). Sampling was aimed at insight into the phenomenon instead of empirical generalization from sample to population (Patton, 2002). “The logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding” (Patton, 2002, p. 46).

Qualitative research intends not to generalize the information to the wider population (Creswell, 2013); therefore, qualitative inquiry focuses on relatively small samples (Patton, 2002). Dukes (1984) suggested examining three to 10 subjects, and one phenomenology scholar stated having up to 325 participants in a study was permissible. A demographic questionnaire was used as a precursor to the purposeful sampling process to frame the criteria specified for selection. The researcher had six participants with an equal representation of participants serving in varying leadership roles in a differing

capacity. The researcher anticipated having a representation of males, females, and leaders of different ethnicities and was able to find participants who were very different.

Pseudonyms were used for names. Table 3 features participant demographics.

**Table 3**

*Educational Leaders Participants' Profile*

Participant Name	Gender	Ethnicity	School	Current Position	Certifications Held in Texas	Yrs. in Leadership	Yrs. in Education
Karen McMullen	Female	White	Bear Creek Middle School	Middle School Counselor	Teacher Special Education Counselor	14	21
Maria Scott	Female	Black	Alfred Creek High School	High School Principal	Teacher Counselor Principal	21	25
James Lopez	Male	Hispanic	Caney Creek High School	High School Assistant Principal	Teacher Principal Superintendent	6	12
Todd Davis	Male	Black	Caney Creek Middle School	Middle School Counselor	Teacher Counselor	5	26
Laura Clemons	Female	Black	Summer Creek High School	High School Counselor	Teacher Counselor	15	23
Heather Stevenson	Female	Black	Stoney Creek	Middle School Assistant Principal	Teacher Principal	5	12

**Data Collection and Management**

To conduct a qualitative study with fidelity, it was important to collect quality, but relevant data, which depends on the researcher's method to collect data (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). The most appropriate and efficient data collection strategy for this study and a phenomenological study was to conduct in-depth interviews (Adhabi & Anozie,

2017; Creswell, 2013; Padilla-Díaz, 2015). According to Patton (2002), interviews allow the researcher to gain the participants' perspectives in their own words. This qualitative researcher set out to describe and reveal the central themes in the life of its subjects. “Interviews represent one of the most common ways of collecting data in qualitative research because they provide opportunities for the researcher to collect rich and meaningful data” (Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013, p. 188); therefore, this data collection method exclusively was used to gather the experiences of leaders who work with LGBTQ youth in secondary schools (Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013).

### ***Interviews***

According to Creswell (2013) and Gill et al. (2008), the three most popular types of interviews conducted in qualitative research are unstructured, structured, and semi-structured. Unstructured interviews in qualitative research are informal conversational interviews that do not indicate any rehearsed theories or ideas and are performed casually with little or no structure (Gill et al., 2008). According to Adhabi and Anozie (2017), no interview can be qualified as truly unstructured. However, in some aspects of pressing social issues, the researcher must become part of what they are studying, which leads to questions being asked informally to the participants.

Structured interviews conducted in qualitative research are controlled and allow little or no flexibility for follow-up questions to occur. Structured interviews described by Adhabi and Anozie (2017) are like participating in a job interview. The questions asked by the researcher were predetermined, concise, and are designed to render answers that are straight to the point (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017; Gill et al., 2008). The most used type of

interviews in qualitative research are semi-structured (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). Semi-structured interviews contain the main questions that help frame the areas to be investigated (Gill et al., 2008) and allow the researcher and participants the flexibility to diverge from pursuing more in-depth thoughts or responses thoroughly. The protocol designed for this study was semi-structured interviews.

Interviews remain important to the validity of the information collected for this qualitative study; therefore, it was essential to establish a rapport with the participants while exhibiting professional maturity at all times (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017; Gill et al., 2008). Gill et al. (2008) suggested that before the research takes place, study participants should have knowledge about the study and given assurance about ethical principles, such as privacy and confidentiality.

The goal was to conduct a semi-structured interview in person or virtual in-person interview with each participant in the study. The interviews were conducted virtually in somewhat of a controlled environment. More importantly, the interviews took place in a preferred location where the participants felt the most comfortable. Farber (2006) stated that it is important for participants to decide where the interviews are conducted to feel calm and open to sharing their lives and experiences. The researcher requested a quiet space conducive for recording, but most importantly to ensure the participants' privacy and confidentiality. A tape recording of the interview ensured that everything the participants said was captured and preserved for analysis (Merriam, 2009). Each interview lasted about 45 minutes to one hour, which allowed time for the researcher and participants to elaborate and for the researcher to ask clarifying questions. In the midst

and at the conclusion of the interview, the researcher immediately wrote personal reflections to gain more insight into the atmosphere, behaviors exhibited by the participants, and prepare thoughts and impressions before data analysis (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2011). In-person interviews or interviews held virtually were the preferred methods for interviewing participants to allow the researcher the opportunity to observe and interpret non-verbal cues, observe body language, facial expression, voice inflections, and eye contact (Ryan, Coughlar, & Cronin, 2009). All interviews for this study were completed using the virtual face-to-face method described prior. After each interview, the researcher ensured the participants that the confidentiality of interview notes and recordings would be of high importance.

### **Data Analysis Steps**

Data analysis is the process of sorting out the information gathered from the participants (Merriam, 2009). To be more specific, data analysis in phenomenology is characterized by the following procedures: epoche, identifying common meanings and essences, horizontalization of data, textual, and structural analysis (Moustakes, 1994; Padilla-Díaz, 2015). Padilla-Díaz (2015) referred to textual analysis as describing what is expressed by participants and structural analysis as to how it is described by the participants.

The researcher transcribed the interviews with assistance from a transcription company. After receiving the transcriptions, the researcher reviewed the transcripts for accuracy at least five times each for several hours while listening to the previously recorded interviews. Transcripts were checked frequently and transcribed verbatim to

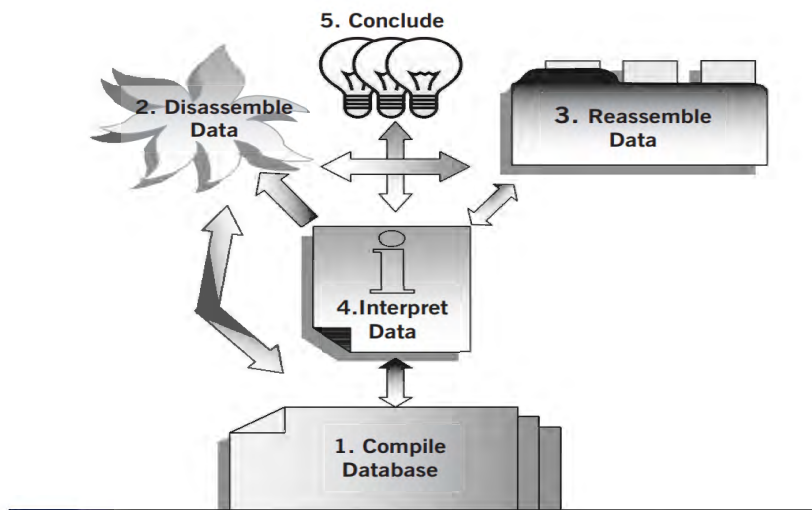
ensure accuracy and, most importantly, to allow for immersion and to truly get a deep understanding of the participants' responses. After the researcher transcribed the transcripts, the process of member checking began shortly afterward. Member checking ensures the internal validity or credibility of the research study (Merriam, 2009). The researcher emailed the transcribed interviews to the participants to review for accuracy. Member checking was conducted several times throughout the research to ensure participants' experiences were conveyed (Beck, 2017; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2011). The process of member checking lasted throughout the duration of the study and required telephone correspondence for clarity for a couple of the study participants. As the researcher continued to analyze the data present in the transcripts, more clarifying questions surfaced based on the participant's responses. The researcher emailed and, in some instances, spoke to the participants via telephone to obtain answers or to clarify questions that surfaced throughout the analysis of the data. At the conclusion of the data analysis process, the participant's interviews were stored on a flash drive in the possession of the researcher. Once the research was approved and finalized, the participants interview information stored on the flash drive was given to the researcher's advisor to be stored for three calendar years at Prairie View A& M University, Delco Building, Suite #209 A.

The process for analyzing data for this research study followed Yin's (2011) five phases of analysis: (1) compiling, (2) disassembling, (3) reassembling (and arraying), (4) interpreting, and (5) concluding data collected; and Creswell's (2013) framework for data

analysis of phenomenology research. The process for analyzing the data is illustrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 2**

*Five Phases of Analysis and Their Interactions*



*Note:* Figure 3 is a visual of the steps you follow when analyzing data collected from research. As shown, this process is fluid, continuous, and designed so that the researcher work among the phases freely in no particular order. From *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish* (p.178) by R.K. Yin, 2011, The Guilford Press. Copyright 2011 by The Guilford Press. Reprinted with permission.

### ***Compiling Data***

Compiling the data collected from conducting this research required the researcher to sort the information obtained from the interviews in order (Yin, 2011). Data organization also required the researcher to create and organize electronic files. The researcher used the computer software NVivo, to organize and store the data collected. The information was sorted and organized using the computer software NVIVO in two ways. The researcher created a file for each study participant, which contained the interview transcript. Data was also organized in NVIVO by each research question,



which was designed based on the social justice leadership model framework. This file contained a folder that consists of the responses for each study participant by each question. Organizing the data in two ways, along with the use of computer software Nvivo, allowed the researcher to organize and quickly locate material and keep it in one place (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2011).

### ***Disassembling Data***

Step two of the process calls for disassembling data or organizing the information together into simple terms or groups (Yin, 2011). Disassembling data required the researcher to interpret the data by reading through the text and making margin notes to break down data into smaller pieces (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2011). By organizing the interview responses by each question as described in the previous section, the researcher made notes of the similarities in the data responses, common words, which led to the start of the coding process. The process of coding using NVIVO required the researcher to assign or create nodes. Nodes are central to organizing data and allow the researcher to organize similar data together that are later determined as main themes and/or subthemes of a research study (NVIVO, 2020). The main method the researcher utilized to create nodes for this study was by analyzing and interpreting the study participants' responses for each corresponding research question. If similarities were found in participant responses, they were assigned to the existing node(s) that were created. If a new interpretation of the participants' response was discovered, new nodes were assigned to that research question. The disassembling of data and the creation of nodes is a continuous process and done as many times in disassembling and resembling data stage as

part of an experimentation cycle of testing codes, accounting for the two-way arrow between these first two phases illustrated in Figure 3 (Yin, 2011).

### ***Resembling and Arraying Data***

Resembling data occurred when themes/codes were identified in step two. At this stage, words and phrases were disassembled and reorganized into different groups. During the analysis process for this study, a couple of themes and/or subthemes were revealed for more than one research question. Creating word clouds in NVIVO visually made the cross representation of themes more apparent. The arrangement and rearrangement of data can be highlighted or demonstrated visually through the use of graphs or by arranging them in lists and other tabular forms (Yin, 2011). For this study and in addition to word clouds, cluster analysis and a simple word list were used to further identify and organize data into nodes. The process of disassembling and reassembling data went back and forth and was repeated several times until data was organized into themes and subthemes (Yin, 2011).

### ***Interpreting Data***

When interpreting data, the researcher provided an interpretation of what happened and a structural description of how the phenomenon was experienced by participants (Creswell, 2013). Yin (2011) added, “that initial interpretations may lead to the desire to recompile the database in a new way or to disassemble or reassemble the data differently”(p.179). However, when interpreting data, the researcher developed an understanding of the essence of the phenomenon experienced by the participants(Creswell, 2013).

### ***Concluding Data Collected***

The researcher presented a narration of the findings or, in other words, the essence of the phenomenon of educational leaders' experiences of working with LGBTQ students. Themes revealed from the data further supported the characteristics Theoharis (2009) highlighted as components of a social justice leader. This phase called for the researcher to conclude the entire study (Yin, 2011). Yin (2011) suggested that findings need to be related to the interpretations developed in step four and from other phases, including the ideas and notes made earlier through the analysis process. Data undergoing in-depth analysis and the process of organizing nodes emerged, and relationships from the data, social justice leadership theory, and literature were apparent.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

Qualitative researchers employ indicators to ensure trustworthiness in their studies (Woo & Heo, 2013). Trustworthiness "is a process in qualitative research that ensures that "some rigor in carrying out the study" was established (Merriam, 2009, p. 209). Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined four criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) posited a study's trustworthiness as essential in assessing its value. Therefore, to ensure reliability in this study, the researcher completed the strategies in the following sections.

### ***Credibility***

Credibility or confidence in the fidelity and veracity of the results in qualitative research involves establishing that the study results are probable and true (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). To ensure there was a credible match among the participants' the researchers used several techniques; triangulation, prolonged engagement, member checking, audit trails, persistent observation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and referential adequacy to strengthen the credibility and rigorousness of a qualitative study (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, this study employed the technique of member checking to ensure its real value.

**Member Checking.** Member checks are when data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with the participants from which data was obtained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated that member checking is the most effective technique for establishing credibility. The method provided an opportunity to understand and assess what the participant intended to do through their actions. In addition, member checking allowed the participants to interpret and explain ideas expressed from the interviews that were not clear. They were also allowed to correct errors and challenge what they perceived as wrong interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, member checks were conducted both formal and informal to ensure data and interpretations were accurate. By sharing the transcripts and the interpretation of the findings with the participants, the researcher's main goal was to make sure the participants' ideas were conveyed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### ***Transferability***

Transferability provides a layer of trustworthiness to a research study by showing that the result was relevant in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To make transferability possible, the study consists of "sufficient descriptive data" (Merriam,

2009, p. 225). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated, “the best way to ensure the possibility of transferability is to create a thick description of the sending context so that someone in a potentially receiving context may assess the similarity between then and the study” (p. 125).

**Thick Description.** The technique of providing rich, thick descriptions allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability (Creswell, 2013). Thick description is described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), “as a way of achieving a type of external validity and a detailed account of field experiences in which the researcher makes explicit the patterns of cultural and social relationships and puts them in context” (p.125). By describing the phenomenon of educational leaders working with LGBTQ youth in detail, individuals can begin to assess the degree to which the conclusions are drawn adaptable to different occasions, settings, circumstances, and individuals (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### ***Dependability***

Dependability involves showing that if the research were repeated, the findings rendered in this research study would be consistent with the results of a new study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability involved the subjects assessing the outcomes and the understandings and proposals of the research to ensure that they are completely upheld (Anney, 2014). Bitsch (2005) stated that dependability refers to the consistency of findings over time. To establish dependability, the researcher utilized audit trails to track and organize every step of the research study and process from beginning to the end (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009).

**Audit Trails.** Audit trails involve a detailed description of the research steps taken from the start of a research study to report findings. The descriptions of the steps detailed in audit trails allow the study to be repeated and outlines what was done step by step when the research was conducted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the audit trail contained the participants' contact information, raw data, summaries, interview records, researcher notes, demographic information, transcriptions with any member check information, research findings (i.e., codes, themes, and categories), and IRB information. All data collected throughout the study was included in the audit trail. Anney (2014) suggested that audit trails also establish confirmability of the study.

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability or the neutrality to which the study's findings are shaped by the participants do not involve research biases, ideas, or interest. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability is “concerned with establishing that data, and interpretations of the findings are not figments of the inquirer’s imagination but are clearly derived from the data” (Anney, 2014, p. 279). As mentioned, audit trails also established confirmability by offering visible evidence from the process (Anney, 2014). To demonstrate that this study's information was provided clearly and objectively, the researcher utilized reflexive journaling in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Reflexivity or Reflexive Journals.** Confirmability can also be established through the use of reflexive journaling. The researcher commented about the ideas and personal experiences that came to mind while interviewing participants to understand the mentalities and perspectives all through the examination cycle that may not otherwise be

captured through interview responses. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), using reflexive journaling is "a kind of diary in which the investigator daily, or as needed, records a variety of information about self and method" (p. 327). The researcher also used bracketing at the beginning when the researcher's perspective is explained and during data analysis. Specifically, the researcher color-coded reactions, experiences, and emotions in the margins of the transcript (Hunt, 2011; Rossman Rallis, 2012).

### **Risks**

According to Ryan et al. (2009), protection of participants 'rights is a fundamental aspect of conducting an interview, and the issues of informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality are of paramount importance. In a typical qualitative study, analysts point out that the interaction between the participant and the researcher during data collection can foster moral consequences (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). Therefore, there was a need for rules to be established and followed while conducting research, so the integrity and ethics of all involved are not compromised.

The guidelines highlighted for the completion of the IRB by Yin (2011) were followed. The researcher obtained voluntary informed consent with a written signature from participants that included a written explanation of the research's harms, risks, and benefits. The researcher also assured the participants' confidentiality, and anonymity would be maintained. This was achieved through the use of pseudonyms and the informed consent process, where the researcher provided explicit details on the objectives of the study and the voluntary nature of the study.

Many licensed professionals have the ethical obligation not to cause harm (American Counseling Association, 2014; Kcabas & Karakse, 2009). As a researcher and graduate student, this researcher possessed the same ethical responsibility of not causing harm or putting participants in harm's way. There is risk associated with every research study; however, the researcher for this study cannot foresee all potential risks and cannot guarantee that this study was 100% risk-free. In preparing to conduct the research, the researcher provided the participants with a full explanation about the research and the steps that would be taken to conduct the study. Before interviews were conducted, written informed consent had to be provided. The informed consent that all participants signed before interviews were conducted contained details about the nature of the research, the role the participant would play in the study, the length of the study, potential risks, and that participation in the study is voluntary.

Participants also learned about the use of confidentiality that was established and maintained for their protection and privacy. The researcher assigned pseudonyms for their name and the entities they represented (Dooly, Moore, & Vallejo, 2017). Reducing the risk of anticipated harm, protecting the interviewee's information remained the researcher's number one ethical obligation.



## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

“Academic researchers are analytical thinkers, and their research has an impact on social change and development” (NVIVO, 2020, p. 1). By examining the personal and professional experiences of educational leaders (principals, assistant principals, and counselors) responsible for serving LGBTQ students from a social justice leadership perspective, the researcher sought to shed a bright light on the cognitive and affective knowledge needed for current and future educational leaders to serve LGBTQ students in Texas successfully. Findings from this research were derived from the following research questions: What are the cultural beliefs, values, experiences, and perceptions of principals and counselors who work with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning? Additional questions were:

- (a) What experiences in leadership and leadership traits promote inclusion, access, and opportunity for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?
- (b) How do educational leaders employ professional and personal beliefs, knowledge, and skills while working with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?
- (c) How do educational leaders create a welcoming climate and sense of belonging for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?

- (d) How do educational leaders recognize and react to policies and practices that do not support inclusion, access, and opportunity for students who identify as LGBTQ?
- (e) To what extent do educational leaders view and sustain themselves as qualified, trained professionals who work with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning?
- (f) What is the leadership experience of working with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning?

To give an overview of the LGBTQ students and population of students served by the educational leader participants, the researcher first provides a brief background of the school district's population, demographics, and climate/discipline summary.

Additionally, a brief profile of each educational leader using the data collected from the Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix C) is provided. Assumed names or alias were utilized to protect the name of the participants, their schools, and the school district. Next, the themes that emerged from each research question will be highlighted, discussed, and summarized using the direct responses and interpretations from the educational leader participants. Lastly, the findings are outlined as they relate to each research question and themes that resulted in a newly created Model for Educational Leaders to follow while educating our LGBTQ and IA youth.

### **School District Setting**

The educational leader participants for this study were comprised of three counselors and three principal or assistant principals. All leaders work at Concordia

Creek Independent School District in the Southeast Region of Texas. For the 2018-2019 school year, Concordia Creek Independent School District was responsible for educating over 70,000 students (CCISD, 2020). The student make-up for the district at the time of data collection consisted of approximately 73% Hispanic, 23% African American, 2% White, 1% Asian, 1% American Indian and 1% of students whose make-up consist of two or more of the mentioned ethnicities (CCISD, 2020). Concordia Creek Independent School District is a Title I school district with approximately 73% of its students being at-risk and 90% being economically disadvantage (CCISD). Title I is a federally funded program that provides supplemental funds to school districts. This program is one of the largest designed to assist schools with the highest student concentrations of poverty to meet school educational goals (US Legal, 2020).

### **Climate and District Summary**

“The walls of a school should reflect a future possibility. The halls should honor dreams. The rooms to help prepare them” (Ferlazzo, 2020, p. 4). For an overwhelming majority of LGBTQ students’, schools are not safe havens for learning. The school environments for many have become stressful and uninviting for LGBTQ students causing them not to want to attend school (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2016). School climate as it related to LGBTQ students is considerably discussed in the literature review; therefore, for this research, it is vital to report the overall environment and discipline summary for Concordia Independent School District. For the 2018-2019 school year, Concordia Creek Independent School District had approximately 50,000 discipline referrals (Texas Education Agency, 2019). The discipline referrals reported

included but were not limited to regular office visits, after school detention, in-school and out of school suspension, and more.

### **Educational Leader Participant Profiles**

All interviews for the study were conducted face-to-face, virtually in the comfort of each participant's home. During the time, late April and early May of 2020, when interviews were conducted for each participant, the entire country experienced a pandemic requiring everyone to work and attend school virtually from home. Despite not being able to physically sit across from each participant as interviews were conducted, technology allowed the researcher to make observation as interviews took place. Each leader participant in the comfort of their home was free from distraction with no student or staff interruptions and was allowed time to think and reflect about personal and professional experiences in depth. The nationwide pandemic allowed an abundance of time for all; therefore, all participants, during interviews, presented themselves to be relaxed, free, open, honest, not against any time constraints, and ready to let their guard down.

#### ***Participant One***

Karen McMullen is a white female middle school counselor at Bear Creek Middle School. She holds a teacher's and counselor's certification for the state of Texas. Karen has served in the leadership position of a counselor for over 14 years. She worked as a high school counselor for two years and has currently been a middle school counselor for 12 years. Karen McMullen has 21 years in education.

Karen McMullen presented herself as being honest, relaxed, and eager to talk about her experience working with LGBTQ students. Karen's interview took place in the comfort of her home. When the interview first started, she had her computer set up in a common area visible to her family members who occupied the same space. After reviewing responses from the demographic survey, Karen thought it would be best for her to move to her bedroom to be free from distractions. When the interview questioning started, Karen was sitting on her bed, but as we begin to talk more and more as the interview progressed, Karen began to lie down in her bed, which showed how relaxed she was while interviewing. Karen's opportunity to reflect on her experience working with LGBTQ youth while interviewing allowed her to think about new ways to interact with her LGBTQ students positively.

### ***Participant Two***

Maria Scott is an African American female high school principal at Alfred Creek High School. She holds a teacher's, counselor's, and principal's certification for the state of Texas. Maria has served in the leadership position of principal, assistant, and counselor for over 20 years. She has worked as a high school counselor for 14 years, five years as an assistant principal, and two years as a principal. Maria Scott has 25 years in education.

Maria's interview took place at her home, outside on her nicely decorated patio. The serene setting provided an atmosphere of Zen and for deep reflection to take place. She presented herself as confident but also realistic or matter of fact. The responses she gave typically painted a picture of the atmosphere and conversations at the school she leads. Maria is currently the principal of a non-traditional 9-12th school that serves

students who are over age, are significantly behind academically, but who still are trying to graduate and get their high school diploma. Because of the students she serves and the barriers her students often face, Maria is observed to be very laid back, patient, and relatable. As she sat in front of her laptop, lounging in her chair on her patio, she also presented herself to be a rational thinker as she reflected on her experiences of working with LGBTQ students as a counselor, assistant principal, and principal.

### ***Participant Three***

James Lopez is a Hispanic male assistant principal at Caney Creek High School. He holds a teacher, principal certification, and a Doctor of Education with a Superintendent certification for Texas. James has served in the leadership position as assistant principal for a total of six years. He has worked as a middle school assistant principal for five years and one year as a high school assistant principal. James Lewis has 12 years in education.

Mr. Lopez's interview took place in his home in what seems to be in his formal living room area that was placed next to the kitchen. Although the interview took place in an open space, the atmosphere was quiet for most of the interview, but once in a while, the researcher could hear a cute little voice calling for her daddy. James has a lot of personality and uses humor to make connections with students and staff. Throughout the interview, there were many laughs or chuckles, which lightened the mood throughout the interview. Although many laughs were shared, James answered all interview questions with sincerity and thought. James Lopez presented himself as a sincere participant. When answering questions about his professional experiences, he often reflected upon his

school and the school district's many ideas to ensure an atmosphere conducive to learning for LGBTQ students.

#### ***Participant Four***

Todd Davis is an African American male counselor at Caney Creek Middle School. He holds a teacher and counselor's certification for the state of Texas. James has served in the leadership position of a counselor for five years. He has worked as an intermediate school counselor for three years as the sixth-grade counselor and two years as a middle school counselor. Todd Davis has 26 years in education.

Todd Davis presented himself to be very personable and genuine. His interview took place in a common area of the home, which may have been an open office area or formal living room. Like participant James Lewis, the background noise level was quiet due to Todd having earbuds, but every now and then, you could hear the voices of children playing quietly. As Todd was interviewed, he leaned in towards his monitor for most of the interview, which shows that he was engaged, listening, and showed a genuine interest. His body language showed that he was trying to understand the interview questions to respond accordingly fully. Todd had the closest personal relationship with an LGBTQ individual due to having a sibling who identified as gay. Throughout his interview, he referred to his brother, who was the most influential in how he has always interacted with the LGBTQ individuals he has met and the students he serves.

#### ***Participant Five***

Laura Clemons is an African American female high school counselor at Summer Creek High School. She holds a teacher and counselor's certification for the state of

Texas. Laura has served in the leadership position of a counselor for a total of 15 years. She has worked as a middle school counselor for seven years and eight years as a high school counselor. Laura Clemons has 23 years in education.

Laura's interview took place in the comfort of her home in an area set up as her office area. Throughout the interview, it was quiet with no distractions, which allowed Laura to really think and articulate her experience over the years as a leader in education, working with students as they struggled with coming out, parents, and personally with friends. Though in the comfort of her home, Laura was very professional and dressed as if she had been to the office. Laura presented herself to be serious and really took pride in gaining as much knowledge as possible to ensure the students she worked with were successful socially, emotionally, and academically.

### ***Participant Six***

Heather Stevenson is an African American female middle school assistant principal at Stoney Creek Middle School. She holds a teacher and principal's certification for the state of Texas. Heather has served in the leadership position of assistant principal for a total of five years. She has worked as a middle school assistant principal for all five years. Heather Stevenson has seven years total in education.

Heather Stevenson was the last participant to interview but the most intriguing. She came with a wealth of knowledge about education and curriculum and presented herself as having a heart for people in general. Heather's interview also took place in her home in her office, which appeared to be housed in the loft of her home. The area was bright, well-lit, which matched her bubbly personality throughout the interview. Heather,



several times throughout her interview, was honored to be a participant in the study and expressed how there is a great need for educators. Heather presented herself as being very invested by giving several examples of how her personal and professional experiences in interacting with LGBTQ individuals have significantly impacted who she is today as a person. She was very forthcoming and upfront while interviewing. While reflecting on her experiences out loud, she often recalled and repeated conversations she had with individuals or herself. The responses she gave, which were in great detail, painted a picture of the moment and discussion, making you feel like you were actually present.

Table 4 is reprinted from the previous chapter.

**Table 4**

*Educational Leader Participants' Profile*

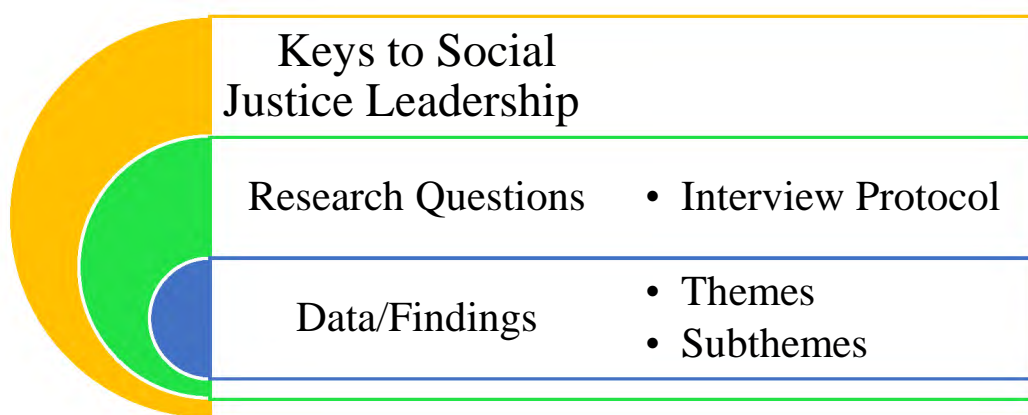
Participant Name	Gender	Ethnicity	School	Current Position	Certifications Held in Texas	Yrs. in Leadership	Yrs. in Education
Karen McMullen	Female	White	Bear Creek Middle School	Middle School Counselor	Teacher Special Education Counselor	14	21
Maria Scott	Female	African American	Alfred Creek High School	High School Principal	Teacher Counselor Principal	21	25
James Lopez	Male	Hispanic	Caney Creek High School	High School Assistant Principal	Teacher Principal Superintendent	6	12
Todd Davis	Male	African American	Caney Creek Middle School	Middle School Counselor	Teacher Counselor	5	26
Laura Clemons	Female	African American	Summer Creek High School	High School Counselor	Teacher Counselor	15	23
Heather Stevenson	Female	African American	Stoney Creek	Middle School Assistant Principal	Teacher Principal	5	12

## Data Analysis

The findings and themes that emerged from the study are presented to show its correlation to the Five Keys of Social Justice Leadership conceptual framework that provided a lens for this research study. Each Social Justice Leadership Key is present, along with the research question that corresponded to the Leadership Key. Data from the research participants, observations, memos, and the themes and subthemes that were revealed from the study will follow. The data analysis framework was developed by the researcher and is illustrated in Figure 4.

### Figure 3

*Visual Representation of Research Findings and Social Justice Model Framework*



## Findings

**Key 1. Acquire Broad, Reconceptualized Consciousness/Knowledge/Skill base**

**Research question (b): How do educational leaders employ professional and personal beliefs, knowledge, and skills while working with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?**

The social justice leader possesses a sense of awareness, comprehends the importance of social-formative power and social construction, and the ability to develop inclusive school norms (Capper et al., 2006; Theoharis, 2009). The phrase knowledge is power attributed to Francis Bacon (1597) but used by Thomas Jefferson to equate knowledge with power, safety, and happiness (The Jefferson Monticello, 2020). Giving the study participants and leaders, in general, the opportunity to deeply reflect on the skills they possessed and the conscious and unconscious bias they have as a leader for the opportunity to produce change is power translated into action. Sub-question (b) was designed to allow the participants to enter into deep reflection so the researcher could obtain a clear understanding of the knowledge the leader participants possessed when working with students who LGBTQ.

### **Theme 1: Experiences and Learning**

The first theme revealed from this study's participants was Experience and Learning with the subtheme: Conscious and Unconscious Beliefs. When one thinks of gaining knowledge or learning a new skill, education is often mentioned somewhere in the equation. Kolb and Kolb's (2018) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) or Experiential Learning Cycle explains the process of learning or gaining knowledge through experience. Experiential learning and knowledge occur through experience and reflection of the experience. According to Kolb et al. (1999), the knowledge gained through experience is a continuous cycle that consists of an abundant amount of reflecting, thinking, acting, and experience. Kolb and Kolb (2018) described this constant learning cycle through experience as endless and like breathing, a lifelong process of

taking in and putting out. Experience is necessary for learning and in-depth knowledge of the skills leaders obtained. The past and current experiences, both good and bad, detailed by the individuals involved in this study as they reflected on interactions with LGBTQ students has led to them being leaders who stand for change.

Two of the leader participants referenced the knowledge gained through higher education as a contributing factor for the knowledge and skills they implemented while working with LGBTQ students. Nonetheless, the education received was not mentioned as the sole source of the knowledge base they possessed. The theme that emerged strongly among the participants as a primary contributing factor for the knowledge and skills used while working with LGBTQ students was their past, present, personal, and professional experiences or encounters with LGBTQ students. Participant three James Lopez said it best when he stated with certainty, “*Site-based learning from the students themselves,*” as the best experience. Mr. Lopez also added, with a surprising look on his face, “*There is no greater way of learning than from the students themselves on what would help them in a particular situation.*” Participant 5, Laura Clemons, explained, “*What I found was that they’re very open to sharing once you build a rapport.*” Laura explained further how students sharing their experiences have helped her understand and learn. “*I think just knowing that you have an interest in learning and that you’re open to listening and giving them the opportunity.*” Laura also explained that once she established a relationship and was able to ask open-ended questions to the student, she was able to learn and acquire information from the students.

Some participants described how their personal experiences played a positive role in the knowledge they have acquired over the years and have implemented to support youth who are LGBTQ. Participant 4, Todd Davis, described how growing up and having a brother who was gay, picked on, and now is deceased was the driving force of how he treats the students he encounters in his school who are LGBTQ. While Participant 6, Heather Stevenson, talked about her struggle with a friendship established in college with a young man, she later found out to be gay through an email. As Heather described the friendship from her past, her face began to exemplify sadness as she reflects on why the relationship failed and why her friend did not feel comfortable telling her he was gay. Heather explained, *“I have not seen him since, and that part hurts because I felt like I lost a lifelong friend and I remember reflecting on what did I do, what did I say, did I make a joke.”* She continued to say that she would love for someone to correct her to change the behavior if she did offend. Heather added, *“Since that time when I work with students, I always feel like I’m treading lightly, I’m walking on eggshells because I don’t want to offend.”* Heather expressed feeling bad several times for not knowing what really ended her relationship with her college friend. The idea of her possibly saying something wrong or offensive to her friend provided a profound moment of reflection that became very sad yet disappointing for her.

Half of the leader participants in this study expressed honestly how their Christian upbringing, values, and beliefs have consciously and unconsciously played a role in interacting with their LGBTQ students. In the literature review about students who attend traditional and faith-based schools, sexuality and religion are still problematic for

LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2018). Religious exemptions or federally funded programs across nine federal agencies were previously designed to make it easier for schools to qualify for Title IX exemptions as *religious schools* are now barriers for LGBTQ students who attend these institutions. Due to the recently proposed new regulations by the Trump Administration, it is now more difficult to use public funds to protect students from discrimination (GLSEN, 2020). As mentioned previously in the literature, Title IX is the education amendment that has consistently protected students from discrimination based on sex (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2019). Nevertheless, despite the protection of Title IX, 62.2% of students who identify as LGBTQ still report experiencing discriminatory policies or practices at their school (Kosciw et al., 2018).

***Subtheme: Conscious Beliefs***

When asked about beliefs, Heather Stevenson described in depth how she came from a Christian home, grew up, and worked in the church and many of her family members who serve in various capacities at the church. Heather mentioned her Christian upbringing and briefly reflected on her Christian beliefs in deciding if her Christian upbringing should be significant in how she should interact with LGBTQ individuals. Heather recalled, “*When I was in college, my work-study job was a church secretary, so that was my upbringing.*” Heather continued to reflect, “*I started questioning, you know, the things that I was taught. So, I started looking at other cultures and other religions to determine.*”

On the other hand, Todd Davis, immediately with confidence, stated, “*Being a spiritual person, I had to remove that from working with our children, because spiritually we already notice its morally wrong.*” Despite having felt an alternative lifestyle being morally wrong, he knew instantly he had to remove his feelings and remember the students. Tyner (2019) stated, “The first step in addressing unconscious bias is to begin examining your personal beliefs, values, attitudes, and perceptions” (p. 5). By exploring unconscious bias and personal beliefs, leaders can then confront the biases that tend to harm students who are LGBTQ.

***Subtheme: Unconscious Beliefs***

Participant 1, Karen McMullen's unconscious beliefs, determined how her experience and interaction with LGBTQ students were affected. Karen hesitated but then freely explained, “*Umm, initially, my belief was that I’m not going to work with them if it comes out in conversation.*” Karen explained that she was always taught in her counseling program that if she came across a situation that she was uncomfortable with, she could just give the individual a referral instead of inflicting harm. Karen continued to reflect on her initial feelings,

*I think, over time, I just came to the understanding that that was going to have to change for me personally. So, I think that now I’m a different person, and I still don’t really address the whole LGBTQ scenario with a child. It is just that now I look past all of that and just see the child as a child. I’m just trying to love the person period, for exactly whomever they are and wherever they are at that moment. My beliefs and me working on myself and my belief system as far as*

*Christianity and what that really is. Furthermore, being able to love people and knowing that that is what I'm supposed to do, period. And so, for me, that's the conclusion that I have come to.*

“Unconscious bias can be challenged through a process of critical reflection. This starts by looking introspectively, putting up a mirror to see yourself clearer” (Tyner, 2019, p. 5). Self-reflecting on personal and professional experiences is essential. The literature supports that LGBTQ individuals are often unconsciously offended by something as simple as the terminology people use that they are unaware of being offensive (Jenkins, 2015). Three participants agreed that while they may or may have had conscious and unconscious biases, they identified those biases and have intentionally made sure they did not let them interfere with the livelihood of the students, or they learned from experience in their profession that they needed to do what was best and love students.

## **Key 2. Possess Core Leadership Traits**

**Research question (a): What experiences in leadership and leadership traits promote inclusion, access, and opportunity for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?**

Understanding the leadership personality traits social justice leaders possess and the leader participants' perception of how certain characteristics work when interacting with LGBTQ students were explored (Theoharis, 2009). Northouse (2013) explained that for some, “leadership is not a trait or characteristic that resides in the leader, but rather a transactional event that occurs between the leader and the followers” (p. 5). Therefore,



when exploring sub-question 1 (a) as the study participants revealed specific leadership traits possessed that provided positive interaction with LGBTQ students, presented also are specific cases or moments of interaction the leaders had while working with LGBTQ students.

## **Theme 2: Developing Relationships**

In possessing core leadership traits related to the second key of the social justice leadership model, one theme and two subthemes emerged from the participants. The theme Developing Relationships and subthemes Openness and Understanding was apparent when participants talked about traits educational leaders possess when working with all students. Northouse (2013) said that according to some leadership theories, traits are who leaders are, and the characteristics leaders have encouraged others to accomplish tasks. The task principals, assistant principals, and counselors are charged with differ, yet in their differing roles, what is clear is the traits leaders possess when positively displayed aid in the academic success and overall school experience for students (Chatwin, 2018). One could argue that leadership is second to instruction in terms of importance for students' overall success, including LGBTQ students. In that sense, it is paramount that the traits and characteristics leaders possess to enhance the school experiences for LGBTQ students and an overall cognition about youth and what makes them successful academically in school are key (Mendels, 2012).

Payne's (2008) article focused on essential practices for educational leaders to advance school achievement for students living in poverty. Dr. James P. Comer, a child psychiatry professor at the Yale Child Study, clearly states, "No significant learning

occurs without a significant relationship” (p.1). The act of leaders developing relationships with students not only emerged and served as the central theme for Key #2, but it is also apparent in other keys for social justice leadership. Building and sustaining healthy, positive relationships between students, teachers, and leaders are the foundation to students feeling part of the school community, social-emotional development, and academic growth. When educational leaders make their school culture and climate a priority by cultivating trusting and caring relationships with school staff, it can help create a culture in which every individual feels apart of and takes an active role in promoting positivity so the school and students can thrive (Transforming Education, 2020).

An ally is an individual or group of people considered majority or dominant, who is seen as working to end oppression through supporting and advocating for a group considered oppressed (Human Rights Campaign, 2020). The leader participants for this study served as allies for LGBTQ youth at their schools. They expressed how establishing relationships with their students allowed them to feel safe while at school and provided insight for them as the educator. Participant 1, Karen McMullen, immediately stated in her interview, *“I very much want a relationship, I’m relationship-oriented.”* In talking more about experiences, Karen was asked to speak about her most impactful experience and credits her relationship with a current student as the most significant. Karen explained, *“This will be my third year working with her, and it was just my relationship with her working through everything we worked through.”* Karen began to think and went into deep thought about the relationship she has with this student, and

she added, *“And I think that my relationship with her really changed a lot of how I felt about how I was responding to students and how I saw myself.”* When asked the same question about the most impactful experience, Participant 4, Todd Davis stated, *“I would say relationships; I’ve formed a very good relationship with students that said they were gay.”* Todd continued to talk more about the importance of understanding the different types of relationships he had with students and concluded by stating, *“So I would say the relationship class still works with kids now.”*

The Human Rights Campaign is an organization that has done countless activities, and research and serves as an ally for LGBTQ individuals. An example of its work is the showcase of a program that offers support to LGBTQ youth, *Establishing an Allies/Safe Zone Program*. Mentioned within this program is the idea of allies placing a rainbow logo on their office door to show LGBTQ youth they have been trained, they stand in support of LGBTQ youth, and will be a person easy to talk to Participant 5, Laura Clemons, spoke about having this sticker in her office and speaks of the logo as a silent way to say to LGBTQ students, *I support, and are here for you*. Laura explained,

*“One of the things that I learned in training this year that was really valuable was that a lot of the students do not feel like they’re in a safe space., particularly late teens. So, we were even given some resources that we could use, like a little sticker you can post. I think this is a good resource, and I can just post it on the side of my desk so it can open up dialogue and let the person know that I at least have some knowledge and understanding. It just creates more of a safe environment, I believe.”*

This idea of silent communication expressed by Laura Clemons served as a tool to start and develop relationships with students who identified as LGBTQ. Students often do not know how to have this awkward conversation with strangers, so the idea of having a rainbow logo or sticker is one of many ways leaders can show support for LGBTQ youth.

### ***Subtheme Openness***

The ability to be open or openness is part of the personality dimensions placed centrally and often drive behaviors (Psychology Today, 2020). Openness is described as the ability to be receptive to new ideas and new experiences (Psychology Today, 2020). Jensen (2015) suggested that openness is associated with learning and general knowledge and further explored in his study all five personality traits as they related to surface thinking and achieving learning. Being open or openness is associated with learning because individuals tend to be motivated to learn as much as possible about an area of knowledge they find interesting (Jensen, 2015).

In this study and consistent with the literature, all leaders expressed repetitively the need to be open when working with students to develop relationships, especially students who identify as LGBTQ. Participant 3 James Lopez stated, “*Having a general open-mind is probably the idea that you have to have.*” Participant 5, Laura Clemons, also expressed,

*I think primarily the traits and characteristics are just being open to differences amongst clientele. Knowing how to ask questions to gain an understanding and being open and mindful is one of the primary traits that assist in that area.*

Participant 4, Todd Davis, spoke about learning to be open when having the opportunity to reflect on personal biases. He stated, *“I can’t believe I was so close-minded. I have to kind of remove myself and be more open and more accepting.”* According to the leader participants, openness is an essential trait to have, open with discussions, open to ideas students may express, and even just having an open-door policy. They all recognized that possessing this trait allowed LGBTQ students to feel apart of the school, confident, like they had an ally or someone to talk to while at school.

***Subtheme: Understanding***

Being understanding as leaders is a subtheme that also emerged from the participants in the study. Understanding, seeking to understand, or having empathy as an educator or leader in education is the core of the process of what it takes to educate children. Understanding as leaders is multi-facet and can carry several meanings related to education (Wiggins & McTighe, 2020). Understanding in education is often associated with how well students know a subject matter; however, for this study, understanding pertains to both knowledge and application. Understanding is the power of comprehending or the ability to be aware of others feelings sympathetically, personal feelings, tolerant and forgiving (Decety & Jackson, 2004). In this study, the participants spoke of how open communication with LGBTQ students required them to be open-minded and open to utilizing and applying skills/strategies they were not accustomed to using with students. Through dialogue, they were able to learn, understand, or gain knowledge about LGBTQ students.

Participant 5 Laura Clemons, as mentioned previously, referred to understanding as *“Knowing how to ask questions to gain understanding and being open-minded is one of the primary traits that assist in that area.”* She also added, *“Just understanding a little bit more about the population and have little more insight from the actual individual.”*

Laura said this has been beneficial for her, and seeking to understand the students has helped her gain knowledge and develop better relationships with LGBTQ students.

Participant 3 James Lewis spoke of understanding as it relates to the students. He stated, *“I just have to listen and make sure that I fully understand what they are going through. I think the keyword is empathy.”* Todd Davis, Participant 4, took pride in knowing that his personal experiences have given him the ability to be understanding. He said, *“I felt like going into education, and I think growing up having a brother that was gay, I already embraced, I already understood.”*

Effective leaders and the traits leaders possess are essential to a school (Kransnoff, 2015). Despite the leader participants having differing roles as principal, assistant principal, counselor, and how they impact a student, all professionals agreed that the students they serve should be the priority. While the student should remain central in the minds of educational leaders across the world, leaders must understand and keep in mind that they have the power to positively transform a school or community and ensure success for LGBTQ and all students if done with integrity and the children in mind.

**Key 3. Advance Inclusion, Access, and Opportunity Research question (a): What experiences in leadership and leadership traits promote inclusion, access, and**

### **opportunity for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?**

This Social Justice Leadership Key specifically for LGBTQ students highlights what and how social justice leaders seek to establish an equal opportunity for all students in their schools. Research Question (a) reveals a vivid picture of what access for all, including LGBTQ students, looks like in secondary schools.

### **Theme 3: Acceptance**

Key 3 is the advancement of inclusion, access, and opportunities related to education, leaders, and children, and it should be simple. However, society and the world require educational leaders to understand, study, reflect and put into action the keys to social justice leadership. The theme that emerged from the study relating to Key 3 is accepting: they support a cycle built on respect and care for all students (Theoharis, 2007). Leaders seek to include and provide an opportunity for all and put into action the federal law Title IX, which says, “No person in the United States shall, based on sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program, activity receiving federal financial assistance” (United States Department of Education, 2019, p. 1).

### **Acceptance**

The leaders of this study spoke of being accepting as the leader, colleagues being accepting of students, students accepting other students, and students being accepting of themselves. Acceptance, as described in this study, relates to the social acceptance of individuals and their differences. What was revealed in this study from the participants

was that once acceptance from all was established in the school setting, LGBTQ students tend to feel included.

Acceptance was demonstrated easily among all participants in the study but one. After reflecting on personal biases, upbringing, and professional experiences, the one participant began to realize that acceptance was the only way she could effectively do her job. As mentioned, the leader participants themselves felt that accepting students who identify as LGBTQ allowed for relationships to develop and learning to take place. Participant 1, Karen McMullen, stated, *“I am just a person that accepts people as they are and that I am just a very caring and loving person.”* Participant 4, Todd Davis, mentioned, *“I had to remember to include, always accept the students for who they are and not to mention, not hold it against him, but accept them, for who they are.”* Todd Davis also mentioned, *“I also made sure LGBTQ students are included, they have the same mobility, the same access to everything despite of who they are.”*

Participant 2, Maria Scott spoke of being accepted as a leader when students revealed they are LGBTQ but also spoke of how teachers who may not have been as accepting of students made her feel like the leader. Maria stated, *“Working with others on acceptance because not all or everyone is always accepting of differences.”* Maria also added, *“Working with others when they are not accepting of differences, you know, kinda gives me a negative perception of them.”* Maria reflected further, *“I’ve always been accepting, and it’s fine with me, but then learning that others are not, and they are supposed to be professional.”* Maria described how it was a struggle to work with individuals who judge others and still remain a professional leader. When she spoke of



this issue, the inflection in her voice showed her passion for students and making sure they were all accepted, respected, and treated fairly. Participant 6, Heather Stevenson, also spoke about her colleagues being very judgmental of students who identified as LGBTQ. She felt their actions, the conversations and behaviors were not professional and should not be displayed by educators. Heather stated with disgust, *“I remember my principal, she commented, and she said, Oh, this is just ridiculous. Heather adds I was concerned about the comment because I was thinking, wait a minute, you’re the leader of this entire school.”* In her interview, she talked about hearing teachers whispering about boys wearing pink and making jokes and feeling powerful at that moment. Heather also described how her silence and not speaking up for the students when teachers made jokes were something she was not proud of and needed to change.

Two of the leaders talked about how the relationship they had built with the student(s) that were LGBTQ allowed them to guide them in self-acceptance and what to do when peers were not as accepting. Participant 2, Maria Scott, said, *“It’s just making sure they’re prepared for what the world may bring, it’s also making sure they have the skills they need when faced with someone who’s not accepting.”* Participant 4, Todd Davis, recalled a time when he advised an LGBTQ student and said to the students, *“You also have to understand that you cannot force, you cannot put those things on other people. You can’t make another guy like you; you gotta be willing to accept what comes along with it.”* Maria and Todd expressed genuine concern for making sure LGBTQ students are prepared to face discrimination beyond the school.

As one of the participants stated, teaching and practicing acceptance related to LGBTQ students, educators have to deal with positive and negative encounters. Social acceptance is vital, and school counselors are charged with implementing a curriculum that promotes a positive social and emotional school climate (American School Counselors Association, 2019). The data supports integrating the social and emotional curriculum in schools citing that schools that use programs to promote social acceptance, celebrate differences, and promote respect have better academic outcomes (Jones, et al., 2017).

**Key 5. Create a climate of belonging**

**Research question (c): How do Educational Leaders create a welcoming climate and sense of belonging for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning? and Research question (d): How do educational leaders recognize and react to policies and practices that do not support inclusion, access, and opportunity of for students who identify as LGBTQ?**

Social justice leaders challenge the injustice of students attending schools in a hostile, unwelcoming environment by establishing a warm, welcoming atmosphere that renders a sense of community (Theoharis, 2009). As reported biannually in the National School Climate Survey conducted by the organization GLSEN, school climate continues to present itself as a roadblock for LGBTQ students (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2016). Research sub-questions (c) and (d) allowed the participants to share how they create a welcoming climate for all students

#### **Theme 4: Welcoming**

The school leader's main task is to establish and maintain a school culture where students are known, accepted, and valued, nurtured, and encouraged to be active, responsible citizens of the school community (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019). The research is clear and has emphasized that a positive school climate is associated with high or improving attendance rates, test scores, promotion rates, and graduation rates (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2018; School Climate Improvement, 2020). *Welcoming* serves as the overall theme, while *Love and Respect* are subthemes for Key 5, which translates into establishing a school culture of active participation from all. Creating a climate of belonging that is welcoming requires the leader to be respectful and show love. Though the overall theme for this Key is welcoming, the participants described having a welcoming climate that fosters a sense of belonging for LGBTQ students by showing love and being respectful.

Students must feel wanted, validated, and supported. Leaders are charged with establishing a nurturing environment where students are known, safe, and can learn. Maslow identified this back in 1943 when he published his well-known hierarchy of needs. At the base of Maslow's pyramid sit the most fundamental physiological needs those required to maintain life. Above these sit 'safety' needs, including well-being needs, and above these, the need for a sense of belonging and love (The Learner's Way, 2020). Two of the needs mentioned in Maslow's hierarchy, see Figure 5, are co-themes that emerged in Key 5, creating a climate of belonging.

**Figure 4***Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

Note: The figure of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is pictured to show how two of the co-themes love, and, respect are part of the human's basic need. Adapted from McLeod, S. A. 2018, *Maslow's hierarchy of needs*. Simply Psychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.

***Subtheme: Love***

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 NIV describes love in a way that is relevant to the love educators demonstrate to their students.

Love is patient; love is kind. It does not envy; it does not boast; it is not proud. It does not dishonor others; it is not self-seeking; it is not easily angered; it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hope, always preserves (BibleGateway, 2020, p. 1).

The leader participants all agreed that a welcoming climate is essential for learning to take place for the staff and students. Through their educational experience, all of the

participants perceived a welcoming climate described as the essence of love, love for the profession, and, most importantly, love for the child.

Participant 1, Karen McMullen, described herself as loving and presented herself in a loving way to make the students feel welcome. She stated, *“I just am a very caring, and I’m a loving person. I reach out towards students, very welcoming.”* Karen also expressed that she knows that showing love is what she is supposed to do as a Christian and even expressed that she wakes up in the morning with an attitude, ready to help students. Karen said, *“I’ll wake up, and I try to put my mindset in a certain place before I ever get to my job because I look at my job as an opportunity.”* Karen reflected more on her experiences.

*I’m always thinking, I don’t know who I’m going to talk to today. Who am I going to impact today? Whether it be a parent, a student, or a teacher, I’m consistently in a mindset of knowing that I’m going there to give out.*

Participant 2, Maria Scott, expressed the importance of having a welcoming and safe climate for students at school because home life may not be as favorable. Maria Scott explained in a concerning manner,

*The kids have so many other things that they have to focus on; Some of them are the head of their household, some of them have families already that they’re taking care of, some are taking care of their parents, so the school has to be their safe place and need to be somewhere they can come.*

Participant 4, Todd Davis, agreed and said, *“I feel like a positive school climate is paramount.”* Todd Davis elaborated on a positive school climate by concluding, *“My*

*goal here is to make sure that everyone, our children feel loved, valued, respected and safe.*” Todd Davis further explained how showing love and telling the students *I love you* can make a difference in how future interactions with the student change after telling them, *I love you*. Mr. Davis also explained that many of the kids never hear anyone say those words and often become surprised when they hear the words stated directly to them.

***Subtheme: Respect***

Respect is important because it contributes to safety, openness, and reflection (ASCD, 2020). Feeling esteemed or a sense of respect in a school setting is essential for leaders, but it is also equally important for students to feel like they have a voice or are part of the school community. When educators work to create an atmosphere at schools that exude a climate that shows respect for all, acknowledging LGBT individuals among the student body, their endeavors can bring about a more certain school insight for LGBT youth (GLSEN, 2020).

Participant 5, Laura Clemons, talked about a climate of respect as well as access. Laura explained, “*A welcoming climate where students feel like they belong, where they feel connected is important because that’s going to have the biggest impact on how much achievement they are able to gain.*” Laura added, “*give them a way to access you, where they know it is confidential and a safe space.*” She also mentioned the need to have resources available for students and clubs so students can have peers with common goals who can come together as a community. Participants James Lopez and Heather Stevenson also felt that clubs or social groups could also show respect for student

differences and make all students feel part of the school community. Participant 2, Maria Scott, talked about a school of respect, *“We should lead our school as a community where everyone is respected.”* Maria explained that they practiced restorative practices at her school and explained that the students and staff have a place at the table and how it creates respect. Maria stated, *“We’re doing restorative practices where we have circles where everyone has a voice.”* Heather Stevenson also talked about the use of restorative practices. She added, *“Social circles where people want to get restorative justice and are able to speak out and get their voices heard is being inclusive.”*

James Lopez painted a picture of a school with an adverse school climate. He stated, *“If you try to have a functioning campus without a positive climate, it’s not going to work; try to have a department without it, you’re going to have turmoil.”* He added, *“A school’s climate is like building a house; it’s the foundation and without, it’s going to crumble.”* Establishing a warm and welcoming climate for all students is a determining factor of school success. Without welcoming school climates, academic success and an excellent school experience for LGBTQ students is inevitable.

### **Key 7. Sustain Oneself Professionally and Personally**

**Research question (e): To what extent do educational leaders go to be viewed and sustain themselves as qualified, trained, professionals who work with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning? and (f): What is your leadership experience of working with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning?**

To sustain oneself professionally and personally when challenges exist requires the social justice leader to be resilient in continuing the work of social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2009). Research sub-questions 5(e) and 6(f) explain what professional development opportunities they have attended that support their working relationship with LGBTQ students. For leaders in education, charged with educating and advancing new ideas for learning, having professional development and attending training prompts more grounded and well-informed instructors and student success. (Educators for High Standards, 2020).

### **Theme 5: Reflection/Training**

As described by Meirrow (1997) regarding transformative learning, “A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience.” (p.5). In addition, reflecting on work experiences enhances its meaning and encourages insight, which leads to learning or gaining knowledge (Costa & Kallick, 2008). The theme of Reflection not only emerged but was also apparent through the process of interviewing and the observation by all leader participants. The opportunity is given to the leaders to talk about their educational experiences allowed for a substantial amount of reflection to take place. “Reflecting on experiences encourages insight and complex learning” (Costa & Kallick, 2008, p. 221). Through reflection, the leader participants understood why some of the experiences or perceptions they had in the past had played a role in their current leadership style. The leaders were also able to deeply reflect on current practices they use, their staff development participants, and were able to talk about new and improved ideas they felt would help develop them professionally.



By reflecting on professional leadership experience, as it relates to working with students who identify as LGBTQ, all participants felt that they could use more training about the subject matter. The participants expressed the need for ongoing training about making the school experiences for LGBTQ students better at the campus and district level. Participant 3, James Lopez, explained, *“There’s not enough training; there needs to be more.”* All participants either expressed the same feeling as James Lopez or implied they needed more training because of the lack of training they have received so far. Participant 5, Laura Clemons, stated, *“I think there needs to be more training specifically because, as a counselor, we definitely tend to have a little more insight in certain situations.”* Participant 2, Maria Scott, mentioned, *“I don’t think I’ve attended anything. I know there are trainings out there.”*

The idea of educational leaders needing to get more training is consistent with the literature. By exploring this idea more, it was discovered that principals received less training than counselors related to LGBTQ students. The counselor leader participants were able to identify at least one training provided by their district related to LGBTQ students that they all felt was beneficial. Out of the three principal leader participants, two of the three were not able to identify trainings they had attended. The one principal participant who mentioned the training she had participated in also stated that there were trainings she attended on her own and not with the school district.

Despite having several professional development opportunities relating to LGBTQ students, the leader participants were able to identify staff developments they felt would be beneficial at the district and campus level. The leaders felt that because the

restrooms were a hot topic some years ago, they thought it would be helpful for the district to have a training revisiting this issue. The leader participants were unclear on how to handle this issue if it should arise on their campus and were not aware or certain if their school district currently had a policy that outlined how to handle this situation. Participant 3, James Lopez, felt that the district should establish a committee to address issues like the bathroom issue for LGBTQ students. Overall, for Key 7, Sustain Oneself Professionally and Personally, the participants' interactions with LGBTQ students and reflecting on personal experiences with LGBTQ individuals had helped them develop professionally.

### **Summary of Findings**

Cognitive knowledge refers to a person's thoughts, his or her own thinking, or human thinking as a whole. Researchers who explore effective school leaders' qualities often start with what the leader knows about the students they serve, the campus, and the community (Brooke, 2017). Figure 6 serves as a visual developed by the researcher that represents the Social Justice Leadership Model Keys for Social Justice Leadership, the framework used for this study from which the research sub-questions were designed, in relation to the themes and subthemes that emerged from this study.

**Figure 5**

*Representation of Social Justice Leadership Keys to Themes and Subthemes of the Study*



Theme 1, Experiences, and Learning, along with Subthemes Conscious and Unconscious biases aligned with Key 1, Acquire broad, reconceptualized consciousness/knowledge/skill base, allowing for the knowledge that leaders possess to come to the forefront. The leaders' perspectives before having the professional experience of working with LGBTQ played a significant role in how the leaders worked with students. Theme 2, Developing Relationships, and the subthemes Openness and Understanding aligned with Leadership Key 2, were significant leadership traits that leaders should possess to build a successful relationship with LGBTQ students.

Acceptance was the sole theme to emerge from the research sub-question (a) aligned with Key 3, Advance Inclusion, Access, and Opportunity. The participants expressed that students who identify as LGBTQ all want to be included and accepted while at school. They found that by including them with decision-making and basic conversations that allowed them to share what they think and feel made them feel needed and part of the school.

Key 5, Creating a Climate of Belonging aligned with Theme 5 Welcoming, and subthemes, Love and Respect, appeared. Participants all agreed that a positive school climate that included love and respect for the students and the staff enhanced their school environment. The participants felt that creating an atmosphere of love and respect for all was essential for learning to occur and that a school would suffer significantly without it. The final research sub-questions (e) and (f), and the theme Self-Reflection aligned with Key, 7, Sustaining Oneself Professionally and Personally. The participants felt that by being afforded a chance and moment to reflect on their personal and professional experiences, they could identify their needs professionally and the areas where they could use more support. All participants felt that more specific training at the district and campus-level was needed to support students who identify as LGBTQ. The leaders felt that if they had an opportunity to conduct an audit, reflect on best and worst practices with colleagues, they would be able to develop new and improved ideas to support them. They also expressed the need for training to be ongoing and not just a one-time beginning of the year training.

Several themes surfaced through the careful analysis of the data; however, what is interesting is how some of the themes that emerged from the research questions also emerged in other questions. Because the themes that emerged were so powerful, they seem to overlap and make themselves relevant when addressing other research questions. Though the problems LGBTQ students face have been ongoing and complicated for many educators for many years, this research revealed simple principles for leaders to implement to create supportive schools for LGBTQ students: a leader's experiences (conscious and unconscious), willingness to be open, understanding, accepting, loving, respectful and reflective to gain knowledge of the students they serve according to the participants in this study that make for a better school experience for LGBTQ students.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

#### Summary

Education gives us knowledge of the world around us and changes it into something better. It develops in us a perspective of looking at life. It helps us build opinions and have points of view on things in life. (Doumbia, 2013, p. 1)

In contrast to the quote mentioned above, for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, the process of gaining information about the world or life, in general, is met with many barriers and challenges in schools (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2016). Countless researchers and studies have investigated the family, school climate, legislation, policy, biological factors, and more to explore ways to dismantle the barriers LGBTQ students face in a school setting. Despite the efforts put forth by researchers who have taken a great interest in this subject, the literature review and the outcomes from this investigation were reliable and compatible with results from previous studies that suggested a more in-depth understanding of policies districts have and are enforcing to protect and ensure a better educational experience for LGBTQ youth (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010; Kull et al., 2015).

Over the years, researchers have made great strides in highlighting factors that contribute to the negative school experiences of LGBTQ students (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010). However, little to no research has deeply examined the school leaders, mainly principals and assistant principals, to understand their thoughts and interaction, particularly with LGBTQ students on campus. School leaders are critical and impact the

way of life and atmosphere of schools and student success (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014; Mendels, 2012). Research conducted by Lane (2016) surveyed school leaders, teachers, and other staff members and revealed leadership as a critical component in the success of campus, especially with transformational leaders having the potential to positively impact a school's climate (Lane, 2016). The literature is clear and has highlighted that school climate and leadership have an impact on a school environment. What stills needs more attention is how educational leaders can help students who are LGBTQ and those students who are perceived to be LGBTQ (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014).

By using the theoretical framework Social Justice Educational Leadership Model and five of the seven keys for social justice leadership, this descriptive phenomenology study sought to deeply understand the thoughts and practices of educational leaders who have had success while interacting with students who identify as LGBTQ. Specifically, serving as a guide for this study was the following overarching research question with supporting questions: What are the cultural beliefs, values, experiences, and perceptions of principals and counselors who work with youth who identify as LGBTQ?

- (a) What experiences in leadership and leadership traits promote inclusion, access, and opportunity for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?
- (b) How do educational leaders employ professional and personal beliefs, knowledge, and skills while working with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?

- (c) How do educational leaders create a welcoming climate and sense of belonging for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?
- (d) How do educational leaders recognize and react to policies and practices that do not support inclusion, access, and opportunity for students who identify as LGBTQ?
- (e) To what extent do educational leaders view and sustain themselves as qualified, trained professionals who work with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning?
- (f) What is the leadership experience of working with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning?

The participants in this study consisted of principals, assistant principals, and counselors, referred to as Educational Leaders throughout the study, who work with students in secondary grade levels 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade. Specifically, the participants consisted of one principal, two assistant principals, and three counselors with varying years of education and leadership experience. Not pertinent to this study's finding, the study participants also consisted of individuals from various ethnicities. All educational leaders for this study currently work for Concordia Creek Independent School District in the Southeast Region of Texas.

Through observations, in-depth semi-structured face-to-face virtual interviews, review of the study participant transcripts and recordings, member checking the findings revealed five main themes that corresponded to Keys of Social Justice Leadership and



several subthemes for each research question. The emergence of the five themes that had a significant impact on how educational leaders were successful in interacting with LGBTQ students were *Experiences and Learning with sub-themes Conscious and Unconscious Bias; Relationships with sub-themes Openness and Understanding; and Acceptance, Welcoming, Self-Reflection, and Training with sub-themes Love and Respect*. The study participants were unique and presented themselves as more than a leader, principal, assistant principal, or counselor. They all considered themselves as change agents and interacted with their students as social justice leaders. Through their educational journey of becoming the leaders of their schools, the participants provided a profound understanding of the LGBTQ students they serve daily and what it takes as a leader to make a positive life-long lasting impression that significantly changes students' lives. Their experiences expressed through their lens provided food for thought for current and aspiring educational leaders.

## **Discussion**

Several research studies that have been conducted regarding education and school environment indicate that a positive school atmosphere is related to anticipating scholastic accomplishment and a students' social and emotional development (Cohen, 2010; National School Climate Center, 2020). However, for many LGBTQ youth, a school's climate is often described as exclusive, unsafe, and adverse, causing academic disparities and the overall well-being of these students to greatly suffer (Kosciw, 2018; Kull et al., 2019). What is equally essential to the academic success of students as it relates to education and school experience is having a strong and supportive leader (The

Wallace Foundation, 2013). By looking at the leaders charged with students' safety, security, and well-being, this study presented in-depth knowledge of what it takes to ensure LGBTQ students are equally accepted and thriving at school. Boyland et al. (2016) made it clear that school leaders should support and provide strong leadership for social change for vulnerable or marginalized students. Educational leaders must continue to advocate for curriculum and policies that offer support for current and future educators who will interact with LGBTQ students (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2016). Despite making headway in the lives of LGBTQ individuals and students in schools, more work remains that formed the basis for pursuing this research study.

The problems that existed yesterday are still the problems that exist today for so many LGBTQ students. Though the issues faced by many LGBTQ students may come in different shapes or forms from the problems that existed in the past, the research is clear that it takes a village of leaders working together along with the staff and students themselves for successful school experiences to take place (National School Climate Center, 2020). Lack of self-efficacy and leaders feeling unprepared for not being armed with knowledge and the right tools to ensure students feel safe while at school are concerns expressed in the literature (Kull et al., 2017). However, the participants and findings from this study give hope by revealing simple, natural tools most if not all leaders possess or can learn through experience to eliminate most of the issues LGBTQ students face. Essentially the problem and why this study took place was to deeply learn from the educational leaders, who and what within a school setting may negatively contribute to LGBTQ students' on-going negative school experiences year after year.

School leaders are expected to be knowledgeable, and some are charged with leading for social change; however, this study reveals that knowledge alone does not produce change, define, or make a good leader.

This study sought to identify the cognitive and affective knowledge required by educational leaders to serve LGBTQ students successfully and found that affective knowledge is needed, wanted, and valued by educational leaders, staff, and students. As mentioned previously, educational leaders have the ethical responsibility to be non-judgmental, unbiased, and professional at all times. Nevertheless, by allowing the participants to reflect on their personal and professional experiences of working with LGBTQ students, the leaders could confront their own biases (past and present), which led to more supportive practices being revealed. All the participants in this study did not start in their leadership positions without flaws but learned through reflection and practice to become social justice leaders.

One of the themes revealed, *Experience*, and subthemes of confronting *Conscious and Unconscious Biases*, was one the participants felt should be an ongoing practice several times throughout the school year for educators. Biases of any kind can be detrimental to youth, but the bias that individuals are typically unaware of can be “challenged through a process of critical reflection” (Tyner, 2019, p. 4). This starts by removing the mask and taking a look introspectively in what is referred to as “taking a good long look in the mirror.” Throughout the year, on-going staff developments are presented to support students academically and are not a foreign practice for educators. Similarly, the leaders suggested that critical reflection of conscious and unconscious bias

be part of professional development several times a year to allow reflection. The National Education Association (NEA) 2015, surveyed teachers about the effects of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and found that many expressed a considerable amount of pressure and anxiety from school and district leadership to improve test scores. Schools and School leaders continue to be confronted with the pressures for accountability, achieving higher learning levels for all children, and increasing occurrences of publicly being criticized (Grogan, 2014; Kean-Marie et al., 2009). The participants mentioned these same feelings as barriers to developing meaningful relationships with the students and staff they serve.

*Developing Relationships* was another significant theme revealed in this study, and findings revealed that getting back to the basics of the areas expressed in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs by showing love, being welcoming, and offering support to all students in ways that invite them to thrive and learn.

### **Lessons Educators Value, Execute & Enact for LGBTQIA youth to Uphold Positivity Model (LEVEL UP)**

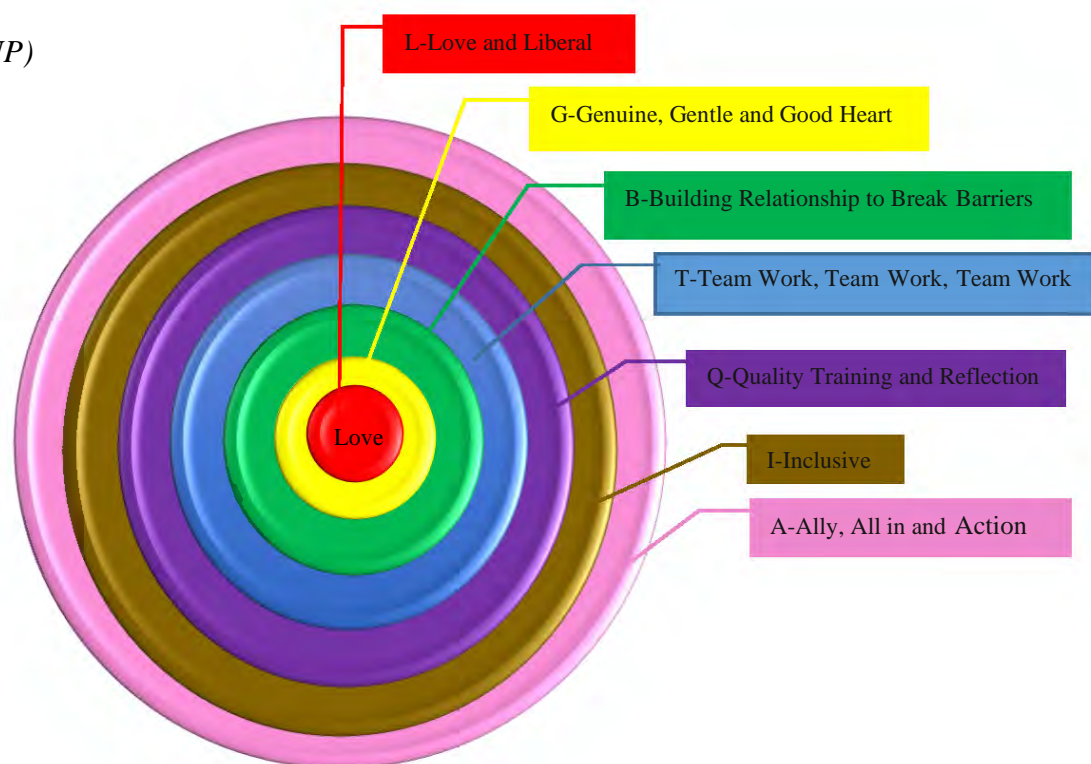
As society consistently changes, educators must always stand ready to develop innovative ways to take on the challenges presented. This study's findings revealed simple tasks and characteristics educational leaders possessed and can implement when interacting with anyone. Care and concern for all students are foundational to teaching. To that end, the researcher used the themes generated from the data to develop a model that can be adopted by other educational leaders who work with students who identify as LGBTQ, extending beyond to include individuals who may identify as intersex, asexual, or allied. The model, Lessons Educators Value, Execute & Enact for LGBTQIA Youth to

Uphold Positivity, can be seen as an educational extension of Maslow's Hierarchy of Basic Needs. The Model highlights the best yet basic practices and characteristics that reflect the themes and subthemes found to be successful when working with LGBTQ youth. The acronym for the model is LGBTQIA and is illustrated in Figure 7.

**Figure 6**

*Lessons Educators Value, Execute & Enact for LGBTQIA youth to Uphold Positivity*

*Model (LEVEL UP)*



**LEVEL UP** was designed with the basic principle of love expressed in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 as central. Even though none of the participants in this study specifically cited the scripture, their descriptions of their LGBTQ students' interactions were consistent with the Biblical definition of love. LEVEL UP is also compatible with another universal approach, *Love and Logic*, developed in 1977 by Jim Fay and Dr. Foster W. Cline (Fay, 2020). *Love and Logic* are used in many schools to improve

student behavior and school climate while giving students the message that adults cared about them.

With the significant role of school climate in the school experience of LGBTQ youth and Key 3 of the Social Justice Leadership model, any action done lovingly or done to show love renders successful relationships. Like many other models developed, the layers of LEVEL UP can be implemented in any order and are connected in several ways. Although the layers for the LEVEL UP Model can be executed in any order in a school setting, the level L, which represents love, is always central. The L for Liberal means essentially being open to new behaviors and opinions was also an idea expressed by the participants. Openness was a subtheme that emerged from the study. It highlighted how leaders established a great rapport with LGBTQ students, which led to increased knowledge and sensitivity. The G represents educators who are genuine and gentle with a good heart, describes characteristics that, in turn, support and helps leaders build relationships with students, the next layer of the model. B, which stands for Building or establishing relationships, was also a theme and was mentioned several times among the leader participants. According to the participants and consistent with current research, building relationships with students are crucial in education. Sears (2019) highlighted that establishing a relationship with students is critical and stated, “It is our responsibility to get to know our students at different levels, not only academically, but personally and socially” (p. 1).

The T for Teamwork uniquely says that the key to the success of students academically, socially, and emotionally requires the work of all stakeholders. One person

or leader in a school setting cannot reach all students. Different educators bring diverse attributes to a team that collectively contributes to completing a task. Collaboration as a team is often referenced in conjunction with leadership, and a strong leader develops strong teams (Sohmen, 2013). The Q for Quality Training and time for Reflection during professional development were themes for Key 7 Sustaining Professionalism. The theme that emerged from Key 1, Experiences and Learning, also goes hand and hand with Quality Training. The participants revealed training related to LGBTQ students as an area they all needed to develop more. The leaders felt that their school district was moving in the right direction by providing training to counselors. However, they expressed that specific training geared towards the special population of LGBTQ students was inadequate.

I for Inclusive is quite simple and has been the one practice LGBTQ individuals and advocates have promoted for years. Inclusiveness or being free from discrimination is based on the federal law Title IX used to protect all students in schools. The A stands for Ally, All in, and Action. GLSEN (2020) stated allyship is not performative but is action-oriented. GLSEN's definition of allyship was reflected in the participants' data, who viewed their roles as one of action.

### **The Framework of Social Justice Educational Leadership**

The Social Justice Educational Leadership Model or Social Justice Leadership Framework, used in this research, served as a guide for this study. The five of the seven keys for social justice leadership by Theoharis (2009) served as a lens and framed the basis of the overarching and supporting research questions. Leading with the idea of

producing a change is vital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and a call for social justice leaders is needed more than ever. Capers and Young (2014) asked the question of what it means to practice socially just educational leadership and concluded that it must be comprehensive. The research is clear across student differences that all students benefit greatly socially and academically when included, welcomed, and made to feel apart of the school environment.

Serving as social justice educational leaders were second nature for the participants in this research. One of the participants stated social justice leadership or leading for change is a must for individuals in education because it is a profession designed to change children's lives. The participants voiced their commitment towards creating more inclusive environments for the students and staff at their schools and were eager to offer ideas of how their school district could put more practices in place to promote inclusiveness. It was evident that Concordia Independent School District is committed to developing its leaders and implementing social justice leadership practices. Two of the participants mentioned the Restorative Justice approach and restorative circles as a practice at their school to bring all individuals in their school together, and they believed this practice alone has helped bring positivity to their campus.

The themes revealed in this study are all significant factors or characteristics that promote social justice educational leadership. The study's design and research questions purposely drawn from five of the seven keys for social justice, leadership allowed for the characteristics of a social justice leader to be easily identified and understand how educational leaders work successfully with LGBTQ youth. The findings support that



further research is needed about concepts specifically designed to create an atmosphere inclusive to diverse groups including, LGBTQ youth. The participants have made it their mission to create and lead schools with equal access for all, despite having the challenge to serve LGBTQ students in the “No Homo, Promo” state of Texas.

### **Implications for Teachers, Educational Leaders, and Policymakers**

Turhan (2010), a decade ago, expressed, “Social developments have changed lifestyles and social structures of all nations dramatically. Concepts such as freedom, democracy, and human rights have come into prominence in this era, and inequalities and interpersonal factors that give rise to inequalities have diversified” (p.1357). The inequalities experienced 10 years later, in 2020, with the cases of Ahmaud Aubrey, Briana Taylor, George Floyd, just a few unarmed African Americans who died at the hands of law enforcement, proves the need for social justice leaders in and outside the school. The issues faced in communities stemming from discrimination because of sexuality or skin color further prove why more research is needed to support children who are continuously affected socially and emotionally with issues that do not promote change.

Individuals who identify as LGBTQ have been presented with challenges for years. As society continues to change, the challenges progress from just being LGBTQ to being LGBTQ and a minority. The theoretical framework chosen for this study demonstrates to current and future educators the need to continue social justice leadership practices in schools. The research findings presented in this study show educators that supporting students does not have to be complicated, and social justice educational

leadership practices can serve as a lens for how educators approach issues experienced in education. School districts often have their mission and vision set to establish unity and a core set of beliefs and goals they want to achieve. The Social Justice Educational Leadership Model provides simple, relevant, flexible practices that can be incorporated in any given situation. Cappers and Young (2014) stated, “the need for leaders to develop, fund, and implement new learning environments that reflect the power of inclusion/integration” (p. 163). By studying and understanding the perspectives of social justice leaders who have been successful in interacting with LGBTQ youth, teachers and other educational leaders now know practices to implement in their schools.

The findings revealed that getting back to the fundamental practices and principles, such as some of the characteristics identified in Maslow’s Basic Needs developed many years ago, provides overall support for children to feel loved, safe, supported, and successful while in schools. Collaboration and time to reflect on practices that work or do not work have been the best tool for teachers and leaders for years and have been proven to improve student outcomes academically, socially, and emotionally (Anrig, 2015). However, many times educators are not allowed the time to reflect on personal biases that may impact their profession. The themes of *Reflection*, *Experience*, and *Learning* demonstrated among the participants in this study have an idea of how they could improve as leaders and practices in the districts they serve. As expressed previously, leaders are often under a lot of pressure for their students to perform on high stakes test. Research demonstrates stress and deep reflection are beneficial to the thinking process, which further supports that leaders need more time for reflecting (Windish,

2015). American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, John Dewey stated, "We do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience" (Institute of Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability, 2016, p. 1). Reflective practices are described by Stefano et al. (2014) and Windish (2015) as an essential part of professional competence and affect both self-efficacy and task understanding. The saying one must stop and smell the roses implies that there must be time to allow leaders to reflect on personal and professional experiences. The recommendations for the district and school leaders to allow time for reflection during professional and staff developments stand to benefit all involved. Allowing educational leaders to collaborate with other professionals, and to self-reflect while learning new and improved practices benefits the number one stakeholder, the student.

The study revealed a gray area for leaders when policies or procedures were discussed related to LGBTQ students. The policy pertaining to the restrooms for students who identify as LGBTQ serves as an opportunity for growth and future areas to research. The participants all felt unsure about how to appropriately address students wanting to use the restroom associated with the sexual orientation they identify. Because Texas is a "No Homo Promo" state, policies and information related to LGBTQ youth in school tend to be discrete or are handled in silence. The "No Homo Promo" laws preclude educators from examining lesbian, gay, or indiscrimination (LGB) individuals in a positive light. To avoid breaking the rules, the participant in this study, along with other educators, remain silent. (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2018). In 2017, The *Bathroom Bill* captured many educators attention. The *Bathroom Bill* consisted of

recommendations issued by the Obama administration in May 2016 that directed public schools to accommodate transgender students (Ura & Murphy, Here's what the Texas bathroom bill means in plain English, 2017). According to Ura and Murphy (2017), who did not support the bill, schools would have been required to:

Provide students access to restrooms, showers, and dressing rooms based on an individual student's internal sense of gender is alarming and could potentially lead to boys and girls showering together and using the same restroom should such guidance be followed. (p. 2)

The guidelines were rescinded by the Trump administration (Ura & Murphy, Here's what the Texas bathroom bill means in plain English, 2017). After careful investigation of Concordia Independent School District rules and school policies, language offering guidance to school districts regarding restrooms' assignment was not found. It is recommended that school district leaders provide clear guidelines as it relates to LGBTQ policies.

### **Future Work**

The issues surrounding LGBTQ individuals are complex, allowing for many research opportunities for educators. Society and education are consistently changing, making the need for updated policies, procedures, and practices to ensure that educational leaders are well informed about LGBTQ youth's supportive practices. While some school leaders and school districts are committed to investigating the practices and policies that aid in a supportive climate for LGBTQ youth, more research is needed and should be ongoing (Gower, et al., 2017).

The first suggestion for future research is the need for research regarding practices and policies in schools by states related to LGBTQ students. As mentioned, having clear policies and practices outlined for a school district allows the leaders to know how to handle different issues that arise in schools. The absence of policies can challenge leaders' self-efficacy and has been identified in the research by leaders as an issue (Singh & Kosciw, 2017). Having clear and supportive policies and practices outlined for schools and school districts will make leaders feel more confident.

An excellent resource for this study and research about school climate and LGBTQ students and their school experiences is the National School Climate Survey conducted by GLSEN. Adapting a Local School Climate Survey by state and then as a school district will give even more insight into how students in different states and school districts are treated in school. This information will provide school districts the opportunity to assess and reflect more about the experiences of the students they are serving, which in return will allow for leaders to implement practices and provide opportunities for growth in their specific school district. GLSEN has designed a survey similar to a survey conducted nationally for local school districts to implement. Allowing students to participate in the survey at the state or district level will provide the information needed for leaders committed to making a difference for LGBTQ students.

Another suggestion for future studies that would shed light on the school experiences of LGBTQ youth at schools is a study that explicitly focuses on teachers as study participants. Students spend the majority of their school day with teachers. Teachers are uniquely positioned to provide more intimate details and observations

relating to LGBTQ students. They can give feedback about how other students interact with LGBTQ youth and how LGBTQ youth interact with others. Teachers would be able to share with other educators whether LGBTQ related curriculum is indeed helpful, when utilized in schools, to better or improve the classroom climate.

Although teachers could be an excellent source to provide intimate details about LGBTQ student behaviors, they could also help answer why teachers are also seen as the oppressors in schools for LGBTQ youth. Approximately 57% of the students surveyed in the National School Climate Survey (2017) reported hearing negative comments from their teachers or other staff, while 71% of the students reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other school staff (Kosciw et al., 2018). In a review of the literature, this researcher found the percentage quite alarming and was in disbelief. To support this claim, two of the study participants have also witnessed teachers and staff making negative remarks about LGBTQ youth. The high percentages of LGBTQ students experiencing this type of harassment from their teachers, who are responsible for educating, protecting, and doing no harm to children, is shocking and calls for more investigation about this pressing issue.

The research related to students who identify as LGBTQ is needed, and there are several areas still left unknown that could make a lasting impact on the education profession and scholarship for current and future educators. Several studies have been implemented to make school experiences for LGBTQ youth better; however, as society consistently changes, more research will also be needed to stay current. One unique idea found in this study, despite the changing world, is the act of showing love and the

implementation of practices outlined in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs from long ago have supported individuals and the development of students for years.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

According to Simon (2011), limitations refer to factors that can impact a study that the research has no control over and exist in all research endeavors. For qualitative phenomenology studies, conducting interviews in-person serves as one of the best methods for observing study participants and gathering data (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017; Creswell, 2013). Due to a nationwide pandemic experienced in the country, interviews were conducted virtually face-to-face. As the researcher, there was only so much that could be observed through a computer screen—not being able to observe the participants' posture, full surroundings, how their offices were decorated served as a limitation to this study.

Delimitations are factors that can impact a study that is within the control of the researcher (Simon, 2011). One delimitation was conducting the study at the secondary level. Research indicates that some children become aware of their gender expression in elementary school. Including the perspectives of secondary educational leaders does not minimize the contributions that primary education leaders can make,

Another delimitation was the focus on educational leaders. School leaders are vitally important because they set the tone for the entire campus. However, this study could have been conducted with teachers as the only participants. As indicated in the suggestions for future research, teachers have more direct interaction with all students.

Another delimitation for this study was the number of leader participants. There were six participants for this research study; however, having more participants share their experiences and perceptions of working with LGBTQ youth could have added more insight into practices future and current leaders can use while leading students. This study only consisted of principals and assistant principals for one school district in Texas. Interviewing educational leaders from several school districts would have allowed the researcher to compare and contrast policies and practices from several school districts to identify best practices for the surrounding school district or even a state.

## **Conclusion**

“Effective leaders build organizational cultures where employees can thrive, customers/clients experience excellent service, and contributions can be made to better society” (Tyner, 2019, p. 1). Because leaders are created through the individuals who play an active part in learning, it is not uncommon for true leaders to continue in the pursuit of educating themselves and their craft. Many leaders take the initiative to grow professionally by taking courses, enlisting the help of a mentor, and perusing the most recent books. However, “an often-missing piece of one’s leadership development is the cultivation of the skills needed to advance the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion” (Tyner, 2019, p. 1).

Ethical decision making, learning, and helping youth in education should lie within the core of every educator and educational leader’s philosophy of education. The researcher’s educational philosophy is to provide service to all humanity to sustain and build people to become better beings in society. The researcher lives and breathe the



words set in this philosophy. Not only does the researcher keep the well-being of the students or staff members in mind daily in her profession, but also practice this same philosophy as she interacts with people in general.

Tyner's (2019) suggestion that there was a missing piece for leadership development which is why this study was birthed. After given the assignment to design a case study and research a policy relating to relevant issues in education in an Ethical Decision-Making course in the Spring semester of 2018, the researcher found that LGBTQ individuals lack laws and policies of protection in the workplace and schools in Texas. The literature is saturated with how LGBTQ individuals suffer and must endure harassment in the workplace and youth at schools. There are gray areas and uncertainty that exist for educational leaders regarding the supportive practices, laws, and policies school districts and the state of Texas have in place to protect LGBTQ youth while in school. This research believes that what is missing is the ongoing development of the skills and practices educators need to promote the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion. That is why the topic was changed to explore practices leaders can implement in school to support LGBTQ youth.

Educational researchers, critical race and social equity scholars have recommended for longer than 10 years that school leaders cannot be effective if they are not at the least aware about their own biases towards people whose beliefs and value are different or simply looks different from their own. Leaders will also struggle if they are not aware or comprehend the effects of abuse and exclusion of people who are underserved in America (Kemp-Graham, 2015). This study was birthed out of the desire

to share, gain knowledge, and deeply understand the personal and professional experiences of educational leaders who have documented the success of the social justice leadership practices and working with LGBTQ youth. Chapter 1 provided a glimpse of how LGBTQ youth fit into the category considered to be marginalized. A small portion of the literature from GLSEN's National School Climate Survey highlighted the constant harassment LGBTQ youth endure in institutions designed for learning.

In Chapter II, an in-depth exploration of the literature associated with LGBTQ individuals focused on factors that are significant to the school experiences of LGBTQ youth. The history of LGBTQ youth issues in schools, school climate, laws and policies as they related to education and school at the federal, state and local levels, and educational leaders and organizations who serve as support for LGBTQ youth. Chapter III presented the methodology, which included the research approach, research design, and the data collection and data analysis methods followed in conducting this study. Strategies to achieve credibility, trustworthiness, and risk associated with this study were also discussed.

Chapter Four presented the findings as they related to each research question and the keys for social justice leadership, which also served as the guide for this research study. The themes that emerged from the data were: *Experience and Learning with the subthemes: Conscious and Unconscious Beliefs, Developing Relationships with the subthemes Openness and Understanding, Acceptance, Welcoming with subthemes: Love and Respect and Reflection/Training*. Chapter Five, briefly outlined the investigation, the analysis of the findings and the theoretical framework. The study by outlined

implications presented for educators, district leaders, policymakers, and suggestions for future studies that could add to the scholarship for current and future educators.

Delimitations and limitations were also discussed to conclude this chapter.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said it best, “The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character is the goal of true education” (p.1). Making a positive change in education as leaders is both rewarding and challenging. Furthermore, to be a successful educator of the highest caliber, leaders need to inspire and empower all the students they serve to strive toward success. The overall theme that emerged from the findings that serve as a lesson for all leaders as they reflect on their professional experiences is their willingness to be open, understanding, accepting, loving, and respectful to children. The participants all felt that gaining in-depth knowledge about the students they serve renders positive, supportive practices that foster a better school experience for all, including LGBTQ students.

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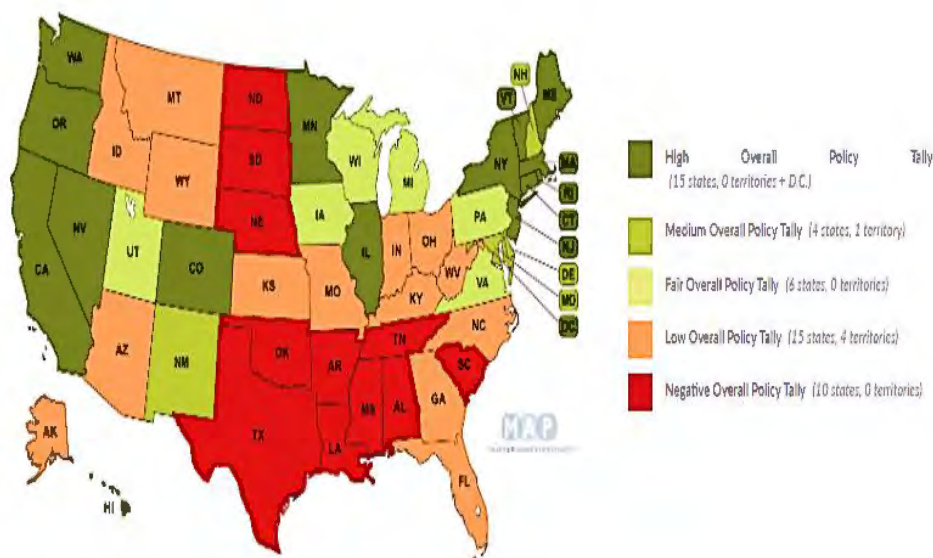
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## APPENDIX A: LGBTQ POLICY MAP


[EQUALITY MAPS](#)
[POLICY](#)
[COMMUNICATIONS](#)
[OPEN TO ALL](#)
[ABOUT](#)
[CHOOSE A STATE](#)
[CHOOSE AN ISSUE](#)
[SHARE](#)
[EMBED](#)
[PRINT](#)
[OVERALL POLICY TALLY](#)
[SEXUAL ORIENTATION](#)
[GENDER IDENTITY](#)
[STATE DATA TABLE](#)

This map shows the overall policy tallies (as distinct from sexual orientation or gender identity tallies) for each state, the District of Columbia, and the five populated U.S. territories. A state's "policy tally" counts the number of laws and policies within the state that help drive equality for LGBTQ people. The major categories of laws covered by the policy tally include: Relationship & Parental Recognition, Nondiscrimination, Religious Exemptions, LGBTQ Youth, Health Care, Criminal Justice, and Identity Documents.

Click on any state to view its detailed policy tally and state profile, or click "Choose an Issue" above to view maps on nearly 40 different LGBTQ-related laws and policies.



### U.S. Territories

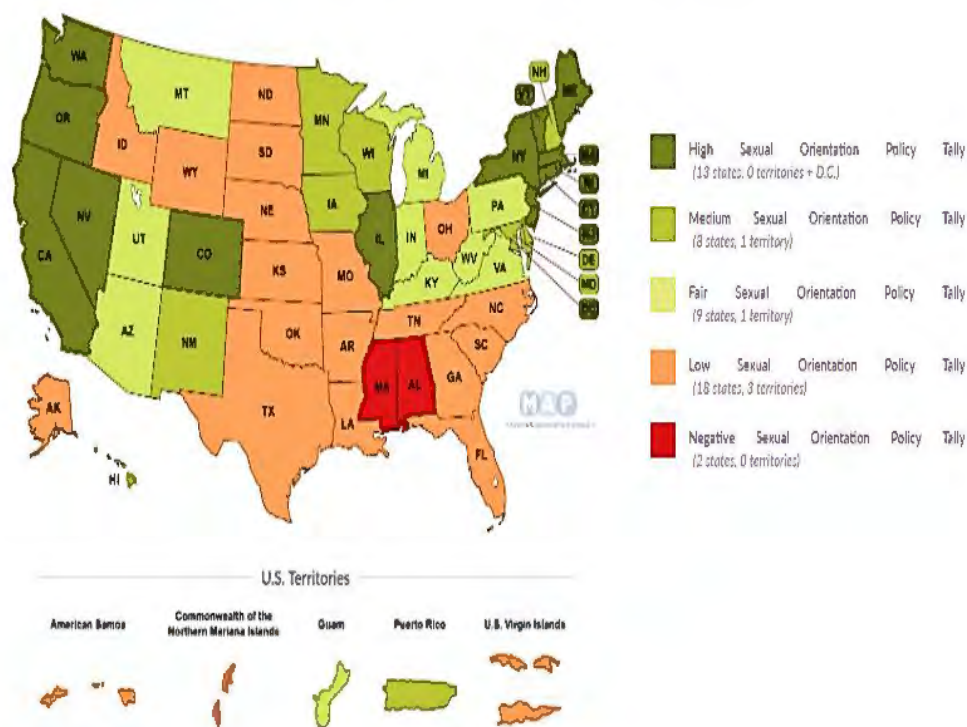


## APPENDIX B: LGBTQ POLICY MAP


[EQUALITY MAPS](#)
[POLICY](#)
[COMMUNICATIONS](#)
[OPEN TO ALL](#)
[ABOUT](#)
[CHOOSE A STATE +](#)
[CHOOSE AN ISSUE +](#)
[SHARE](#)
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[PRINT](#)
[OVERALL POLICY TALLY](#)
[SEXUAL ORIENTATION](#)
[GENDER IDENTITY](#)
[STATE DATA TABLE](#)

This map shows the sexual orientation policy tallies for each state, the District of Columbia, and the five populated U.S. territories. A state's "policy tally" counts the number of laws and policies within the state that help drive equality for LGBTQ people. The major categories of laws covered by the policy tally include: Relationship & Parental Recognition, Nondiscrimination, Religious Exemptions, LGBTQ Youth, Health Care, Criminal Justice, and Identity Documents.

Click on any state to view its detailed policy tally and state profile, or click "Choose an Issue" above to view maps on nearly 40 different LGBTQ-related laws and policies.



## APPENDIX C: LGBTQ POLICY MAP



EQUALITY MAPS

POLICY

COMMUNICATIONS

OPEN TO ALL

ABOUT

CHOOSE A STATE ▾

CHOOSE AN ISSUE ▾

SHARE ↗

EMBED ↗

PRINT ↗

OVERALL POLICY TALLY

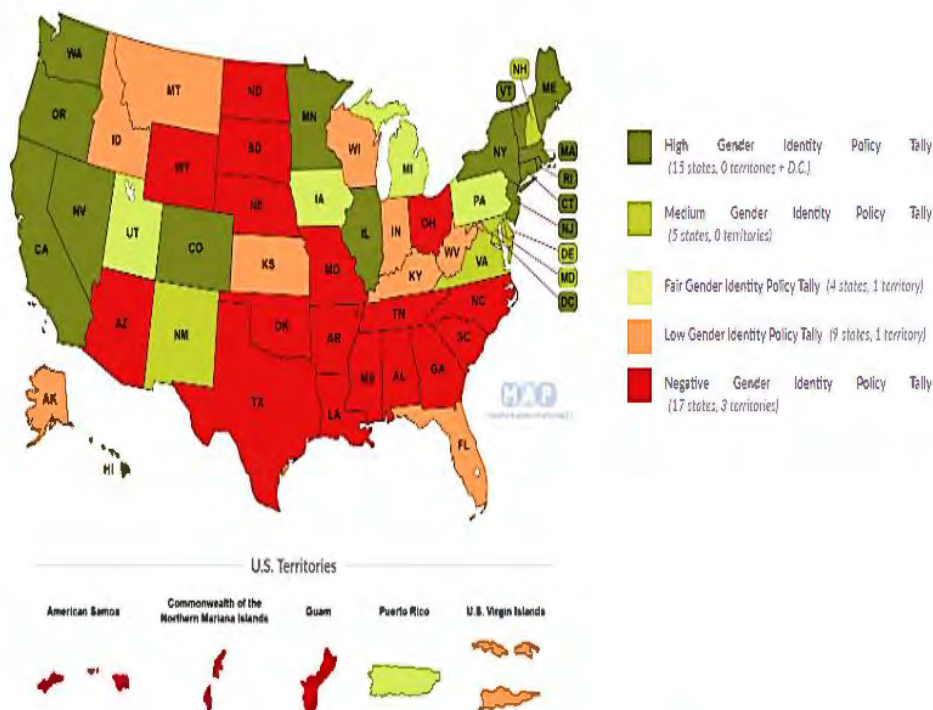
SEXUAL ORIENTATION

GENDER IDENTITY

STATE DATA TABLE

This map shows the gender identity policy tallies for each state, the District of Columbia, and the five populated U.S. territories. A state's "policy tally" counts the number of laws and policies within the state that help drive equality for LGBTQ people. The major categories of laws covered by the policy tally include: Relationship & Parental Recognition, Nondiscrimination, Religious Exemptions, LGBTQ Youth, Health Care, Criminal Justice, and Identity Documents.

Click on any state to view its detailed policy tally and state profile, or click "Choose an Issue" above to view maps on nearly 40 different LGBTQ-related laws and policies.



## APPENDIX D: PUBLICATION PERMISSION APPROVAL LETTER

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Mon 12/30/2019 11:46 AM

To: Guilford Website User &lt;srmdcmore@hotmail.com&gt;

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## APPENDIX E: PUBLICATION PERMISSION APPROVAL LETTER



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December 5, 2019

TO: Sabrina McLemore, srmclemore@hotmail.com  
 Prairie View A&M University  
 Texas

**TCP Reference Number: 2020754**

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George Theoharis

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## APPENDIX F: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

**PRAIRIE VIEW A&M UNIVERSITY**

A Member of the Texas A&amp;M University System

**To:** Sabrina McLemore, Graduate Student, Principal Investigator  
Pamela Barber-Freeman, Ph.D., Faculty Advisor

**From:** Donna Pulkrabek, M.B.A., RLATg, CPIA, CIP, Director of Research Compliance

**Date:** March 24, 2020

**Re:** IRB Protocol 2020-057

Your IRB application submitted entitled "Educational Leaders' Perspectives of Working with LGBTQ Youth in Secondary Schools: A Phenomenological Study of Preparedness, Self-Evaluation, and Reflection of Professional Experience" falls under the Exempt Review category according to the Code of Federal Regulations.

Please note that any changes to the exempt protocol must be re-reviewed by the IRB committee.

Donna Pulkrabek, M.B.A., RLATg, CPIA, CIP  
Director of Research Compliance  
Office: 936-261-1588  
Email: [dipulkrabek@pvamu.edu](mailto:dipulkrabek@pvamu.edu)



## APPENDIX G: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

**PRAIRIE VIEW A&M UNIVERSITY**

A Member of the Texas A&amp;M University System

To: Sabrina McLemore, Graduate Student, Principal Investigator  
Pamela Barber-Freeman, Ph.D., Faculty Advisor

From: Donna Pulkrabek, M.B.A., RLATg, CPIA, CIP, Director of Research Compliance

Date: April 14, 2020

Re: IRB Protocol 2020-057

The amendment to IRB Protocol *Educational Leaders' Perspectives of Working with LGBTQ Youth in Secondary Schools: A Phenomenological Study of Preparedness, Self-Evaluation, and Reflection of Professional Experience* submitted on April 13, 2020 has been approved.

Please note that any changes to this exempt protocol must be re-reviewed by the IRB committee.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Donna Pulkrabek".

Donna Pulkrabek, M.B.A., RLATg, CPIA, CIP  
Director of Research Compliance  
Office: 936-261-1588  
Email: [dipulkrabek@pvamu.edu](mailto:dipulkrabek@pvamu.edu)

## APPENDIX H: REQUEST TO AMEND IRB PROTOCOL MEMO

## Memo

To: Office of Research Compliance, Prairie View A&M University  
 CC: Indrika Ranaweera, Research Compliance Specialist  
 Donna Pulkrabek, Director of Research Compliance

From: Sabrina McLemore

CC: Dr. Pamela T. Barber Freeman

Date: April 13, 2020

Re: IRB Protocol 2020-057

Title: Educational Leaders' Perspectives of Working with LGBTQ Youth in Secondary Schools: A Phenomenological Study of Preparedness, Self-Evaluation, and Reflection of Professional Experience

---

Comments: This memo serves as a request to amend the current IRB protocol # 2020-57 Titled Educational Leaders' Perspectives of Working with LGBTQ Youth in Secondary Schools: A Phenomenological Study of Preparedness, Self-Evaluation, and Reflection of Professional Experience to include that interviews can also be conducted face-to-face virtually.

Due to the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic and making sure I, as the researcher, am adhering to the city mandates, CDC rules, and practicing social distancing. I am requesting to make a change to how the interviews will be conducted for my study in an effort to move forward with my dissertation journey.

The current proposal and protocol state that the researcher will conduct in-person face to face or phone interviews. I would like to make a change and propose that the researcher adds that the researcher will interview the participants in person face to face, **virtually** face to face or by phone. Using Software like Zoom, Go to Meeting, Skype will allow the researcher to have a face to face interview virtually with the participants while adhering to CDC recommendations of social distancing.

Thank you in advance for your consideration

Sabrina McLemore

## APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Demographic and Interview Protocol****Demographic Information:****Study Participant Name:** \_\_\_\_\_**Ethnicity:** \_\_\_\_\_**Gender:** \_\_\_\_**Background**

Directions: Please respond to the items below with a check and answer the questions that follow.

**I have experience working as a Secondary Principal, Assistant Principal, and/or Counselor in a Public School.**

\_\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_\_ No

**I have experience in the following Secondary Leadership Professions. (Please check all that apply)**

\_\_\_\_ Middle School Principal

\_\_\_\_ High School Principal

\_\_\_\_ Middle School Assistant Principal

\_\_\_\_ High School Assistant Principal

\_\_\_\_ Middle School Counselor

\_\_\_\_ High School Counselor

**I have the following licenses/certifications in the state of Texas. (Please check all that apply)**

\_\_\_\_ Principal Certification

\_\_\_\_ Other

\_\_\_\_ School Counselor Certification

\_\_\_\_ Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)

**How long have you served as an educational leader? (Principal, Assistant Principal, Counselor) If you have served in multiple professions, please use the space below to provide more detail.**

\_\_\_\_ 3-5 Years

\_\_\_\_ 5-10 Years

\_\_\_\_ 10-15 Years

\_\_\_\_ 15-20 Years

\_\_\_\_ Over 20 years

**Research Questions and Interview Protocol for  
Secondary Educational Leaders (Principal, Assistant Principals and/or Counselors  
who have experience working with students who identify themselves as Lesbian, Gay,  
Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning or Queer (LGBTQ))**

**(A)** What experiences in leadership and leadership traits promote inclusion, access, and opportunity for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?

1. What leadership traits or characteristics do you possess now and had to develop in leadership that has been the most significant in promoting inclusion, access, and opportunity for LGBTQ students?
2. As human beings, we all possess characteristics or traits that we are not proud of. Reflecting on your time as an educational leader, what traits or characteristics have you changed that you were not proud of, in order to promote inclusion and opportunities for LGBTQ students?

**(B)** How educational leaders employ professional and personal beliefs, knowledge, and skills while working with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?

3. Reflecting on your time as an educational leader, what beliefs or views did you initially have about working with students who are LGBTQ? What beliefs or views have you changed with respect to working with students who are LGBTQ?
4. In your time as an educational leader, what knowledge has been the most beneficial you have gained from working with LGBTQ youth?
5. As an educational leader working with LGBTQ students, what has been the most significant or impactful experience you've encountered while working with LGBTQ students?

**(C)** How do Educational Leaders create a welcoming climate and sense of belonging for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer/Questioning?

6. As a leader, what does creating a welcoming climate and sense of belonging mean to you? Why is a positive school climate important?
  7. Identify and tell about an innovative way you have created or developed an activity or atmosphere that promotes a welcoming climate for students who are LGBTQ?
  8. From a leader's perspective, what will creating a welcoming climate and sense of belonging at school mean to students who are LGBTQ?
- (D)** How do educational leaders recognize and react to policies and practices that do not support inclusion, access and opportunity of for students who identify as LGBTQ?
9. In your role as an educational leader, what barriers do you regularly encounter in a school setting that creates a negative school experience for students who are LGBTQ?
  10. When faced with barriers as a leader working with LGBTQ students, what solutions or actions have you implemented to dismantle the barrier(s)?
  11. If given the opportunity to change a school or district policy that has presented itself as a barrier for students who are LGBTQ, what policy would you change and/or implement? Why?
- (E)** To what extent do educational leaders go to be viewed and sustain themselves as qualified, trained, professionals who work with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning?
12. What professional developments or training have you attended or presented in the last two years that have been beneficial for leaders who work with students who are LGBTQ?

13. In your experience as a leader working with LGBTQ students, what professional opportunities or trainings do you believe will aide, positively enlighten and support principals, assistant principals, and counselors in their profession?

(F) What is your leadership experience in working with youth who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning?

14. Describe the professional experience(s) you have had in working with students who are LGBTQ? For your very first encounter or experience working with LGBTQ students, what were your initial feelings, and Why did you have those feelings? How do working with students who identify themselves as LGBTQ make you feel now?

15. In your experience of working with students who are LGBTQ, what has been the best practice LGBTQ students have shared with you to be beneficial to their school experience and academic success? Also, what has been the worst practice that hasn't been beneficial to their school experience and academic success.

## **APPENDIX J: CURRICULUM VITA**

**SABRINA MCLEMORE**

srmclemore@hotmail.com

### **Educational Background:**

High School:	1996 Dwight D. Eisenhower High School, Houston, Texas
Undergraduate:	2000 Bachelor of Science in Academic Studies, Minor: English Sam Houston State University, Huntsville Texas
Graduate Degree:	2015-Present Educational Leadership PhD (ABD) Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas 2003 Masters of Arts in Counseling Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, Texas

### **Work Experience:**

2020-present	High School Counselor, Aldine Independent School District
2015-2016	High School Lead Counselor, Aldine Independent School District
2008-2015	Middle School Lead Counselor, Aldine Independent School District
2006-2008	Middle School Counselor, Aldine Independent School District
2006-2006	Middle School Teacher, Aldine Independent School District

### **Certifications:**

Classroom Teacher/Elementary English Grades (1-8)  
Elementary Self Contained (1-8)  
School Counselor/School Counselor Grades (PK-12)  
Classroom Teacher/English Language Arts/Reading Grades (4-8)

### **Professional Memberships:**

Honor Society (2020-Present)  
Member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc.(2017-Present)  
Chi Sigma Iota Counselors Organization  
Reece Academy PTO Board Member, Secretary (2011-2012)  
Spring Creek Counseling Association (May 2013 to May 2016)

### **Educational Conferences/ Presentations**

Moderator at RAMP Conference, Houston (2016)  
Student Researcher Symposium Presenter, Prairie View A&M University (2016)

### **Educational Grant/ Proposal**

H.E.L.P. (Habits to Eliminate Low Performance Curriculum Co-Developer (2017)  
  
Wayne F. Placek Program Grant Proposal (2017)  
Leaving Biases at the Door: Evaluating the Formal Training of Educational Leaders Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning