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Caleb Michael Hickman

University of Kentucky, Caleb_Hickman1307@yahoo.com

Author ORCID Identifier:

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0229-0713>

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Caleb Michael Hickman, Student

Dr. Stacy K. Vincent, Major Professor

Dr. Patricia Dyk, Director of Graduate Studies

THE RESILIENCY AND THRIVING OF UNDERREPRESENTED AGRICULTURAL
EDUCATORS: A NATIONAL MIXED METHODS STUDY

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Community and Leadership
Development in the
College of Agriculture, Food and Environment
at the University of Kentucky

By

Caleb Michael Hickman

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Stacy K. Vincent, Professor of Agricultural Education

Lexington, Kentucky

2022

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<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0229-0713>

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

THE RESILIENCY AND THRIVING OF UNDERREPRESENTED AGRICULTURAL EDUCATORS: A NATIONAL MIXED METHODS STUDY

Gay men in agricultural education do not have comprehensive support within the agricultural education profession. When gay men decide to become agriculture educators, they often keep their identity private. This national mixed methods study aims to seek if gay agriculture educators are resilient and thrive in rural communities. The thriving elements of spiritual influence, personal competence, peer support, and family cohesion were surveyed and analyzed using a resiliency lens. Findings include gay male agricultural educators thriving in a heteronormative profession. Recommendations include ensuring LGBTQIA+ teachers have a voice in agricultural education.

KEYWORDS: Gay Men, Agricultural Education, Resilience, Thriving, LGBTQIA+ Community, Identity

Caleb Michael Hickman

(Name of Student)

04/20/2022

Date

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EDUCATORS: A NATIONAL MIXED METHODS STUDY

By
Caleb Michael Hickman

Dr. Stacy K. Vincent

Director of Thesis

Dr. Patricia Dyk

Director of Graduate Studies

04/20/2022

Date

DEDICATION

To my loving parents, Alice and Michael, who never put me into a box and allowed me
to be unapologetically myself

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It takes a village to raise a child. I would not be the scholar, teacher, agriculturalist, friend, or son I am today without the support, dedication, and love of the people that have helped me achieve my goals. The following thesis shows how it takes a village to empower a young academic.

First, I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Stacy K. Vincent. You have set a high bar for everyone that proceeds you as a mentor for me. Throughout my years of education, past professors always told me good job. Dr. V, you are the first mentor to challenge me to the point where I had to pause and question my current thought processes. Thank you, from philosophizing world problems to writing articles till midnight in Garrigus and ensuring I keep asking thought-provoking questions. You encouraged me never to stop reading and writing. You helped me understand that no one can take the power of knowledge away from me, and I hope to continue working with you for years to come.

Secondly, I will be forever thankful for the rest of my committee. Dr. Patricia Dyk, thank you for listening when I felt alone on this journey. Your stories provided me with the strength to continue this work. Dr. Julie Zimmerman, thank you for being my friend in this process. Plus, I knew I could always count on you to brighten my day, cue happy dance. Dr. Rebekah Epps, thank you for making my stay at the University of Kentucky feel like home. You always welcomed me into your office without question, and I will never forget our life chats.

Next, I wish to thank my colleagues I shared an office with for the past two years: Andrew, Audrey, Austin, Dallas, Danny, Eric, Graciela, Hunter-Anne, Juliana, Mallory,

and Tara. Your constant encouragement, questioning, and vulnerability made me a greater researcher and writer. Our memes, road trips, and not judging me for my obsession with Britney Spears and Lady Gaga allowed me to thrive during the last few months. I cannot wait to see what we all achieve in the future—*Gratias vobis ago*.

I want to profoundly thank the study participants, who will remain anonymous for confidentiality purposes. May your stories bring courage to the next generation of young LGBTQIA+ agriculture science educators.

To all my friends, thank you for always answering the phone, responding to late-night texts, and checking in on me. I am thankful for you and the continuous support that you provide. To all my friends, thank you for always answering the phone, responding to late-night texts, and checking in on me. I am thankful for you and the continuous support that you provide.

Next, I want to thank my Mamaw and Papaw whose life experiences paved the way for me to achieve my dreams. My love for rural communities started with you two.

Most importantly, I would like to thank you, my beautiful mother and energetic father, for providing me with more love than a son could ask for throughout the years. I love you forever and always.

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you are, and keep living your best Elle Woods' life. Keep them guessing till the end, my friend.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The moment for full marriage equality arrived on June 26, 2015, with the Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual plus (LGBTQIA+) community youth and teachers continue to feel unwelcomed into rural classrooms (Biegel, 2018). The current legal foundation that protects LGBTQIA+ teachers rest on the *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia* case, which ruled that an employer cannot fire someone based on sexual orientation or transgender status (Smilan, 2020). Although the court has provided reassurances in protecting LGBTQIA+ rights, the pressure to share one's identity increases one's risk of being outed by peers, being ridiculed by community members, harassment in the workplace, and job security (Bower-Phipps, 2017).

The LGBTQIA+ narratives that are depicted in the media primarily represent life for urban LGBTQIA+ individuals (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Through these depictions, the urban experience is the norm making the universal LGBTQIA+ experience seem to only occur in urban areas (Sorgen & Rogers, 2020). Metronormative narratives make rural LGBTQIA+ lives invisible and for teachers, makes supporting them all the more important. Recognizing and supporting LGBTQIA+ youth students in rural areas is essential (Sorgen & Rogers, 2020). As Stone (2018) states, “The city is imagined as a place of community and freedom from surveillance” (p. 1). As a result, rural LGBTQIA+ youth feel they must flee rural areas to escape the surveillance of their heteronormative communities (Gray, 2009).

Today, the LGBTQIA+ literature is moving away from metronormativity towards conceptualizing anti-urbanism (Herring, 2007). To combat metronormativity, anti-urbanism argues the lived experiences of rural LGBTQIA+ individuals reveal many positives of living in rural areas (Kazyak, 2012). In addition, rural LGBTQIA+ teachers may also influence LGBTQIA+ youth to stay in a rural area (Kosciw, 2014).

LGBTQIA+ teachers who live in rural communities may not have the opportunity to share their identity with their administrators, students, or the students' parents. Additionally, teachers report personal or professional identities as incompatible, which leads to low self-worth, depression, and anxiety (Lee, 2019). In rural settings, the "don't ask, don't tell" heterosexism construct perpetuates a public and personal denial of gay behavior, gay identity, gay relationships, and the gay community (Boulden, 2001). Fortunately, preservice teacher education programs provide multicultural education courses to assist teachers in diverse classrooms. Through these courses and trainings, heterosexual and LGBTQIA+ teachers learn how to serve LGBTQIA+ students better and help preservice teachers create a more inclusive classroom (Mitton-Kukner et al., 2015).

Although public attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community have moderated somewhat in the last few decades, studies continue to show rural areas have higher negative feelings about gay men (Keleher & Smith, 2012). Survey data show residents of rural communities tend to have more negative attitudes toward the LGBTQIA+ community than do residents of urban or suburban areas, a tendency that may be especially pronounced in more remote rural communities (Eldridge et al., 2006). Despite the heteronormative perceptions and statistics, gay men are finding careers in rural

communities (Wienke & Hill, 2013). The current trend is showing gay men are moving away to seek higher education, but they are coming back to live in their rural community (Annes & Redlin, 2012). Gay men choose to live in rural areas for many of the same reasons straight people do because it is where they are from, where their families live, or where they feel at home (Gray et al., 2016). Therefore, gay men are seeking secondary teaching positions in rural communities which include agriculture science education careers.

Currently, there is a limited amount of literature depicting the lived experience of gay men who teach in rural communities. More specifically, there is a minute amount of research on gay men who teach in rural communities. This thesis attempted to examine the resiliency and thriving of gay men in agricultural education. Sequentially, the researcher plans to add to the paucity amount of literature on gay men teaching in rural settings.

The current literature is on the right path in aiding future teachers in understanding how to serve LGBTQIA+ youth and support LGBTQIA+ teachers, but agricultural education is falling behind (Murray et al., 2020).

Statement of the Problem

As schools across the United States become more diverse, the need for more diverse teachers is needed (Banks et al., 2001). Unfortunately, marginalized groups are not seeking careers in education because these individuals do not feel welcomed in the white heteronormative teaching profession (Yoder & Mattheis, 2016). Therefore, researchers start by listening to the stories of teachers who are underrepresented in our society.

Specifically looking at why they decided to teach agricultural education, and why they teach and live in rural America.

Significance of the Study

Lyons et al. (2014) conducted a national study in Australia where 1,034 gay men were surveyed and found rural gay men had significantly lower self-esteem, lower life satisfaction, lower social support, and they were substantially more likely to be psychologically distressed, concerned about acceptance from others, and to conceal their sexual orientation compared to their urban counterparts. In agricultural education, a resilience framework has the potential to positively influence many aspects of the profession, including the quality of life for professionals (Thieman et al., 2012).

Four constructs of thriving need evaluation to fully understand the scope of resiliency. The constructs analyzed for the current work surround: 1) spirituality, 2) personal competence, 3) peer support, and 4) family cohesion. Daniilidou and Platsidou (2018) created the teachers' resilience scale to analyze these concepts of resiliency and thriving.

Historically, the conservative Christian church admonished homosexuality as a sin (Tully, 2000). The landscape is changing while official stances that homosexuality is a sin, more and more people that belong to organized religion are becoming more accepting of the LGBTQIA+ community (Murphy, 2015). However, gay men that live in rural America primarily identify as Christian and conservative (Cody & Welch, 2008).

Personal competence is a set of skills that include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Feuerborn & Gueldner, 2019). To fully understand the thriving of gay men who teach

agricultural education, understanding these concepts allowed the researcher to comprehend the decision-making processes of these men.

Identifying the support systems of gay men in agricultural education helps in the understanding of why these men stay in the profession. The lack of support from administration, community members, students, and the parents of the students may hinder the success of gay men in the classroom (Robinson & Ferfoja, 2001). Therefore, the peer support systems gay men belong to in agriculture science education have been imperative to explore and analyze.

Gay men and their families play a crucial role in understanding why gay men may return home to teach in the rural community where they grew up. Once a gay man comes out to their parents, the initial reactions tend to be negative, but eventually, the family becomes more accepting over time and wants to ensure their child is safe (Cramer & Roach, 2010). Unfortunately, there are instances where family members never become accepting, and the gay men rarely return to their hometown (Savage & Miller, 2011). Furthermore, their relationship with their partners is also crucial to understand. Research shows gay men who have a partner will find jobs in rural communities if they are both from a rural community and feel supported in that area (Gray et al., 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The broader purpose of this explanatory sequential design study is to explore the perceptions of gay men who teach agriscience education regarding their profession. More specifically, the researcher analyzed the overall agricultural education field to provide insight into how LGBTQIA+ teachers are perceived in the profession. Utilizing a mixed-method approach allowed the researcher to examine the concept of thriving through a

survey and prescreened individuals with at least five years of teaching experience in the same rural community. Once the participants completed the survey, the participants went through an interview. The following research objectives guided the scope of the study:

RO1: What elements of thriving (spiritual influence, personal competence, peer support, family cohesion) allow gay men to succeed in agricultural education?

RO2: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *spiritual influence* element of thriving?

RO3: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *personal competence* element of thriving?

RO4: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *peer support* element of thriving?

RO5: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *family cohesion* element of thriving?

Theoretical Framework

In the 1970s, psychologists, social scientists, educators, and academics started studying children that faced genetic and experiential adversity (Masten & Barnes, 2018). The overcoming of these adversities to find success in adulthood is now a phenomenon labeled as resilience. Resilience was developed and strengthened as a function of surviving past adverse experiences (Masten, 2001).

Resilience, as a component of the individual's personality, develops and changes over time through ongoing experiences with one's physical and social environment (Lee et al., 2007; Hegney et al., 2007). The degree to which one values themselves or finds themselves to be of worth is indicative of higher self-esteem (MacInnes, 2006). Lack of

confidence or a view that one is less important than others is associated with low self-esteem (Heidari & Nemattavousi, 2020). Individuals with greater self-esteem tend to be more resilient and are more willing to attempt new endeavors or take on new responsibilities concerning work and other life activities (MacInnes, 2006; Resnick, 2015).

Teachers' resilience refers to the extent to which teachers can maintain positive attributes in the face of a range of challenges, pressures, and demands associated with their work (Kyriacou, 2011). Various protective and risk factors empower or disable teachers' resilient behavior (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). A risk factor is considered any observable attribute of the individual (Kaplan, 2002) or the environment (Benard, 1991), which has been found to correlate significantly with a specific negative behavior or outcome. A risk factor is a possible cause or precursor of an attitude but not a direct or indirect outcome or symptom of behavior. Regarding the teaching profession, risk factors can be related to both individual and environmental attributes. At the individual level, the most critical risk factors are low self-esteem (Day, 2008), difficulties in seeking help (Flores, 2006), the conflict between personal beliefs and practices used (Beltman, et al., 2011; Flores, 2006), anxiety and emotional exhaustion (Schlichte et al., 2005) and inadequate preparation for the reality of work (Demetriou et al., 2009). At the environmental level, risk factors are the adversities teachers may face due to constant changes in the education system may increase their levels of uncertainty, pressure, and workload (Gu & Day, 2007; Howard & Johnson, 2004).

Protective factors refer to those factors that mitigate the effects of risk factors or enhance the positive outcomes and the successful adjustment of the individual (Benard,

2004). Most instruments for the measurement of resilience assess a varying number of protective factors that enhance an individual's resilience.

The literature describes how analyzing thriving may explain how teachers overcome the risk factors. Thriving is an element of resiliency; therefore, thriving provides tangible constructs for the researcher to study. The thriving constructs further explain the protective factors that empower teachers to stay in the profession. Day (2008) states:

Research on teacher retention tends to focus on factors affecting teachers' decision to leave the teaching profession. Instead, what is required is a better understanding of the factors that have enabled the majority of teachers to sustain their motivation, commitment and, therefore, effectiveness in the profession (p. 256).

Therefore, the factors keeping teachers, predominantly minority teachers, in the profession need further research by utilizing the constructs of thriving.

Thriving suggests people will respond to thriving in three different ways when confronted by a challenge: They may (a) survive the incident, (b) recover from the incident, and (c) thrive as a result of enduring the hardship (Nishikawa, 2006). Daniilidou and Platsidou (2018) created the teachers' resilience scale to analyze the concepts of resiliency and thriving. The survey helps explain how spirituality, personal competence, peer support, and family cohesion work together to help teachers thrive.

As teacher resilience is an emerging field of research, there are sectors of research that directly deal with teacher resilience and others that examine related constructs. The area of research missing is the understanding of utilizing these constructs to analyze the resiliency and thriving of gay men in agricultural education. Using resiliency as the

theoretical framework and the concept of thriving allows for the proposed research questions to be answered.

Limitations

There are limitations to the study. 1) The sample was selected through snowball sampling; thus, qualified participants may not have received the information. 2) The interviews were conducted through Zoom due to travel restrictions. More detailed descriptions could have occurred if the interviews were conducted face-to-face and provided opportunities for field observations. 3) Because the researcher did not have a recorded demographic in agricultural education for gay men, the researcher is unsure how much of a reach the findings represent within secondary agricultural education. However, the researcher does believe, based on the commonalities in responses, that the findings are transferable to individuals of similar characteristics (Yilmaz, 2013).

Definition of Terms

Agricultural Education – Secondary students develop science, math, communication, etc., skills surrounding agriculture, food, and natural resources curriculum (Hillison, 1996).

Closeted – Not being open about one’s sexual orientation.

FFA – A youth leadership organization in agricultural education; formerly known as Future Farmers of America, now officially known as the National FFA Organization.

Gay – The adjective utilized to describe people whose physical, romantic, and/or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex (Sell, 1997).

Gender Identity – A distinction of identifying as transgender, genderqueer, woman, man, or some other identity may or may not correspond with the sex one is given at birth (UC Davis, 2020).

Heteronormative – A worldview that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation (Sheppard & Mayo, 2013)

Heterosexism – Describes discrimination or prejudice against gay people because they believe that being heterosexual is the only natural form of sexuality (Herek, 1986).

Homophobic – Refers to individuals who fear the LGBTQIA+ community and treat the community members with detestation (Weinberg, 1972).

Metronormativity – A societal bias that universalizes LGBTQ+ urban identities and within which rural LGBTQ+ experiences are excluded (Podmore & Bain, 2020).

Openly Gay – Refers to men who self-identify as gay in their personal, public, and/or professional lives (McAdoo et al., 2015).

Sexual Orientation – The scientifically accurate term for an individual's physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex (GLAAD, 2016).

Queer – A term that describes sexual and gender identities other than straight and cisgender (Levy & Johnson, 2011).

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Resiliency

In the 1970s, psychologists, social scientists, educators, and academics started studying children that faced genetic and experiential adversity (Masten & Barnes, 2018). The overcoming of these adversities to find success in adulthood is now a phenomenon labeled as resilience. Resilience was developed and strengthened as a function of surviving past adverse experiences (Masten, 2001).

Resilience, as a component of the individual's personality, develops and changes over time through ongoing experiences with one's physical and social environment (Lee et al., 2007; Hegney et al., 2007). The degree to which one values themselves or finds themselves to be of worth is indicative of higher self-esteem (MacInnes, 2006). Lack of confidence or a view that one is less important than others is associated with low self-esteem (Heidari & Nemattavousi, 2020). Individuals with greater self-esteem tend to be more resilient and are more willing to attempt new endeavors or take on new responsibilities concerning work and other life activities (MacInnes, 2006; Resnick, 2015).

Teachers' resilience refers to the extent to which teachers can maintain positive attributes in the face of a range of challenges, pressures, and demands associated with their work (Kyriacou, 2011). Various protective and risk factors empower or disable teachers' resilient behavior (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). A risk factor is considered any observable attribute of the individual (Kaplan, 2002) or the environment (Benard, 1991), which correlates significantly with a specific negative behavior or outcome experienced by the person directly involved with a factor. A risk factor is a possible cause or

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Protective factors refer to those factors that mitigate the effects of risk factors or enhance the positive outcomes and the successful adjustment of the individual (Benard, 2004). Most instruments for the measurement of resilience assess a varying number of protective factors that enhance an individual's resilience.

Thriving

The literature describes how analyzing thriving may explain how teachers overcome the risk factors. Thriving is an element to resiliency; therefore, thriving provides tangible constructs for the researcher to study. The thriving constructs allows for further explanation in the protective factors that empowers teachers to stay in the profession. Day (2008) states:

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Therefore, the factors that keep teachers, predominantly minority teachers, in the agricultural education profession need further research by utilizing the constructs of thriving.

Thriving suggests people will respond to thriving in three different ways when confronted by a challenge: They may (a) survive the incident, (b) recover from the incident, and (c) thrive as a result of enduring the hardship (Nishikawa, 2006). There is a paucity of literature surrounding the concept of thriving in the *Journal of Agriculture Education*.

Mental Health of the LGBTQIA+ Community

Mental health is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (World Health Organization, 2004, p. 12). The concept of mental health is discussed frequently in LGBTQIA+ literature. Therefore, the topic must be addressed and explained in great detail to ensure that gay men and other LGBTQIA+ community members’ mental health is addressed and is taken care of accordingly. The following is a list that aids in understanding mental health for gay men:

1. One must understand that gay men are a minority within society, which adds additional barriers for them to navigate (Fassinger, 1991).
2. Minority status directly impacts psychological distress, and gay people in a heterosexist society may experience chronic stress related to their sexual orientation (Meyer, 1995).

3. The construction of masculinity and how it operates in the classroom draws on homophobic discourses, and this rhetoric interferes with gay men's mental health and perception of identity (Francis & Skelton, 2001).

These three factors explain why mental health needs are topics that necessitate further research for gay men in education. Still, it is also important to note not all gay men experience the same type of stressors, nor do they have the same responses as one another (Fingerhut et al., 2010). Each person has their own reaction to stress, but mental health is essential in keeping everyone within the LGBTQIA+ community safe and healthy.

Queer K-12 Teachers

Queer K-12 teachers have an opportunity to share their lived experiences with their students if they are not faced with heteronormative resistance (Mayo, 2015). Once queer teachers feel comfortable expressing their identity in their classroom, they start developing a curriculum that allows for their personality to show, creating an atmosphere of acceptance and displaying the ability to teach as individuals of the LGBTQIA+ community (Jackson, 2009).

Queer teachers should not feel personally responsible for the safety of students that identify within the LGBTQIA+ community because all teachers should feel a responsibility to keep all students safe (Mayo, 2008). Research shows diverse representation in the classroom matters, including the presence of LGBTQIA+ teachers in rural communities (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013).

Queer educators are resilient, but they must learn to navigate heteronormative education systems before entering the classroom (Tompkins et al., 2019). Throughout

history, LGBTQIA+ individuals have made challenging decisions on whether to enter the teaching profession because of their identity (Asakura, 2017). By choosing to become educators, queer teachers have become resilient, and their closeted peers are more resilient (deLeon & Brunner, 2013).

Preservice Teachers' Attitudes Toward the LGBTQIA+ Community

In the literature, several articles surrounded preservice teachers' attitudes toward the LGBTQIA+ community. Some literature focused on heterosexual individuals and their perception of the community, and others honed explicitly in on preservice teachers that belonged to the LGBTQIA+ community. It is crucial to see how preservice teacher training prepares educators to include LGBTQIA+ youth in their classrooms. The literature is limited surrounding this topic, and further research may further explain how the LGBTQIA+ community and teacher education programs can collaborate in preparing teachers to serve diverse populations. Furthermore, a few studies described LGBTQIA+ preservice teachers and their experiences in the classroom. Murray et al. (2020) explains how additional research is needed in agricultural education to help alleviate the barriers of LGBTQIA+ youth.

Heterosexual preservice teachers

There is a concern that higher education is not preparing individuals to work with diverse populations, including LGBTQIA+ community members (Einbinder et al., 2012). For teacher educators, addressing LGBTQIA+ issues with preservice teachers are paramount in combating homophobic oration in schools to protect students and coworkers in the LGBTQIA+ community (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001). Concurrently, training preservice teachers on LGBTQIA+ issues will promote social change and

enhance the lives of LGBTQIA+ youth (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2002). Some teachers believe they include LGBTQIA+ youth in their classrooms, but they miss the mark. Preservice teachers and experienced teachers who are thoughtful and intentional in their teaching ability to serve diverse populations may overlook the importance of the well-being of LGBTQIA+ students (Pace, 2018). Overall, there is a need for more training for preservice teachers to work with LGBTQIA+ students to create a positive and safe learning environment for this community (Wyatt et al., 2008; Mitton-Kukner et al., 2015).

With more training, all parties benefit. Heterosexual teachers understand how to provide an environment for LGBTQIA+ students to feel included (Taylor, 2022). LGBTQIA+ students may participate in classes more frequently when they know they have a space to be themselves (Shelton, 2019). Additionally, if LGBTQIA+ youth know they are safe in their classroom, they may perform better in school (González-Álvarez et al., 2022). Teacher preparation programs need to understand the severity of this issue and provide preservice teachers training in this area (Vincent et al., 2021).

LGBTQIA+ preservice teachers

There is evidence to support the importance of placing LGBTQIA+ preservice teachers with cooperating educators who supports the preservice teacher's identity (Paparo & Sweet, 2014). Toledo and Maher (2019) also explain how LGBTQIA+ preservice teachers advocate for more support in universities and K-12 schools. Institutions continue to recruit diverse populations to obtain a teaching certificate, but they do not feel supported once LGBTQIA+ teachers join the workforce.

Compared to LGBTQIA+ preservice teachers, heterosexual preservice teachers thrive at higher rates (Jones, 2015). Heterosexual preservice teachers do not have to navigate their sexual orientation while LGBTQIA+ preservice educators are learning how their identity fits into teaching (Abbott et al., 2015). Additionally, preservice educators who are coming out during their initial certification, are more likely to change majors before becoming certified educators (Gray, 2013).

Gay Male Teachers

Currently, there is a limited amount of research regarding gay men who teach agricultural science education. Therefore, gay male teachers and their experiences in teaching are of importance to study. The challenges gay men face when entering the teaching profession need to be explained. In understanding gay male teachers, one must keep in mind this group is a marginalized population. Gay male teachers face stigmas, struggle with sexual identity, determining to come out, and discrimination. Each of these topics is essential to understand in conducting the current research surrounding thriving.

Stigma Surrounding LGBTQIA+ Identities

One rationale for the importance of exploring marginalized populations in the classroom surrounds the concept of stigma. McKenna-Buchanan et al. (2015) explain lesbian, gay, and queer teachers must navigate the culture, gender, contextual, risk-benefit, and motivational criteria to decide whether to share their sexual orientation in their classrooms. The stigma that surrounds these topics makes it challenging for teachers to be themselves without their school and community's support. Additionally, gay teachers enter a career in teaching with years of identity development with their experiences in teacher preparation programs, other fields of study, life experiences,

family upbringing, and sociocultural positionality, which allow gay men to decide when to share their identities (Haddad, 2019). Concurrently, if heterosexuals' prejudice toward sexual minorities is present, the cultural stigma which reinforces power and status differences between heterosexuals and the LGBTQIA+ community prevails (Herek & McLemore, 2013).

Sexual Identity

The researcher must define sexual identity in understanding the concept of identity and coming out. "Sexual identity is a mixture of essentialism and constructionism that not only is reconfigured over time and context but also occurs with the multiple and often conflicting contexts in which our lives are played out" (Tierney, 1997, p. 115). Gay teachers who reveal their identities threaten a patriarchal society where heterosexuality and traditional gender roles are natural and universal (Griffin, 1991). Overall, one's sexual orientation and identity have nothing to do with their abilities as an educator (Griffin, 1992). One's sexual identity does not dictate their ability to teach. Therefore, gay men can teach as well as their heterosexual counterparts.

Coming Out

Coming out is the terminology used when an individual decides to reveal their sexual orientation, and it is commonly known as coming out of the closet (Day & Schoenrade, 1997). Hooker (2018) interviewed 11 gay and lesbian teachers and found most teachers did not come out because they fear harassment, which keeps them from forming meaningful relationships within their workplace with students, administration, staff, and local community members. Additionally, closeted gay teachers face two additional demands in the classroom than their openly out peers: 1) they feel more guilt

because of their sexual orientation, and 2) they experience internalized homophobia (Lineback et al., 2016). Dankmeijer (1993) explains that teachers who come out are the crusaders for gay liberation. The closeted teachers are concerned their sense of professionalism will diminish if they decide to come out as gay. Overall, the decision around coming out as a gay man in the workplace is a lifelong and multi-contextual process. Still, heteronormativity does not make the coming out process any easier (Gray, 2013). Within education, gay men must be on guard when it comes to their sexual identity. Individuals who are not open about their identity keep their sexual orientation to their family and perhaps a small core group of friends (Boulden, 2001). Therefore, coming out is up to the discretion of the gay male teacher. No one should force an individual to come out if they are not prepared to share their identity. The closeted agriculture teacher may feel the added pressure of coming out if others suspect or assume their identity within their school or community.

Discrimination of the LGBTQIA+ Community

Irwin (2002) conducted a study with 120 members of the LGBTQIA+ community members who are teachers, and most of the participants expressed they faced workplace discrimination. The participants did not feel welcomed into the school environment, nor did they feel supported by their administration. Furthermore, Ferfolja and Stavrou (2015) conducted research illustrating many school workplaces produce challenges for sexually diverse teachers. One can also see this trend internationally. International studies suggest many members of the LGBTQIA+ community who work in education face discrimination and a fear of losing their job based on their sexual orientation (Fahie, 2016). Understanding one's sense of internalized homophobia, and if one cannot

successfully define it, those LGBTQIA+ community members may feel self-loathing, fear, and shame regarding their identity (Dahl et al., 2015). These feelings should not be prevalent in the education system for gay men and other members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Gay Male Teacher's Abilities to Thrive

Research shows gay men thrive in education, but they must learn how to in a heteronormative world (Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010). Overall, past traumatic experiences limit gay men's ability to thrive in the classroom, but gay men thrive in education (Reed & Miller, 2016).

LGBTQIA+ Youth

It is essential to understand that LGBTQIA+ adults were children once. They may not have acknowledged their identity until adulthood, but they remember how others treated them when they were younger (Haltom & Ratcliff, 2021). Additionally, they may remember the words and actions others had surrounding the LGBTQIA+ community as they were growing up. Therefore, one must understand LGBTQIA+ youth and their upbringings.

The terms *sissy*, *faggot*, *lezzy*, and *dyke* are popular labels utilized in high school hallways by students who suspect one of their peers belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community (Lugg, 2003). Studying LGBTQIA+ youth may help prevent homophobic rhetoric from hindering students' learning process if families do not know how to care for and avoid bullying for the LGBTQIA+ population (Goodboy & Martin, 2018). Therefore, teachers, family members, and caretakers must understand these issues by the family unit and school. The literature explains how families with LGBTQIA+ youth need to help

their children, and the literature details the issues surrounding bullying of LGBTQIA+ youth.

Family of LGBTQIA+ Youth

Families of LGBTQIA+ youth experience myriad health inequalities than their heterosexual peers, and families do not have enough resources to take care of their LGBTQIA+ children (Newcomb et al., 2019). Holman and Oswald (2011) conducted a study with 22 parents of LGBTQIA+ children, and they stated that support and socialization were the two desired resources they sought for their children. Additional resources for LGBTQIA+ youth are needed, and gay men that teach agricultural science education may provide students with a safe place to learn and engage with science. Furthermore, families need to understand how to care for LGBTQIA+ youth. Schools and other organizations must provide resources for families. A child deserves the highest quality of resources no matter their sexual orientation or transgender status.

Bullying of LGBTQIA+ Youth

Francis and Reygan (2016) state microaggressions are a form of bullying, specifically heterosexist bullying, and additional resources and policy is needed to combat heterosexism and bullying of the LGBTQIA+ community. Microaggressions are subtle invalidations and insults that target individuals who are a part of a marginalized group, including the LGBTQIA+ community (Nadal et al., 2017). Bullying and microaggressions make schooling challenging for students belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community. Therefore, educators, parents, guardians, and the school community must work together to create an environment to promote learning and inclusion for LGBTQIA+ youth (Nadal et al., 2017).

Support for LGBTQIA+ Youth

LGBTQIA+ youth are resilient and thrive when they are with educators who provide the necessary environment for the students to feel safe (González-Álvarez et al., 2022). With the aid of gay–straight alliances (GSA), LGBTQIA+ students have a space where their concerns are heard and an environment where they can be themselves (Walls et al., 2010).

LGBTQIA+ Teachers in Rural Areas

Oswald and Culton (2003) conducted a study with 527 nonmetropolitan gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, or transgender individuals that stated the worst part about living in a rural community is the lack of resources for the LGBTQIA+ community, living in a homophobic social climate, and not having equal rights compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Gay men teach in rural areas, but they do not share their identities with their colleagues and students compared to their urban counterparts. Lee (2019) had 105 lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender individuals complete a survey, and 15 percent of rural teachers are not out to their students, and roughly a quarter of the respondents from the city were open about their sexuality to their students. Gay men who live in rural communities tend to act and be more masculine than men who live in urban areas because they follow gender norms from the rural community they teach in, and some did not have role models to help them build their identity (Annes & Redlin, 2012). Not every gay man acts feminine, but if individuals cannot be themselves, that may present mental health issues in the future (Nadal et al., 2011).

Overall, additional research is needed to understand the lived experiences of gay men that teach in rural settings. There is a scarcity amount of literature surrounding

LGBTQIA+ people thriving in teaching within rural America. Agricultural science education is one discipline, but further research in other subjects needs to occur to understand gay men and their teaching careers holistically in rural environments.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The primary focus of this chapter is to examine the methodology and procedures used in this study. The following procedures are provided: purpose, characteristics of mix-method research, the explanatory sequential design, researcher's role and reflexivity, participants, data collection process, instrumentation, validity and reliability, and trustworthiness. After deciding to utilize the teachers' resilience scale and interviewing the volunteered participants, but prior to the data collection stage, approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Kentucky was sought. After receiving IRB approval, protocol number 70739 (see Appendix), the data collection process began.

Purpose

The broader purpose of this explanatory sequential design study is to explore the perceptions of gay men who teach agriscience education regarding their profession. More specifically, the researcher analyzed the overall agricultural education field to provide insight into how LGBTQIA+ teachers are perceived in the profession. Utilizing a mixed-method approach allowed the researcher to examine the concept of thriving through a survey and prescreened individuals with at least five years of teaching experience in the same rural community. Once the participants completed the survey, the participants went through an interview. The following research objectives guided the scope of the study:

RO1: What elements of thriving (spiritual influence, personal competence, peer support, family cohesion) allow gay men to succeed in agricultural education?

RO2: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *spiritual influence* element of thriving?

RO3: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *personal competence* element of thriving?

RO4: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *peer support* element of thriving?

RO5: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *family cohesion* element of thriving?

Characteristics of Mix Methods Research

In mix methods research, the inquiry is based on the assumption that collecting diverse types of data provides a more complete understanding of the research problem than quantitative or qualitative data alone (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The following study employs the explanatory sequential design mixed method (Hanson et al., 2005) to adequately explore the topic of the resiliency and thriving of gay men in agricultural education. Greene (2008) states:

A mixed methods way of thinking is an orientation toward social inquiry that actively invites us to participate in dialogue about multiple ways of seeing and hearing, multiple ways of making sense of the social world, and multiple standpoints on what is important and to be valued and cherished.

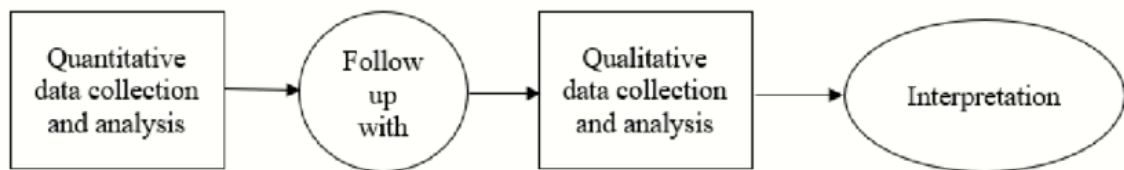
For this mix method study, a broad survey was used to generalize results to a population and then, in a second phase, focuses on qualitative, open-ended interviews to collect detailed views from participants to help explain the initial quantitative survey (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The Explanatory Sequential Design

The explanatory sequential design frames the concurrent or sequential collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data sets (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The purpose of the explanatory sequential design is to conduct research that clearly explain

the qualitative data by referring to the initial quantitative data (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Figure 3.1 displays the process of the explanatory sequential design. For this framework to successfully be used, the researcher must first provide the participants with a quantitative piece (questionnaire) followed with a qualitative (case study) element. Each must be collected before interpretation can occur.

Figure 3.1 The Explanatory Sequential Design



Note. Model depicted by Creswell & Clark, 2011.

The researcher is utilizing a social constructivist worldview. Social constructivists seek an understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher utilized social constructivism to help understand the multitude and complexity of views surrounding gay men in agricultural education and the men's lived experiences.

Researcher's Role and Reflexivity

The researcher is a gay man who plans to enter agricultural education as a high school educator. The researcher shares a lived experience with the gay men who participated in this study - he grew up in a rural community and understood the significance of having teachers who recognize the importance of identity. As someone who has experienced homophobic microaggressions and other forms of bullying, he has experienced how damaging words and actions impact young people. Through this study, the researcher hopes he has provided his reader with hope. He is optimistic the next

generation of LGBTQIA+ youth have LGBTQIA+ teachers as role models. Concurrently, the study will provide implications for heterosexual teachers to ensure they serve LGBTQIA+ youth properly and gain a greater appreciation and understanding for the LGBTQIA+ teachers they work beside each day. The researcher is excited to share his passion with his heterosexual peers and colleagues because no one deserves to live inside a closet. Through this thesis, the researcher utilizes this study to help him come out to his profession, and he is learning how to serve the LGBTQIA+ community better.

The researcher acknowledges his personal experiences have shaped his personal bias as his perception of the LGBTQIA+ community and education but uses his insider status to aid him in this research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). He is aware of the confirmation bias he encounters but understands that all researchers have some degree of confirmation bias they must assuage (Nickerson, 1998). To mitigate this effect, the researcher stayed in close contact with and met continuously with his graduate research advisor, who has over eleven years of experience in research within the context of multiculturalism and underserved populations, to follow up and debrief his findings. The reflexivity process is essential for the researcher to ensure that his bias does not interfere with the research conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

This research is not here as the objective truth for all gay men who teach agricultural education, but it is a subjective telling of stories and data that will hopefully enlighten the reader into understanding the lived experiences that question the societal norms.

Participants

Participants in this study were either current, past, or recently retired secondary agriculture teachers. They all identified as gay and as a male. Snowball sampling

(Goodman, 1961) was utilized to help spread awareness surrounding the current work. Snowball sampling allows participants to provide information about the study to individuals who may qualify to participate to gain awareness of the research (Goodman, 1961). Through snowball sampling, more gay men were able to participate in the survey. Due to snowball sampling, the researcher is not knowledgeable of how many received the recruitment email but was later informed that it was shared on private social media group pages, specifically for the gay community.

A total of 45 gay men completed the survey portion of the study. The participants did not have to provide a reason for not wanting to participate in the qualitative portion. Eighteen teachers agreed to participate in the qualitative portion; however, twelve completed the interview. The six non-participants did not respond to a second interview invitation or decided to no longer participate due to time restraints. Contact was made with the other seven participants who initially qualified for the interview, but after a lack of response from a follow-up email, further contact was discontinued.

Table 3.1 provides an overview of teaching experience, observed personality during the interview, and whether each gay man was open about their sexual orientation at school. The researcher utilized the Myers-Briggs personality types and definitions to help him describe each participant's observed personality (Judge et al., 2002). Collectively, the men have 115 years of teaching experience. The location of the gay men is to stay anonymous. However, each region of the National FFA Organization is represented (ffa.org, 2022).

Table 3.1 Participant Information

Pseudonym	Teaching Experience	Observed Personality during the Interview	Open Yes/No
Troy	9 years of teaching experience	Cool and Calm	Yes
Freddie	6 years of teaching experience	Succinct and Realistic	No
Harry	5 years of teaching experience	Outgoing and Bubbly	Yes
David	8 years of teaching experience	Kind and Quick	Yes
George	7 years of teaching experience	Diligent and Considerate	Yes
Adam	8 years of teaching experience	Shy and Intelligent	No
Ricky	5 years of teaching experience	Reserved and Caring	No
Michael	15 years of teaching experience	Bold and Optimistic	Yes
Sam	6 years of teaching experience	Reflective and Laid-back	No
Clay	11 years of teaching experience	Determined and Easygoing	Yes
Tyler	28 years of teaching experience	Established and Sanguine	No
John	7 years of teaching experience	Passionate and Warmhearted	No

To be eligible to be interviewed, the participants must have at least five years of teaching experience in the same rural area. The researcher set the criterion at five years to ensure that the teachers have built rapport in their communities and schools (Topchyan & Woehler, 2021). A total of twelve interviews were conducted out of the eighteen who

qualified. The seven remaining individuals were unresponsive to follow-up emails so further contact was discontinued.

Data Collection Process

For the survey, a recruitment letter was distributed to all postsecondary agriculture teacher education programs through the American Association for Agricultural Education and National Association of Supervisors Agricultural Education listservs. To gain face credibility and urgency, the recruitment email, with questionnaire link, was sent from one of the University of Kentucky professors. The professor served as a moderator between the researcher and participants. Upon receipt of the email, the recipients were asked to pass along the email, with participation interest link to any teacher that fit the criterion.

Gay men that teach or taught agricultural education could participate in the survey (see Appendix). To qualify for the qualitative portion of the study, men had to have five years of teaching experience in the same rural area. Five years of teaching experience was deemed appropriate for building rapport with community members. Initial contact was made the first of November 2021 with professors, university faculty, and agricultural educators. Surveys and interviews were conducted once the researcher identified eligibility.

The recruitment email and reminders were sent three times over the course of six weeks. After the closure of the survey, all answers were kept on a secure, password protected online statistical analysis website. Then, the data was exported from Qualtrics into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program.

During the qualitative portion of the mixed methods design, the researcher followed a case study approach. Yin (2018) defines a case study's parameters as an investigation into a phenomenon where real-world context is evident where multiple sources of evidence and data are sufficiently collected. Throughout the literature, one of the most common forms of studying the LGBTQIA+ community is through case study research.

Audio recordings of the interviews were done, and notes were taken throughout each interview. Interviews occurred in the form of one-on-one conversations. The interviews were semi structured in design.

A standard introduction was used as a general welcome, following the reading of the consent documentation, and ending by asking the participants for their consent. After answering any clarifying questions, the interview began. Twenty-four questions, along with clarifying sub-questions, were asked (see Appendix). The interviews were conducted online via Zoom and lasted between 30 and 180 minutes.

Instrumentation

After receiving the email from a colleague, the participants completed the teachers' resilience scale (Daniilidou & Platsidou, 2018) survey (see Appendix). The data from the teachers' resilience scale was retrieved from the five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). At the conclusion, the participants were asked if they were interested in participating in an interview to further discuss the study. Each individual who agreed received a link to schedule a Zoom interview.

Validity and Reliability

A comparison of participants who completed the questionnaire following the first invitation to the last reminder was completed and no significant difference was determined; therefore, no response bias was found (Sax et al., 2003). For the survey data, the researcher calculated measures of central tendencies in SPSS to determine a summated value of the four thriving constructs identified by the teacher resiliency scale: spiritual, personal competencies, peer support, and family cohesion. For the interviews, the researcher utilized the bracketing method to mitigate the effects of preconceptions that may have tainted the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Trustworthiness

Multiple validity strategies were implemented to ensure trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility of the findings (Yin, 2018). The researcher's personal understandings have been explicitly stated; the self-reflection he made in a journal helped his advisor and him understand how interpretations of the data could be formed by his past experiences. The point of this research is not to pity the oppressed, but to recognize underrepresented populations are wanting a chance to serve their communities without being discriminated against.

Credibility was further established through consistent checking of the transcripts and interview notes. The constant comparative method technique establishes credibility as the researcher analyzes themes in the case study (Glaser, 1965).. Returning to examine the research questions and the data was also done to ensure credibility.

To ensure dependability, the researcher maintained an audit trail of a reflective journal, researcher notes, and debriefings with his graduate advisor, Dr. Vincent. Notes

were kept of all activities that happened during the study, in the interviews, and in the debriefings. Confirmability of the data consisted of thorough comparison to data with the codes to ensure there were no shifting definitions or meanings of the codes over the course of analyzing the interviews (Glaser, 1965). This was done to ensure the researcher's biases would not influence the findings of the lived experiences from the gay men participants. Cross-checking of the data and codes was accomplished by the researcher and his advisor to ensure accuracy and authenticity of the information (Glaser, 1965).

The research at hand focuses on the stories of the participants; and these stories are not objective truth for every gay man or every individual who identifies within the LGBTQIA+ community. The study's transferability is supported through detailed description of the participants and their survey results and interviews, and by the researcher's transparency surrounding the analysis and trustworthiness (Yin, 2018).

To maintain confidentiality all twelve interviewed participants were given alias names throughout the study and in their direct quotes. Because sexual orientation is a highly contested subject matter (Voss, 2018), the researcher refrained from writing or outlining identifiers, such as home state, to ensure their safety and identity.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The participants' responses on the questionnaire were transferred onto to SPSS 27 for data analysis. Measures of central tendencies were used to determine a summated value of the four thriving constructs identified by the teacher resiliency scale: spiritual, personal competencies, peer support, and family cohesion. Following the review of the quantitative findings, the researcher developed conclusions based upon the guiding

theory, which assisted in determining a phenomenon among the rural gay teachers. Based upon the conclusions of the quantitative findings, the researcher designed an interview protocol to help expand the questions of “Why” and “How” the phenomenon was occurring within the quantitative data.

Following the completion of interviews, transcribing, reflective journaling, and peer debriefing occurred. As the interview continued, the researcher began to determine commonalities and recurring answers to each interview question (Schensul & LeCompte, 2010). Interviews were transcribed, and interview notes were taken during the interview to maximize the qualitative research element (Schensul & LeCompte, 2010). After organizing interview notes and transcriptions, the researcher utilized the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) to analyze the interviews. After this step, codes were outlined of all the collected and observed data. The data collection, through observation, was more casual than formal. According to Yin (2018), casual direct observations occur through fieldwork. Yin (2018) explains how in case study research questions become more focused and centralized.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

After four months of email invitations, follow-up reminders, and tracking of snowball sampling, 45 participants completed the questionnaire and 12 of the 45 agreed to participate in the qualitative portion of the mixed methods research design. Using an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design, chapter four depicts the quantitative and qualitative findings and their relationship to one another.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose was to explore the resiliency and thriving factors (spiritual influence, personal competence, peer support, family cohesion) that promote and limit the success of gay male agricultural educators.

Research Objectives

The following research objectives were developed to be the focus of this mixed-methods study:

RO1: What elements of thriving (spiritual influence, personal competence, peer support, family cohesion) allow gay men to succeed in agricultural education?

RO2: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *spiritual influence* element of thriving?

RO3: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *personal competence* element of thriving?

RO4: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *peer support* element of thriving?

RO5: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *family cohesion* element of thriving?

Research Objective 1: What elements of thriving (spiritual influence, personal competence, peer support, family cohesion) allow gay men to succeed in agricultural education?

Research objective one sought to evaluate the four thriving elements of the teachers’ resilience scale (TRS) that Daniilidou and Platsidou (2018) developed. Through measures of central tendency, Table 4.1 depicts that personal competence ($m = 3.98$; $SD = 0.48$) was the highest perceived thriving element among the rural secondary agriculture teachers who identify themselves as gay. Following personal competence was peer support ($m = 3.88$; $SD = 0.67$), family cohesion ($m = 3.70$; $SD = 0.92$), and spiritual influence ($m = 3.50$; $SD = 0.65$).

Table 4.1 Thriving Elements

Thriving elements as described by rural secondary agriculture teachers who identify as gay (n = 45).

Element	<i>n</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
Personal Competence	45	3.98	0.48	3.00	5.00
Peer Support	45	3.88	0.67	2.00	5.00
Family Cohesion	45	3.70	0.92	1.00	5.00
Spiritual Influence	45	3.50	0.65	2.00	5.00

Note: TRS responses were based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not true at all) to 5 (almost always true) with 3 as neutral point. All responses are based upon the teachers’ resilience scale (Daniilidou & Platsidou, 2018).

Research Objective 2: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *spiritual influence* element of thriving?

Spiritual influence is the lowest of the four elements in the quantitative data; however, the mean score ($m = 3.50$) is above the neutral point. Consistently across the interviews, participants spoke how religion and politics interfere with their ability to thrive. Starks and Robinson (2009) explain how religion and politics are nearly

inextricable when analyzing spiritual influence. Therefore, the researcher pulled themes that explain the complexities of religion and politics impacting the spiritual influence of the thriving element.

Within the spiritual influence element, several themes appeared throughout the interviews. Themes included: (1) Religious upbringing and the impact religion has on gay men's lives; (2) teaching in traditional Christian conservative environments; and the (3) hinderance of politics on gay men in agricultural education.

Religious upbringing and the impact religion has on gay men's lives

Several men interviewed explained how their faith impacted their ability to acknowledge their sexual orientation growing up. Most participants described how their Christian upbringing made it more challenging for men to come out as gay. Therefore, religion has impacted their ability to thrive, but religion has not limited their success.

Some of participants discussed how their religious upbringing was an obstacle that they faced when coming out to their loved ones. John explains with sincerity:

So, a lot of my reservations about telling my family were grounded in religious beliefs, religious perspectives, I was baptized . . . [and] I knew what their beliefs were. And I knew, I mean, I'd heard that [being gay meant you were condemned] at sermons, and things like that.

For John, the sermons that he heard at church made it more challenging for him to accept his sexuality. He was not the only one who struggled with a religious upbringing. Sam, who is closeted, still struggles with his identity. He states, "I still struggle with [being gay] to be quite honest. And a big part of that comes from growing up in a very conservative evangelical home. And I'm still not actually completely open with my family about it."

Pray the gay away. In the LGBTQIA+ community, praying the gay away is a concept that if one comes out as gay, the individual can pray the gay away. Praying the gay away does not work, and the idea adds psychological distress to the individuals that try and pray the gay away (Super & Jacobson, 2011). Several gay men interviewed explained how praying the gay away has not helped with thriving.

Harry explains that at one of the previous schools he worked at, one teacher thought that if an individual identifies as gay, that person is going to Hell, and used his sexuality as an excuse not to interact with him. Harry with great enthusiasm states, “Are you thinking if I tell you that I am gay, you are going to tell me I’m going to Hell?” At the end of the comment, Harry chuckles. He sounded defeated when he said that phrase.

George explains how he struggled with people telling him that he chose to be gay, and because of his sexuality, and explains how identifying as a gay man has made his life more challenging. He states with great emotion:

Everybody always say you chose {pause}, you chose {pause}, you chose [to be gay]. You cannot choose, sorry, I wish you could. That’s always my response. People tell me that I wish I could choose, wish I could, man. I totally chose a harder life path [ended with a smirk on his face].

The smirk on his face said it all. George describes how being gay is not a choice, and one cannot simply be straight. No one asks to be gay or straight. Sexual orientation is a natural part of one’s identity, and it’s not a choice no matter how hard one prays it away (Barton, 2010).

The following explains how harmful praying the gay away concept has on young rural LGBTQIA+ people. Tyler, with pure vulnerability, stated:

I was not a young person when I first realized I was [gay], I did hide it for a long time. I was in my 20s when I finally acknowledged it, and boy it was a rough

time. Being raised to think that was wrong and everything and that made you hate yourself. You prayed, you know and all that, but like I guess most of us do.

Tyler expresses how most gay men may seek prayer to try get rid of being gay. He understands the church's view of his identity. Tyler, who is Christian, explains how acknowledging his identity was challenging, but his identity did not limit his ability to thrive.

Current religious beliefs. Several of the men expressed that they are men of faith. Their faith helps these men to thrive. John states cheerfully, "Now, I would say [my partner and I's] church is a United Methodist Church. It is a reconciling church. And they affirm all identities and so that is fantastic. We love our church". While discussing his church, John sounded pleased with how his church is ran. Tyler shares a similar sentiment but has his reservations with the church. Tyler states with sincerity:

I do not attend church anymore. I did grow up as if you had to say I'm a member of a church at the Southern Baptist Church. And we all know how they deal with gays and lesbians and other members of the [LGBTQIA+ community]. But evidently, I have to tell people I have my faith. And nobody will ever take that from me. I do believe I'm a firm believer. I'm a Christian. But as I if people would say ask me what church, Tim, I said, I'm a Baptist, but I'm not a good Baptist, because I don't believe everything the Baptist doctrine says. After all, that's manmade. And I said I believe what God said.

Not all the men agreed with John and Tyler's views. For Sam, he struggles with organized religion. Sam states with hesitation in his voice:

I kind of struggle to be quite honest with our religious aspects of the way the church has gone lately. The direction that it's going. I'm not, I'm a full believer in Christ. And I think that we have one and only one God, but we've lost a lot of the love of Christ in church. So, I've really struggled with going because it's so against that, that love. I am just finding a way to be a good person.

In his explanation, Sam emphasizes that he is finding ways to be a good person regardless of attending church. Through Sam's testament, the spiritual influence element is not helping him to thrive.

Clay explains that the only time he interacts with the church is for weddings. He states with a chuckle, "Only when I go to weddings and funerals. That's about it. That is my only church going". For Clay, religion does not have an impact on his life. Therefore, he does not attend church. Clay does not allow spiritual influence to impact his ability to thrive.

Teaching in traditional Christian conservative environments

The traditional Christian conservative viewpoints historically do not support individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community, but growing acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community is occurring (Keleher & Smith, 2012). By identifying as a gay man, and teaching in rural communities, most of the men discussed how teaching in their traditional Christian conservative environments has provided the participants with challenges. Therefore, limiting their ability to thrive.

Some of the teachers explain how being gay has helped their traditional Christian conservative environments to accept people who vary from the norm. David explains this concept:

But I think [my identity] has allowed my students to see that we are all different. And you know, somebody's involvement in agriculture was never the social norm growing up. And so, for somebody or students understand that you can break the normal boundaries, or you can do anything that is not social normal, or, and I would say my rule, kids have really understood that too, because I have that relationship with them. And they've really understood that that's just who I am. And I love what I do. And just because I'm different than them doesn't mean that we can't have the same passions, and we can't follow through with the same excitement that we do every day.

George adds to David's remarks by stating:

It helps bridge the gap between the usual conception of people in agriculture like that we just like nobody in agriculture would possibly be gay. That was the thought process of some of the students in my previous district. So, it was kind of funny to like, to kind of broaden people's horizons in a sense, and you know, like, it doesn't matter, like yeah, like, I leave here at 3:30 and go home and milk cows that's what I do. So, um, I've had students say like, it makes them it's made some my students more open and accepting, I think, to like some of my, I want to say rougher around the edges. For the students from really traditional families, my identity has helped them be a little more understanding of people's lifestyle choices and how they choose to conduct their lives.

Sam describes his rural school's culture. Throughout his interview, he explains how he loved his school, but he felt that he could not be himself. He states:

The simplest way to put it is that my community was a very conservative Christian culture. It's a very small rural school. The town really all stems from one family, to be quite honest. So, it's very much a traditional type of program, which I had no problem with that part. I loved that. Looking at the older generation, which is the majority of the population in that area, it would have been tough to truly feel like I still want to be my true self.

Sam explains how he was fearful that if he did share his identity with his students, he would have driven them away from his program. He states, "I thought how some kids would react towards me being different, I am not going to say that they would be mean or nasty. I think [my identity] would have driven them away from the program". Religion is a topic that Sam shares in detail with the researcher. He recalls the day that the Pope supported same-sex marriage. Sam states:

I have pretty damn thick skin, to be quite honest. So, I don't let a lot of stuff bother me. And [homophobic] comments never really did bother me. But I did, I would, I wasn't afraid to have different discussions with students about various things. Even though I wasn't out to my students, I wasn't afraid to talk about [LGBTQIA+ identities]. I had one student, who had posted some very negative things, a very strong Christian student who posted some very negative things about the Pope coming out and saying, we're not going to condemn these people. And I had a Catholic student who came in and was furious about what this other student had put on Facebook or Snapchat. And so, instead of teaching that day,

we sat down and had a conversation. We had a conversation about why we are the type to condemn people and we shouldn't be the type to keep others from finding happiness. It was just more of a conversation that I led. I didn't do anything to discipline because I didn't feel like I had to. I had such great respect for my students that they would much rather have a conversation.

Several of the men discuss how the traditional views of their communities are hindering them in their classroom. Clay states:

I work in a very conservative community, and the community is very traditional; I guess you could say that's a good, good way to put it. They aren't as progressive as some larger areas [in the state]. I feel like until [being gay] becomes something that more people understand that it is something about you, it does not define who you are. It's just not a topic of discussion in my classroom.

Not being able to connect. Several of the men expressed that one way they are not able to thrive is not being able to connect to traditional families. The traditional family is a man and woman who is married with kids. Not being able to connect is impacting the participants ability to thrive. David explains, I can't relate to some of the traditional families. Not that it is scary or intimidating. Sometimes I struggle with connecting with conventional families with two kids and a spouse". While David explains how this impacts him in the classroom, Clay explains how he has a challenging time connecting with his community. Clay states:

And those traditional farmers are stuck in their traditional ways of how the community should look and how the community should act. And you can only imagine how that impacts our agriculture education program based upon their stereotype of tradition and what tradition should be.

Hinderance of politics on gay men in agricultural education

Most men describe how politics hinder their ability to do their jobs. A few men shared their political beliefs, some were conservative, and others were liberal. The men's rural communities' viewpoints helped the researcher explain how thriving scored the lowest in the quantitative data.

The researcher asked if there were any reservations for not being out in the classroom. Freddie states, “It’s a very conservative area, and I’m also pretty conservative. But [long pause], I don’t know, just apprehensive about how being gay will be received. I’m sure it’ll be fine”. For Freddie, he feels that he cannot be himself because of political beliefs. For Adam he explains this concept in greater detail. With no hesitation, Adam states:

I would say prior to Trump being elected to office. Our kids policed each other and it just, it was almost a non-issue. And then everything became politicized, and everything became polarized, and kids started, you know, pushing the limits of what they would say to each other more. Then, [a global pandemic] happened, and kids weren’t in the building and that structure was lost. And when they came back, like their social decorum is atrocious, like, it’s like, they don’t know how to treat other people socially anymore.

Adam explains how politics were affecting his students and how that impacted his classroom culture.

Meanwhile, Sam explains how he was legislated out of teaching. He states with sorrowfulness:

I really feel like I was legislated out of education. We have no legislation [in our state] pushing people to want to stay in the profession. But we’re putting more, a lot more, restrictions on what teachers can and can’t do. Which is really disappointing to me. I look at like what’s happening in Indiana with having to post your lesson plans a year in advance, I’m a week in advance, there’s no way you’re going to get me in a post my entire year worth of lessons because they change week to week, I couldn’t be doing something one weekend, the next week, I think we got to take a pause, we got to do something different for a minute. And if that was something that I was in [Stat], and that was happening, I probably would have been peace out guys, I can’t do this. There’s no way it’s not good for my mental health or my sanity.

Sam describes how the current political climate is impacting his mental health. Therefore, impacting his ability to thrive.

Research Objective 3: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *personal competence* element of thriving?

Personal competence is a set of skills that include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Feuerborn & Gueldner, 2019). Several of the men shared with the researcher their understanding of defining characteristics of self. Through these conversations, the men discussed that identifying as a gay man does not define who they are, but it is part of who they are, and that is a distinction that was made throughout these interviews. Troy states with gusto, “My sexuality isn’t my number one defining feature. I let my agricultural background and knowledge, my hobbies, my passions, and my interests be more of my defining features. . . [My sexuality is] just a piece of me”. Harry, who is an openly gay man echoes the same sentiment when it comes to being themselves in the classroom.

Harry explains:

Regardless of whether or not I date men, that’s not the first thing about me. It’s a small subset of who I am as an overall individual. My sexuality is not what I’m always going to talk about in class. I don’t force my opinions upon people. I feel like some people do. I am who I am. I have a fiancé. Ultimately, that’s my personal life, and I’m at school, and if it comes up, it comes up, but it’s not like my sexuality is the talk of the town.

Troy and Harry’s perception of self explains how personal competence scored the highest ($m = 3.98$) on the TRS. To fully understand the impact the personal competence characteristics emerged. Themes included: (1) being a good teacher; (2) deciding to come out; (3) the need to assimilate; (4) the reasons as to why gay men stay in agriculture education; (5) how identifying as a gay man helps with being more empathetic and

sympathetic towards others; and (6) how students of the gay agricultural educators provide them with support.

Being the good gay agriculture teacher

Being a good teacher and good teaching are common phrases used in education; however, gay male educators have an added layer of complexity with their identity. Several of the teachers shared that being gay has made them better teachers. Harry explains, “Kids really want to take my classes, and whatnot. Being gay has not presented itself with any problems. My sexuality has made kids think I am more fun. They want to take my classes”. By being himself, Harry sees more students wanting to take his classes. Harry further explains how he is in a multiple-teacher program, but he is the only male agriculture teacher. Harry says that being a gay male teacher has not limited the enrollment of men into the program. Harry wanted to ensure that he told the researcher, “Male student membership, like participation, like definitely increased, like once I got here, so like, [being gay] has not been a hindrance”. Harry’s identity has aided him and his program by encouraging all students to enroll in his classes.

Gay agriculture teachers must constantly prove themselves. Most men explained that it took more than being a good agriculture teacher in their school system. They felt that they had to work harder and consistently prove themselves to their school and community because of their identity. David shares his experience eloquently:

When I first came to [my current high school], it was not as a gay teacher, [sharing my sexuality] was not the first thing I focused on, it was not the ideal goal, it was, I have a job to do. And I am going to prove to you that I came here for my job and who I am should not affect the fact that I have a job to do. And so, I think that that is very important to understand too that it is okay to be yourself, but and be who you are and be whom you want to be. But know that you are taking on a role that you have to do your job. And that was one thing that I think assisted in my community and the agricultural community accepting me.

Throughout David's entire interview, he constantly mentions having a job to do and having to prove himself to his school and community. David provided the most detail surrounding this theme; however, nearly every man interviewed echoed the same type of surveillance that David expresses. David provides an analogy to help the researcher understand his emotions:

I always grew up with the mentality that you have a job to do. And then I have mentioned that many times, it was, you know, you have a job to do. People do not need to know about your personal life, and people do not need to know who you are; you know, get in there, start your job. And then you feel more comfortable where you are. Open those boundaries, open that wall. And that is applied to everything in our life, you know, if we go on vacation, we are in a new spot, our boundaries are up for a little while until we figure out where we are at and if we are safe. If we meet somebody new, we meet, we are starting to date somebody, our boundaries go up again, because we are like, we do not know if we want this. So, I think it came down to boundaries that were up just for the safety of my own heart and brain and eventually have evolved into where I feel that I can be who I am no matter what that is.

David's sense of self allowed him to set boundaries in his classroom to ensure that his identity did not hurt his teaching. Eventually, once he felt comfortable, he did decide to come out to his school community.

Imposter phenomenon impeding thriving. Proving oneself and imposter phenomenon works together to interfere with gay male agriculture science educators to succeed in their roles. Harvey and Katz (1985) explain:

Because they dread being exposed as fakes, [imposter phenomenon] victims often share another fear. This is the fear of failing. To them, any failure is going to be the giveaway, the event that shows the world they are only imposters. But some are not just *afraid* of failing; they are terrified of it. And they tend to define failure as *any mistake or flaw that reveals them to be less than perfect*. Anything short of brilliance or perfection brings out [imposter phenomenon] victim's self-doubts (p. 13).

Several closeted gay men expressed Harvey and Katz's (1985) interpretation of the imposter phenomenon. They feel like an imposter within the LGBTQIA+ community because they are not out. Still, the participants also are fearful that if they do come out, they will become an imposter within the agricultural education profession. Sam explains how his mindset hinders him. He shares with vulnerability:

[Coming out and accepting myself] is still something I'm working on myself. It's just getting over that mindset, that, you know, there's this image that you have to uphold when most people don't care in all reality. They really don't. You hear about the few bad eggs that give a whole view of what the agriculture industry wants to see. And for the most part, I would find that false. I really would, especially with the group that I'm around all the time. And honestly, a lot of that overcoming has been talking to the women in the ag industry. They're easier to talk to the men in general, and women are easier to talk to for me. But for the most part, people want you to be yourself.

The mindset that Sam explains was present in several of the interviews regardless of being out or closeted. The men that were open explained how this process was a hindrance for them before being out. Ricky explains these feelings in detail:

[Long pause] I'm nervous. I mean, I've told most of my agriculture teacher friends that know that I'm ready to share my identity and get it off my chest. When [the administration] offers me my contract this spring, I will be tenured, which means they have to have valid reasons to fire me, which I'm super excited for the security. Because then I feel like I can open up and be myself. I plan to become more open about being gay. But like with that probationary stage, and then not having a reason to get rid of me, it makes me nervous. So, it's tough because you feel like you can't be yourself. After all, if your community members and your board or admin don't support you, they can choose not to rehire you, and they don't have to give me a reason why they're not rehiring me.

Most of the men shared similar feelings to Ricky. The participants explain how being gay makes the educators perceive themselves as an imposter in their classroom. Therefore, limiting their ability to thrive.

While looking at the imposter phenomenon, Clay shared a time that he has constantly had to work harder than everyone else because he feared that he would not be

as successful as his heterosexual peers. Clay starts his explanation with frustration and then ends with relief. He states:

When I was in college, I tried to get involved in everything possible, from every committee to every organization that I could sign up for to a leadership position that I could be a part of in my undergrad. I wanted to build my resume. But I think I did that because I felt like I would have to fight harder in the game of life to obtain a position where I was going to be respected. And I did that because I wanted to be the best. And I felt like being gay; I would have to work harder than the rest to be the best. And I'm glad I did. And I don't necessarily know if I needed to work that hard. But it paid off. And I'm happy. Glad I did.

Clay thought he had to work harder than his peers to be successful. Although he feared that he would not be successful because of his identity, that fear helped him thrive and overcome societal pressures that surround the LGBTQIA+ community. The imposter phenomenon is present in some of these men's lives, but it did not limit the participants. However, the imposter phenomenon aided the men and their abilities to succeed in their careers.

Deciding to come out as gay while being an educator

Most of the men that are open about their sexuality endured a challenging decision in coming out to their school's faculty, administration, students, and the community they serve. Outing someone should not be taking place in a professional work setting. Therefore, several men shared with the researcher that they wanted to make that decision before entering the classroom. For example, David states, "Originally, it was tough for me to come out and share with my students, but today, it is something that is a cultural norm".

Adam does not keep his identity of being a gay man a secret, but he does not tell his students unless they ask. He explains to the researcher that there are students at his

school that assume that he is gay, and for that reason, he believes that is why he does not have more of the typical students in his class. Adam jokingly explains:

There are students that if they do not know I am gay, that is just ignorance on their part because again, it is not like I am hiding anything, but they make assumptions, and if they did not make that assumption, or if somebody told them, they would interact differently in the classroom, because of, you know, what their cultural upbringing is, what their parents tell them and what their own biases are. And I know there are students that I have never had that would typically be in the program because of [my sexuality]. So, it is a factor. I mean, my identity is there.

Vulnerability to share one's identity. There were several of the men that were interviewed that shared that they had to be vulnerable to be willing to share their identity.

Clay explains this concept:

Admitting I was gay, accepting what was known, accepting that this is me and who I am. And gay people like to know that heterosexual people accept them for being different and okay with it. Because then they can accept it and be okay with it, and I feel more comfortable being gay. And that is just how you gain acceptance. That is just being vulnerable to let people know that it is okay to be who you are.

When asked how identifying as a gay man hinders you in your classroom, Freddie states:

Well, not being out helps or does not help. I am not 100% myself. Um [nervousness], I feel like there is sometimes where I must play more of a hiding game. And I feel guilty about not being 100% of myself with [my students]. And, you know, there are times that the kids will want to talk about something, and I do not feel comfortable talking to them about my personal life or relationships or anything like that. And so that uncomfortable, you know, shutting things down unexpectedly does not allow for a transparent culture in my classroom that needs to be there.

For Freddie, he is not prepared to share his identity. He is concerned that not sharing his identity may influence his classroom culture. Therefore, Freddie's personal competence may be affected by his fear of being out, impacting his ability to thrive.

To help further understand vulnerability, David defined the term true self to the researcher. He shares with sincerity:

My understanding of my true self is that I would not do a single thing in high school that I did not think through before understanding how being gay impacted that decision. When I asked to go to the bathroom if somebody asked before me, I did not go because I did not want them to think I was too gay for following. Everything I said was well thought out. Everything that I did was well thought out. All my actions were well thought out. Where I went, what I did, how I acted, whom I talked with, everything had a psychological approach to how it operated. I guess, you know, the brain is a fantastic thing. We can place ourselves in an environment that we think we do not belong in, and then we can quickly pull ourselves out of that. And I now am at a point in my life where I say what I feel, and I do what I want, you know, I do not have to worry about judgment. If I do, see you later. I do not have time for you. And I think that that is an important aspect. And it comes down to how you can build that relationship? Or can you close the gap off? I think there is a good judgment point there that I use a lot. But you either have the option to build that relationship and be your true authentic self or close the gap and be done with it. And I am lucky that I think I have done more of trying to build the relationship and begin understanding. But at the end of the day, my true self is I am, who I am. I approach students in the same way I approach faculty and staff, other than at a professional level. And, you know, this is what I am going to be, and I do not know how to be anything else anymore. You see, I have given up on the fact that I must add that I must think through every action that I have every day.

For Michael, he believes that honesty is the best policy. He states, “Kids respond best to honest, open people with them. And you know, I do not hold punches. I am a smartass, too. I like to joke with them”. Each of these men is similar but vastly different at the same time. Vulnerability and personal competence worked together in helping to understand how the perception of being gay plays a role in the participants’ lives.

The ‘new’ me. While coming out, the men explain how society changes their perception of the educators once they identify as gay. The participants explain that they are no longer the agriculture educator but the *gay* agriculture educator. Freddie explains with concern:

High school students may not understand if I came out as gay. And, you know, I have been there for years, and they know me one way. And I do not want them to think entirely differently whenever I tell them. So just that worry is a significant stumbling block for me.

David explains that he was not open about his sexuality at first but is honest about it in his classroom after he formulated relationships with administration, staff, students, and community members. He states:

I went there for my job, and eventually, as I worked with other coworkers and people, they saw that I was there to be my authentic self and be a teacher. And I wanted to make an impact on students, and I wanted to make an impact in kids' lives; that became the most important thing for people in my community because I was willing to put in the time, energy, and effort to impact how the community grew and develop and everything in between. And so when I say that impact, and just being my authentic self, at the end of the day, it was, do your job, be who you want to be and be where you're at, um, show authenticity when you can, and, and try and gain relationships. And I realized this is what I've said a lot. But you know, you gain connections, you do your job, you are being your authentic self, and you're showing yourself the best that you possibly can to everybody around you. There's no fault in that. And if there's a fault in that, it's a broken system. You have to be who you are, give everything you have, and be your authentic self. And as I mentioned, if it's, if it's not working, it's a broken system that you can't fix.

For Sam, he decided to leave the classroom. He no longer felt that he was supported at his school, and external circumstance pushed him out of the classroom. He states:

I will say that the way I identify is partly what I left the high school that I was teaching at last. I am not 100% sure many other reasons pushed me to leave. The main one being high school kids are just a pain in the butt right now. And I was tired of being walked over by the school, not necessarily the kids I had. I had reasonable control of the kids; I had great relationships with my students. My students miss me dearly, and they contact me on occasion. I felt like I was losing a lot of support. And it was a small rural school, which is crazy to think, but I was losing administrative support. And I needed another challenge was tired of being asked to do everything by everybody, and I needed out of my home area badly. So, it was time to move on to something different.

John states boldly, “I’m also not wanting my sexuality constantly being brought up, you know, like, oh, because I’m gay I do this because I’m gay, I do that”. Again, gay male agriculture educators fear that their perception of them will change once they share it with their students. Through the dialogue the participants shared, the stress of coming out and being the gay agriculture teacher may hinder their ability to thrive.

Feeling the need to assimilate to heteronormative ways

Most of the individuals interviewed considered themselves as straight passing. Straight passing is a social construct that heterosexuals and other LGBTQIA+ community members have on one another; assuming one’s sexual orientation based on appearances is a form of assimilation (Pfeffer, 2014). Straight passing is a privilege (Eguchi, 2009) that more masculine gay men have over their more feminine counterparts. Straight passing may be a protective factor, but it may not be infinite. Five of the twelve men interviewed stated that they felt they had to assimilate to fit the mold of their rural, heteronormative environment. The closeted individuals felt more need to assimilate than their open peers. John states, “I convinced myself that I did, but I don’t think I need to”.

When asked, have you felt the need to assimilate your personality to fit the mold of your rural community, Freddie states with reservation:

Um, yes and no. Yes. In that, I am not out to everybody. And so, you know, just going with the flow. But at the same time, I do not think that it is anything different than how I usually am. I am pretty rural, pretty conservative. So that lifestyle, that mentality does not really change. Like I have told everyone that I have come out to, I am not entirely changing my personality or changing who I am. It is just this one part of me that you thought was one way is different. So that is really it. And so, I guess, yes, I have said or done something a little differently than I usually would have. But it is not that far out of the norm for what I would have done any other time.

Adam shares with the researcher that he does not have to assimilate, but he understands how to relate to his students. He shares calmly:

Students of all stripes come through, and it does not matter, you know, what stripes I wear. I still need to relate to them on an individual level and as a group. So that does not matter. It just still comes down to being a decent human being. On the industry side of things like that, it gets trickier there because I have issues with the agricultural industry that are entirely unrelated to this. So, and that has more to do with the scientific side of things, and the policy side of things of how the industry needs to continue moving forward and embrace, you know, the world at large. You throw on some social layers to that too. And it gets complicated, but I still believe in the importance of agriculture. And its intertwined role with everything else. And I find that fascinating. So, that is what keeps me with it.

Adam shares his ability to connect with his students and building relationships with his students helps him thrive in his classroom. Additionally, he explains how he understands that Adam does not agree with every aspect of the agricultural industry, but he learned how to navigate being gay and working in agriculture.

Ricky explains how he does not feel that he has assimilated to fit a mold, but he is not open about his sexuality to his students. He shares:

I have not really assimilated. I do not talk openly about my sexuality with my students. Mainly because even if I was straight, I do not think they need to know what goes on in my personal life outside of school. I am there to educate them and everything. What I do in my free time outside of school does not affect how I teach in my classroom. I have chosen to stay at my school even though I know that it is hard to it would be hard to be an out gay ag educator, mainly because I love my students. And I honestly think that they need to learn about diverse cultures. And if I am one of the only few people who can do that, that is really important because I know they have to experience quite a bit with me when we go on FFA trips. If I am the only one doing it, that is great because it changes their mindset, which helps when they have kids and start raising their kids. Many of their biases come from their parents and grandparents. If I can get rid of those misconceptions, I will feel successful.

For Ricky, he does not discuss his sexuality, but he thrives knowing that his students have someone teaching that belongs to an underrepresented population.

Sam explains that assimilation did not only occur at school but growing up, he had to assimilate because of his parents. He shares with openness:

I had to assimilate with my family. Growing up on a cow-calf ranch, I was a rural young man, and I had to do everything my family did on the farm. And it really was not until college that I found where I could truthfully start to move away from that assimilation. And I would consider myself a very masculine individual in many ways. Still, I always felt like I had to fit this mold where I could not be the sometimes be the flamboyant individual that I am, or I could not have the fun that I like to have in the aspects of, you know, dance and being a total goofball, and just living life. I have been leaning on a lot of that lately, and I am trying to get past it because I still struggle. I look at my childhood and feel that I hindered myself. And I struggle with that.

Sam shares how he assimilated during his youth and how that has impacted the rest of his life. Similar to Ricky, he appreciates and thrives in the agricultural industry and understands how one may need to fit in a mold to succeed in agricultural education.

Clay explains how he did not need to assimilate to fit into a mold. He states, “I am a very masculine gay man in terms of I do not flaunt being gay, I do not talk or walk or anything of those sorts. It is not something that I have had to adjust my behaviors or attitudes”. Clay’s masculine traits allow him to thrive in the classroom.

Loving their job and students

The researcher asked each man why they stay in agricultural education. All of them stated that they stay in the profession because of their students. For example, Troy states with compassion:

I am just helping the kids, honestly, because I was one of those kids that did not really know what they were going to do or where they were going. And agriculture was kind of like the place that grounded me and centered me and kind of helped me find my way. So being that place for kids is amazing!

Ricky tells the researcher that he struggled with making the decision to become an agriculture educator because of his identity. Coming to accept his sexuality has challenged Ricky. He states with emotion:

The biggest obstacle was my internal battle with my sexuality. Going through college, I questioned whether I was going to be successful in this career, with my personal life being so widely not accepted in the ag education world. And I finally just had to decide that, you know, it is going to be what it is going to be if I am a good teacher, then my sexuality is not going to play a factor in that. So that is the biggest thing for me was just that internal battle.

Ricky describes how his internal battle with accepting his sexuality prevented him from thriving. Freddie shares a similar experience with Ricky. Freddie utilizes the term *it* while describing his sexuality. Through his conversation, he understands the importance of being out but is hesitant. Freddie states with sadness:

Accepting *it* [I am gay] myself, and then, you know, realizing that it is not the end of the world. And it is okay. I have had everyone I have talked to about it; coming out was easier than I expected. And so just getting over the mental hype of, oh, this will be terrible. Coming out is going to be a bad idea. Do not tell this person or whatever. And I am just doing it. I feel so much better whenever I come out. I feel a lot more relaxed and comfortable afterward. So just that mental anxiety of what will happen and accepting it. At first, it was the biggest hurdle that I had to deal with, but I felt a lot more comfortable in the classroom once I did it. And I know as soon as I tell the kids, I will feel a million times better. Now it is walking that tightrope of I do not want to slip up and do not want to say the wrong thing, or I do not want to lead anybody on in any way. And so that is the biggest hurdle right now for me is just getting over that mental block.

For Freddie, accepting that he is gay has placed a burden on him. Therefore, his identity may hinder his personal competence. A few of the men interviewed had similar testaments. Unlike Freddie, Adam is out, but he has sympathy for gay agriculture teachers who are struggling with accepting their identity and who are closeted. When asked what obstacles you have had to overcome in your journey to be a gay man in agricultural education, Adam states with sympathy:

I think the first one is being out. And I say that from the standpoint of there is enough other stuff going on in the profession, and you are being pulled in so many ways and get stressed for time, energy, everything, that I cannot imagine still having that stress on top of it, I cannot fathom it. So, I think that is, that was the biggest obstacle. And that was before I got into the classroom. So that was good.

Adam's personal competence was not affected by his sexuality because he is open about his identity. His ability to thrive is not limited to being closeted. Similar to Adam, Michael explains how he has been out since his first day of teaching. Michael states, "From day one, I have been out. I have a picture of my husband behind my desk". For Michael, he can display a picture of himself and his husband on his school desk. That may empower Michael and help him to thrive in his current role.

Clay explains how he is open about his sexuality in his school and community. He does not flaunt the information, but he does not hide being gay from anyone. When asked if his sexuality hinders him in his classroom, he states:

I do not see being gay as being negative. I do not feel like it has any negative to it. I know that there are students who know, I know that there are parents who know the staff at the school, and the community members know. And I do not think I have found any part of my career that my sexuality has hindered, people choose not to do something because of that, or they do not want to participate with me. I have some students who have mentioned it to coworkers or other people in the community, but not in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable, but just as a clarifying, is he, is he? And it is, and I am okay with that. It is not a question that I would, you know, be super like, let us sit down and talk about it. Let me answer that for you. But it is something that if they are curious and want to find out that knowledge, then whatever, go for it. And whatever you do with that knowledge, be respectful of it.

The researcher found Clay's comments about his sexuality as being regarded as a hindrance neutral. Therefore, the participants may have ranked personal competence higher if they did not have any issues or any positive as identifying as a gay male agriculture teacher.

Debunking the universal gay experience ideology. The researcher found it essential to explain how there is not a universal gay male lived experience. Social media, movies, and other forms of media depict stereotypes and trends that typical gay men should be doing. Some men are more flamboyantly gay, while others are more subtle with their identity; however, the depictions are normally of gay men that are more prideful in gay culture. Gender expression plays a role in understanding how these men interact and engage in their communities. For rural gay men that teach agricultural education, there are several communities that they may claim to interact with daily. Therefore, the theme of belonging to the gay community and the social pressures that have emerged from these interviews. All twelve participants shared similar experiences, but none had the same lived experience.

Clay explains how some of his gay friends try to get him out to gay clubs, but that is not his scene. He explains, “It is just not something for me, a club that I can go to, or an organization, or a Bible study group of sorts for gay people. It is just not something that I do not look for”. Clay describes how not all gay men are involved in the same leisure activities. Believing that there is only one universal way of being gay is harmful to one’s well-being and may hurt the chances to thrive.

Identifying as a gay man allows for more empathy and sympathy towards others

All twelve men stated that by identifying as a gay man has aided them in being more empathetic and sympathetic towards their students. Ricky specifically states, “I think that being gay just helps me be more sympathetic and empathetic with my students.

Freddie explains how identifying as gay allows him to notice other students who may struggle with their identity. Freddie states:

I can kind of spot a few things. A couple of students that I know are either gay or questioning themselves. I can sort of notice that a little bit. I have been able to help them a bit. They are not necessarily bullied, but you can definitely tell they feel a little uncomfortable at a time. So, I can kind of step in and alleviate that situation.

Freddie's statement explains how gay men who teach agricultural education thrive if students feel successful in their classes. Freddie thrives when his students succeed.

Earlier, David explains how his identity has helped create a cultural norm in his classroom. He feels he has a welcoming classroom for all through the cultural norm of acceptance. David states enthusiastically:

My sexual orientation is just part of the cultural norm, which has opened up the boundaries to where students feel accepted and are willing to commit themselves to understand that my classroom is a welcoming, warm environment for anyone, whether it is socioeconomic status, their race, sexual orientation, and it has really built a classroom that can really accept anyone. And that came to full fruition when another teacher was outside my school last year. And he goes, you know, you have really built something good here. And I said I do not know what you are talking about. He goes, you have taken one of the most country kids, one of the most or one kid that is the most rural you have and a kid that is the most urban and a kid from different races, and you have combined them into one classroom where they all feel accepted, warm, and loved.

David is explaining how his sexual orientation has helped him cultivate a classroom environment that is more accepting of all backgrounds. Through his personal competence of sympathy and empathy, he has a classroom environment that promotes thriving. Adam shares the same mindset as David. Adam with passion states:

I definitely think that being gay gives me a perspective on the students who struggle with bullying and not fitting in. And it is not to say they are facing the same things that I did. Everybody carries something around with them that may weigh heavy on their shoulders. I internalize that and empathize with that a bit better. And then there are those students that maybe share similar experiences, and they appreciate the fact that there is somebody else here. And particularly in an agricultural classroom, somebody else here might be like me.

For Tyler he is more compassionate for students who are struggling with their identity because he shares in that hardship. Tyler states with hesitation:

But I think it makes you more compassionate. I have spoken to my folks about this. I said, you know I am in the minority. But the trouble is, no one out in public can see that I am a minority. And I said it made me more compassionate to kids that came from different backgrounds.

In his response, Tyler spoke emotionally, and he sounded alone. The compassion that he conveys is sincere. While he was teaching, he thrived while his students were thriving.

Most of the men interviewed stated that they were able to connect with their female students. Sam explains how formulating these relationships empowered him and helped him be more aware of other's lived experiences. He states calmly:

I honestly think being gay made me more empathetic towards my students. It gave me the ability to connect to both girls and the boys very well. As a young male teacher, I know it can be not easy to connect with young females. The fact that I could honestly sit and have conversations with the young girls in my room contributed to being gay. I think that will always be something that I think is helpful, and I also believe that it helped me be more open-minded towards others. I have always been a person that loved to sit down and learn about people, but I think being gay adds to it that I want to know your story before I make a judgment.

By listening to his female students, Sam created an environment where they felt empowered. Therefore, Sam is helping his students thrive, and he feels empowered, helping him succeed.

To conclude, Clay describes how being different is okay. Clay explains with excitement:

There have been several moments where different students, whether they be gay or for other reasons, tend to gravitate to me a little more because they have that feeling of safety and security. After all, it is something that they feel like, hey, if he is going to be a little different, it is okay for me to be a little different. And so, I find that those students will tend to be a little more open and connect a little more with me.

Clay is thriving by being different, and he is more sympathetic and empathetic toward students who vary from the norms.

Students supporting their gay agriculture teacher

All the teachers stated that their students support the participants in some capacity. Some of the teachers discussed how there was a partnership between the teacher and students. Sam explains how relationship building helped him gain support with his students. He shares with a smile on his face:

I built a relationship with every single one of my students; no matter how big or small it was, I had a relationship with them. And they could drive me what drives me absolutely insane. But at the end of the day, they knew they could come to me for support. And I had respect. So, knowing that I had all the respect of all my students. I got respect from my faculty and fellow teachers too.

Ricky explains how his students support him. He shares:

When I am having a rough day, my students know, so they do little things for me here and there. I am a huge coffee drinker. My students would say that I am addicted to it. So, you know, if they see that, like, I am having a bad day or stuff, and they go and refill my coffee for me, or they will get me like, I am also a massive fan of chocolate, so they will go get me candy bars and stuff like that.

Clay explains how his students do not care how he identifies because they know that he cares for his students. Clay states:

They bring me lots and lots of iced coffee every day. I love that. Yes, yes, I have the best students. I literally have the best students, and in any way, whether it is a text message or bringing me a cake pop yesterday, one of them brought me a cake pop. And I and it was just a random like, here is the cake pop. Thanks. And I am like awesome. So, my students support me in so many ways and not because of being homosexual or because I'm different. They just genuinely love me and care.

Through these stories, the participants explain how students support the gay men that teach agricultural education and help them thrive through personal competence.

Research Objective 4: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *peer support* element of thriving?

Identifying the support systems of gay men in agricultural education helps in the understanding of why these men stay in the profession. The lack of support from administration, community members, students, and the parents of the students may hinder gay men in their ability to thrive (Robinson & Ferfoja, 2001). Therefore, the peer support systems that gay men belong to in agricultural education provided significant insight on how gay male agricultural educators thrive.

To understand the magnitude of peer support, David explains how he provides his students with support. David unapologetically states:

You show your kids that you love them, and you care for them, and you want to be authentic, and you want to be yourself, and you want to support the students 100% even if you cannot support yourself some days, they are going to give you the same back. I really think that when you look at how do they support you? How do they support you personally? How do they support you mentally? How do they support you emotionally? It goes beyond gifts. It really comes down to the concept of how they can mentally make you feel like you belong at your school. How can they inspire you to want to get out of bed every day? And I think the most significant component with that is, there are days I do not want to go to work, there are days I want to call in sick, but when I sit there, and we have a CDE (Career Development Events) practice, and I know that kids really want to learn about that concept. That is when you know that they support you 100% because they need you there. And you can pry yourself out of bed to go.

David explains how his students support him, and how he supports his students. In this section, the researcher decided to include students as the participants' peers. Most agricultural educators spend more time with their students than they do with any other group they may interact with at any given time.

Peer support scored the second highest on the TRS ($m = 3.88$) for the qualitative portion of this study. Multiple themes appeared in the qualitative data. Themes included

for peer support: (1) Students' consequences who utilize homophobic rhetoric; (2) perceptions of faculty and staff that work with gay agricultural educators; (3) other LGBTQIA+ teachers; (4) agricultural education profession and LGBTQIA+ identities; (5) schools supporting gay agricultural educators; and (6) the community supporting surrounding gay agriculture teachers.

Identified school support prohibiting homophobic rhetoric

To understand how schools tolerate and discipline students who participate in homophobia, the researcher asked the participants how their schools address homophobic rhetoric. Troy states with no hesitation:

The school has a no-tolerance policy; they have zero-tolerance. Earlier this year, some kids drew a giant penis on the side of my truck with dirt and wrote 'likes dick' all over my truck. That day, one student came up to me and asked if I was gay. And I said, yeah. And I cannot remember what he said. But that ended up being what was written on my truck. So, I was like; it must be him. And when the administration reviewed the security camera footage, it was not him. It was three students that I did not even know. So, it was like an unrelated incident or something. But yes, the administration brought those kids, and they gave them detention. And so, they gave them detention and everything. And they had to write apology letters.

For Troy, having "likes dick" is a story that Troy may always remember. His administration gave the students detention for their actions. Troy never allowed this incident to prevent him from thriving.

For David, he internally disciplines students in his classroom. David explains in detail:

Homophobia is not tolerated. And typically, if I ever have that issue with a student, I do not do anything about it except address it myself. We look at agricultural education and education in general. And we understand the importance of relationship building. And if I have that opportunity to have a relationship with that kid and really talk to them about the comments that have been said or what has been done, then I can make that impact. For example, I had a student who wrote faggot on one of my whiteboards in the back corner, and I

figured out who that student was. And I was like, do you understand what that word means? Do you know everything that you just wrote? And when it came down to it, the student did not understand its impact. So, by having that relationship, building that relationship, I am better able not necessarily to solve a problem but to gain understanding and gain that relationship where I can have an impact. From a school perspective, it's not tolerated. There's disciplinary action put into place. We do have multiple students that have seen repercussions before because of that.

Supporting students helps David to thrive. Additionally, he understands the importance of relationships and rapport building have on students. David did ensure to state that students have consequences for their homophobic actions.

George recalls a time when a group of students called him a faggot. He states, "My first-year teaching, I had a group of five boys called me a faggot. Nothing was done, like, not a thing". George did not have administrative support to help alleviate this issue. Therefore, the comments from these students and the lack of action from his administration may have hindered George's sense of thriving. Ricky shares a similar experience as George. Ricky explains that he does not see his school discipline students who use homophobic rhetoric. He states:

Students just openly used terms like faggot when I first started teaching, but I got after them quite a bit when I first started and made sure they knew that those words were not okay. Even if they were not talking about it, you know, using it directed towards someone in the LGBTQIA+ community just said they are not appropriate. I am in such a rural area that is not very accepting of the LGBTQIA+ community. I hear a lot of negative comments from male students. They have this significant stigma that all gay men are attracted to them and everything, and it is super annoying. They use slurs all the time in class or when I first started; they do not anymore.

Four of the twelve men interviewed had students call the participants a faggot. The rhetoric used toward the men may restrict their ability to thrive.

Working with homophobic colleagues

There was a split in the perceptions of faculty and staff surrounding gay male agriculture teachers' sexuality. The researcher asked the participants to explain how their school supports them. Most men stated that the school faculty and administration supported them as educators regardless of their sexual orientation. Harry says, "Our administration is super supportive". The peer support element of thriving may have been scored higher by individuals that felt they had administrative support.

Homophobic coworkers. Several of the participants shared that their students were not homophobic, but their coworkers participated in homophobia. George explains how he left one school district because of his homophobic administration. He states:

When I first started teaching, being gay hindered my ability to teach, and it was not so much student-wise as it was administration-wise, and then the perception of other faculty and staff within the building. The sad part is that the district I was in was extremely liberal. We did have a sizeable LGBTQ population. However, just particular administration had really hardcore, traditional values. And, like, it was a brand new program started up program, a lot of stuff was just like, if anything went wrong it was never said to my face, but it was said to everybody else's face, well, it is just because of his lifestyle choices. That is why that does not work in the classroom or why this did not work in the school. It made me go back and think to myself, like, Oh. My. God! What am I doing wrong? {yelling} What is wrong? Like, what is this? And kind of, like, made me go back and self-evaluate.

George says that "my head of discipline was a homophobic asshole, is the nicest way to put it". George is a calm and mild-mannered person. The colorful language he uses seemed off character for him. Therefore, he meant the description that he provided.

George was not thriving at his last school. Sam agrees with George. Sam said his students were not homophobic, but his teaching peers were more hesitant to accept the LGBTQIA+ community. He shares earnestly:

A lot more homophobic rhetoric came from the staff than from the students. From our older staff, who are very much old Christian-type staff, it was not anything terrible, and I do not want to say it was like everyone was saying, "You're going

to Hell” or any of that kind of stuff. But it was more of the mindset that we disagree with being gay.

Tyler may explain homophobic teachers the best. Tyler states with brutal honesty:

What really was heartbreaking for me as an educator was when you go to the teachers’ lounge and hear teachers talk about gay students, and not in a positive light. And it really bothered me. And it is like you got it to me. My reflection on being an educator is that too many people in education should not be in education. They did not get in for the right reasons.

As a closeted gay agriculture teacher, hearing this rhetoric from his colleagues may have hindered his ability to thrive.

Other LGBTQIA+ teachers

Several of the participants belong to LGBTQIA+ groups that support their identity and careers as teachers. Through these organizations, the gay men who belong to these alliances feel they can be themselves without hiding their identity. Five of the twelve men belong to groups on social media that support their sexuality. Harry states:

Social media groups have helped me know that other people like me exist. As you are saying, this thesis helps to explain. Several Ag teachers are openly gay and teaching and doing great. And that is an inspiration to me, and I am elated to see it.

Knowing that there are other LGBTQIA+ teachers may help the participants thrive.

Harry expresses that there are lesbian teachers at his school. Harry states, “We have other staff members here that are lesbian. So, it is part of the culture here”. He told the researcher that two of them are engaged, and “they come to school together”.

Additionally, David explains that there are several LGBTQIA+ teachers at his school and that there are several gay and transgender students. He states, “Three [LGBTQIA+] teachers that are out in our school. I have multiple gay and trans students as well”. Harry and David both explain how other LGBTQIA+ teachers are thriving in their

communities. Additionally, Troy states, “The student teacher that I have next year is actually LGBTQ”. Therefore, rural LGBTQIA+ teachers may be helping each other to thrive. Furthermore, George currently works across the hall from another gay man. When he first started, the other teacher told him, “You’re not alone”. Teachers supporting teachers that belong to the LGBTQIA+ community may explain why peer support was the second highest TRS score.

Agricultural education profession and LGBTQIA+ identities

Throughout the interviews, several men explained the history of agricultural education and the recognition of the LGBTQIA+ identities. Harry explains this theme exceptionally well. Harry states in detail:

Historically agriculture education has been the good ol' boys club. Agriculture educators pretend that they do not know about the good ol' boys club. The good ol' boys club is retiring left and right. We have noticed a shift in acceptance. It is like now agriculture teachers are either women or gay men. The number of gay male teachers in the state is high. So as far as the profession. It is not. Being gay is continuously growing to be less of an issue in the profession.

Harry explains how being a gay man is becoming more accepting in the agricultural education profession. As for the “good ol’ boy club”, Harry describes individuals that are not as accepting of his sexuality. However, Harry also explains how most of his friends are agriculture teachers that support him. By having the perception placed by the “good ol’ boy club” may hinder personal competence and thriving for some of the participants. John further explains Harry’s remarks. John and the researcher discussed how this thesis was going to help teachers. He shares:

We started this conversation off, and you were saying, hopefully, that we put out something that rising teacher can find, read what we put out maybe and see find discover allies because as gay men, we belong here. And I think that that was that was part of finding people who I knew would support me and would have my back. And I certainly have that now.

Having a support system that understands who he is as an individual provided a greater understanding of being a gay man in agricultural education. Understanding himself and coming to terms with being gay played a pivotal part in John's life.

Schools supporting gay agricultural educators

Several of the men state that regardless of their sexual orientation, their school's administration supports their agricultural science departments. Freddie states, "No matter what, it's an extremely supportive community, we're a giant family". Harry shares a similar view. Harry states, "The school district puts on like LGBTQ seminars and whatnot, that you can go to, and it counts as professional development". Furthermore, Harry has moved up the hierarchy of his school system and has become the department head. The principal of his current school supports him in the decisions that he makes; therefore, helping him to thrive in his career. Some of the teachers speak of their peers that they teach with in their schools and how their words of encouragement help them to thrive in their programs. David tells the researcher a story:

One night, my principal texted me and said, 'what are you doing tonight?' And I said, 'I'm watching TV staying at home'. She goes, 'well, we are heading to a concert. And there are three other girls, let us roll'. When you get to the point where you've built that authentic relationship, how are they supporting you personally, also, you know, had removed school aside, and how are you being supported personally as a human being outside of the high school. My school has done an outstanding job of making me feel appreciated. My principal has told me that we are grateful you are here. And even if that means professionally, outside of the school, professionally in the school, or personally outside the school, we want to celebrate the fact that you are here, and you are doing the best for our community and our kids.

David's principal is making him feel appreciated in his current role. David's smile on his face while telling this story helped the researcher to see what thriving looked like on the participants.

George's stories provided great insight surrounding school personnel's perceptions of the LGBTQIA+ community. At one of his early teaching jobs, he shared his identity with one of his teaching peers. However, his peer decided to share this information with others. He recalls how this made him feel:

Pretty crappy. You are pretty, let down. I definitely felt betrayed. It was extremely unprofessional. It helped me reaffirm how that school district chose to conduct business at that point. And it was at that point that I made up my mind. I want to work at McDonald's before I continue to work for that school.

Throughout his interview, George speaks about how he was treated unjustly at his first teaching job. Fortunately, now he has an administration that supports him. George states with happiness, "My administration, like, my principal, is very much that you're going to respect my teachers, you're not going to beat up my staff". George is at a point in his career where he is thriving.

Ricky explains how his state has a probationary period of five years. In this period, the school can fire teachers without a legitimate reason. Therefore, Ricky is fearful that he may lose his job because of his sexual orientation. Ricky states with hesitance:

My students know where I stand on issues surrounding the LGBTQ community, but they do not know officially that I am gay. And my biggest reservation with that is it is such a rural community, and it is not widely accepted. And in [State], when it is your first five years of being a teacher, you are known as a probationary teacher. And what that means is the board, and the school administration can decide not to renew your contract at any time. And they do not have to give you a reason. So, it is part of me is just afraid that, if I were fully open and the community was not supportive of it, you know, they could potentially not renew my contract. And they do not have to give me a valid reason why they are not choosing to do that. So, nothing says they did not get rid of me because of my involvement in the LGBTQ community. But I have no proof that that is why they would have gotten rid of me.

Through Ricky's vulnerability in telling his thoughts, Ricky is having a challenging time being a gay man at his school. For this reason, Ricky has had to overcome barriers at his school to thrive.

Michael recalls a time that his high school principal did not know how to support him in one situation. Michael tells this story:

I had a young man in my class who identified themselves as gay. And he was actually sending text messages to the other girls. And he was saying how he would like to take me in the bathroom and do very explicit stuff with me. And so, I actually had to end up I, the girl gave me her phone, and I took it to the office. And the kid never said anything to me. But I went to the office, and I showed the principal who at the time was, like, a 57-year-old man, and he just sat there, and I go, how would you treat this if I was a woman? What would you do? So, the kid got brought down and talked to and you know, that, you know, this is not appropriate. The student never did it again.

Clay shares a similar experience:

I have a great story for you. About four years ago, this student that I am going to speak about is now a senior. So, it would have been four years ago, and he was a freshman. I had a student, it was raining, and I was in my classroom, working on some stuff, and the student wanted to come to get out of the rain. And I knew if I let one student into my classroom, I would have to let 500 other people into my classroom because it was raining outside. But we do have facilities on our campus where students can get out of the rain when it is raining. And this was one of those days where you just needed to be in your classroom by yourself. There are those days we have them, and we need them. And this was one of those moments, and it was my lunch. I need to be by myself. Please give me my space. While the student proceeded to yell out, mister, please let me in your room, and I will suck your cock. And I was like, oh, oh, I called the principal right away, I shared what had just happened with the student, and the student was immediately removed from our program immediately removed. And I was so thankful that the school district handled it the way they did with that student. I mean, it was a male to a male sexual favor. And the fact that they removed the student from my classroom without any meeting or doing anything comforted me. And so, regarding that situation, hands down an excellent way to handle it.

Michael and Clay have school support, and they feel safe in their teaching environments.

Therefore, thriving is more likely to take place.

The community support surrounding gay agriculture teachers

All the men interviewed mentioned the importance of community supporting their agricultural programs. Regardless of sexual orientation, the men stated that their current communities support the participants. Adam says, “There are individuals within my school district community that are unbelievably supportive that without them, I would not be still teaching. I have been completely burned out.” Adam explains how he is thriving by having the support of the community.

Several teachers explain how the students spark conversations with their families and friends to promote the program. Harry states, “The community is open [about my sexuality] to begin with. It really was not much of an issue. Because kids believe I am a badass, and they know I do not care”. As Harry states, being a “badass” has helped him recruit students to his program, and the positive perception of his program allows the community to see how he is thriving.

Conversely, George explains how his school board did not support him at one school, and they decided not to renew his contract. George states, “My second year, board support got weird. Many of the board members are very conservative, they probably have Donald Trump on their mantle kind of deal. You wonder, was it my sexuality”. The school board made George question if he had a place at that school. Therefore, this could be a factor that limited his success. Tyler shares the same feelings as George. Tyler explains that if he came out in the rural town he taught in, he would have to seek another job. He states, “I always figured, if I came out, I would be looking for a new job in my town”.

Students’ parents’ perception of the LGBTQIA+ community. Several of the gay male teachers share that the parents of the students that they teach do not approve of

their sexual orientation. Harry states, “I have had like some parents that like, don’t like *it*”. Harry worked for another school before working at his current school. Legally, the school could not fire Harry because of his sexuality, but parents of his students would be “nitpicky” of his teaching because of his sexual orientation. He explains to the researcher that he believes that his sexuality is the reason as to why he was let go. Harry states, “I definitely think [my sexuality is] ultimately probably why I got let go from my last high school, honestly”. He explains that the parent’s perception of him is why the administration had to let him go. To conclude Harry’s experience with students’ parents, he told the researcher that this experience was “very, very, very stressful”. Harry’s stress that he depicts was shared among multiple participants and could impede one’s ability to thrive.

When deciding to come out to his students, he feared that the students’ parents’ perceptions could disrupt the flow of the FFA chapter. John forthright states:

I was concerned about the level of participation in our FFA chapter. Rural settings and folks accepted me for who they believed me to be [a straight man]. And I certainly had a fear, and fear is the right word, but only is it a fear that if I had shared my identity with my students, my sexuality with my students, I was forthcoming at the time, that many families would have said, well, I am not allowing my son or my daughter to go on an overnight trip with this guy here. Because of what could happen, I will not allow that teacher to transport my child in his car back home from practice.

Public perception of his identity limited John in sharing his identity with his community.

David recalls when he wore a pair of orange Sperry shoes to an eighth-grade preview night to promote his program. David said that the moms of these young gay men stated, “We will take him”. The parents of these children felt that their children would feel safe in David’s classroom because he was open about his sexuality. Similar to David, Clay tells a story where parents in his community support him. He states:

I also have some parents who, interestingly enough, just had a recent Greenhand Degree ceremony. And one of my favorite students. And I know I am one of his favorite teachers, as I found that out, according to his mothers, and I just said mothers because there are two moms. And I did not know. I had absolutely no idea, and I would have never guessed it. But mom and dad did get divorced. And mom did decide to find another female partner. And I think that is another reason students connect so well with me because he has gone through a severe life change from having a mother and a father divorce to going to a father and two mothers and listening and trying to understand how that impacted him.

By having a student with two mothers as guardians, Clay can connect with this student.

Clay explains how he is helping this child understand how his family dynamic is changing. Clay is aiding this child and is thriving in the process because he has a personal connection to this student.

Research Objective 5: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *family cohesion* element of thriving?

Every man interviewed discussed how their family unit contributed to their overall thriving. The mean TRS ($m = 3.70$) was the second-lowest recorded. However, the men accredited the individuals they interact with daily to their overall success. Not everyone shared the same family dynamics; therefore, the researcher only saw one major theme: (1) support systems for gay agricultural educators.

Support systems for gay agriculture educators

The men identified their support systems as their parents, significant others, and friends. The individuals that uplifted and encouraged the men to succeed helped the participants to thrive in their careers.

Parents. Parents play a significant role in the coming out process for these men. Parents who support the men after they come out thrive more than the closeted men or the

men whose parents disapproved of their identity. Several men had positive reactions to their coming out, and others had negative ones.

David discusses how his father was an agriculture teacher, and how he always knew he could rely on him to ensure that he had a place in FFA. David states, “I pay tribute to that because my dad was my ag teacher. So, I knew I always had my dad”.

Michael explains that he can talk to his mom about anything. He states, “So I just talk to her about pretty much everything”. Michael’s mother accepts him for who is, and he talks to his mother about life. Then, there is Tyler. Tyler’s parents are the only family members of his that are aware of his sexual orientation. Tyler explains the unconditional love his parents have for him:

My parents are accepting. We do not talk about [me being gay] much. Especially my dad. He knows. And I know he loves me, but it is just one of those things he does not feel comfortable talking about it, so we just do not discuss it. My mom loves me.

Tyler’s father does not discuss his son’s sexuality, but he does love Tyler. Tyler cares for his parents, and they help him to thrive.

Sam explains how his family is everything, but they do not necessarily agree with him being gay. He is not open with his parents. He shares with hesitation, “Because of still living at home, I had to figure out how to survive at home. I stayed in the area because my family was there, and my family is everything to me”. John shares a similar story to Sam. John’s mother had a challenging time accepting John as a gay man. John with sincere emotion states:

When I was in high school, I recalled a conversation with my mother. I did not really date anybody in high school, girls, or boys; I was not really in the dating scene. A lot of my close friends were girls. And my mom asked the question, why are all your friends girls? Why do you have so many friends that are girls? Why don’t you ever date anyone? I told her that I did not know. I do not know. I do not

know. And then, one day, before even realizing what my sexuality was, I was probably a freshman or a sophomore in high school, she started that line of questioning again. And I spat back. Maybe I'm gay mom, and she got so angry and said, you better not be. And I said, 'What if I am?' So, it was like an argument. It was not even a serious conversation. And it was not anything that I was serious about at the time. I was too young to fully embrace my identity or even figure it out. But when I said, what if I am, she said, I will disown you. And so, I think that that set some fear in the back of my mind as well. Since then, she and I have had that conversation, and we are on good terms.

Significant others. In the LGBTQIA+ community, spouses, or someone that one is in a committed relationship with is referred to as a significant other. Harry explains how his fiancé is going to school to become an agriculture teacher. He states, "He is going to school to become an ag teacher too. So, he has observed our department and some of our activities". The school faculty and Harry's students know that he has a fiancé. Adam shares a similar story about how he found his future husband through agricultural education. He states, "Through [becoming an agriculture educator], I met my future husband, that is also an ag teacher. And everything fell into place". Then, Michael explains how his husband is a significant supporter. Michael states, "My husband is my big one. He always must be my sounding board. So, he listens to whenever I must whine or cry about it."

David explains that not having a partner is not hindering him, but it affects his ability to thrive. He states:

Finding someone to spend the rest of my life with is a huge problem for me, and not because I feel like it's going to ruin my day or make things worse. Still, I think we all want that we all want that opportunity to feel loved and accepted, not just by like the general population, but by one person, specifically. And so as I've worked my way through life, or my job, there are days that it impacts me, there are days that it does affect my job, because like, you know, you go through a breakup or you know, that certain someone you've been talking to just kind of isn't their usual self. There are days that it impacts my job, how I thrive, and how I interact with kids.

Friends. Most of these men state that their friends are their greatest support system. For Harry, he discusses how his co-teacher helps him to thrive. Throughout his interview, he speaks highly of his co-teacher and how they support each other. He states:

I protect her because I don't want her to lose her job. And I also don't want her to get burnt out. And I do not want her to say, screw teaching, I'm over it, and I'm going to work in the industry. I take on more so that like she doesn't feel overwhelmed. We do work so well together.

For Ricky, he explains how his state assigns first year agriculture teachers with a mentor.

This mentor is someone that also teaches agricultural education. He states:

In [State], when you become a first-year ag teacher, you're assigned a mentor, and they're an ag teacher in a neighboring school that helps you out. And so, my mentor and I are like terrific friends. We talk all the time. And then, she was assigned to another new Ag teacher in our area to mentor. So, like, we're a whole little family. We call her our mom, saying that we are her little ducklings. So, we're all very close friends, and I rely heavily on them for support.

For Harry and Ricky, having friends in the profession has helped these men thrive.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

Restatement of the Problem

As schools across the United States become more diverse, the need for more diverse teachers is needed (Banks et al., 2001). Unfortunately, marginalized groups are not seeking careers in education because these individuals do not feel welcomed in the white heteronormative teaching profession (Yoder & Mattheis, 2016). Therefore, researchers should start by listening to the stories of teachers that are underrepresented in our society. Specifically looking at why they decided to teach agricultural education, and why they teach and live in rural America.

Research Objectives

The following research objectives guided the scope of the study:

RO1: What elements of thriving (spiritual influence, personal competence, peer support, family cohesion) allow gay men to succeed in agricultural education?

RO2: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *spiritual influence* element of thriving?

RO3: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *personal competence* element of thriving?

RO4: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *peer support* element of thriving?

RO5: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the *family cohesion* element of thriving?

Summary of Research Findings with Conclusions and Discussions

Gay male agricultural educators are resilient and are thriving in the classroom, but gay men have their own unique challenges to overcome to thrive in the profession.

Spiritual influence, personal competence, peer support, and family cohesion are pivotal in the understanding of how these men thrive in agricultural education. The researcher has provided the reader with the themes that emerged from the interviews and provided conclusions and dialogue to help summarize the findings.

RO1: What elements of thriving (spiritual influence, personal competence, peer support, family cohesion) allow gay men to thrive in agricultural science education?

Through the responses from the teachers' resilience scale, personal competence ($m = 3.98$; $SD = 0.48$) outranked the other three elements. Peer support ($m = 3.88$; $SD = 0.67$) was second, followed by family cohesion ($m = 3.70$; $SD = 0.92$), with spiritual influence placing last ($m = 3.50$; $SD = 0.65$). Through the quantitative data, the researcher holistically analyzed each of the twelve interviews from the case study. Each element of the teachers' reliance scale was then holistically analyzed through a case study, and conclusions were made.

RO2: How do gay male agriscience teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the spiritual influence element of thriving?

Most of the men did not contribute their success to spiritual influence, but a few men did accredit their thriving to their faith.

Religious upbringing and the impact religion has on gay men's lives.

Ironically, having a religious upbringing allowed some gay men to become more resilient later in life, not because of their love for faith, but how the participants felt attending church and having to suppress their identity due to their faith. Throughout sermons, the

participants explained how identifying as gay is a sin, and that identifying as gay is condemning. Hearing that growing up has psychological consequences (Barton, 2010). It is imperative to understand that one cannot simply pray the gay away, and heterosexual individuals who participate in and applaud saying that gay men are going to Hell is committing a microaggression (Nadal et al., 2011). Regardless of how many times an individual who feels uncomfortable with LGBTQIA+ identity say, “I do not agree with your lifestyle” or “do not say gay”, people cannot change who they are attracted to at a given time (Marshall & Hernandez, 2012).

Conversely, several men stated that their faith is something that no one can take away from the participants. By utilizing resiliency, the men who shared that their faith plays a significant role in their lives allow the gay men to be resilient (Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013). Through these conversations, the researcher concludes that religion is a sensitive topic to discuss with rural agriculture teachers because of the complexities of organized religion.

Teaching in traditional Christian conservative environments. Some research participants expressed difficulties teaching in traditional Christian conservative environments and not connecting with conventional families. Not having the ability to relate with individuals impacts resiliency by creating an additional barrier for gay men to overcome (Hash & Rogers, 2013). The researcher found it captivating that the men admitted to being a valuable addition to the rural Christian conservative environments they serve. Therefore, the openly gay male agriculture teachers provide students with diverse perspectives compared to the lived experiences of rural heterosexual teachers and communities. Research shows that the more exposure students have at an early age to

diverse perspectives, the more successful they will be at interacting with individuals with various backgrounds from their own (Keengwe, 2010). The men thrive in their communities while helping their students understand that people comprehend information in various ways.

Hinderance of politics on gay men in agricultural education.

Politics and religion are interwoven in the findings because most men interviewed combined the two topics when discussing spiritual influence. Thus, the researcher concludes that politics is hindering men from thriving. Contrarily, the gay men who spoke of the challenges that politics provide show that they are more resilient because they know how to navigate the political climate surrounding education, identity, and policy.

RO3: How do gay male agriscience teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the personal competence element of thriving?

Personal competence provided critical insight on how gay men in agricultural education thrive. The men's sense of self helped the researcher to draw conclusions.

Being the good gay agriculture teacher. Gay agriculture teachers must be more than good teachers. Several men expressed that their students do not regard their educator's identity as a negative trait. Although, several participants explained how identifying as a gay man led the participants to believe that they were not doing their jobs adequately. Therefore, participants explained that they felt they constantly needed to prove that they were the right candidate for the job. By overcoming the mindset of being a good teacher, gay agriculture teachers become more resilient. Demonstrating that they are the best educators helps these men subconsciously thrive (Hutchins & Rainbolt,

2016). Gay men are more intentional in their decisions than their heterosexual peers in the classroom because of their identity.

Deciding to come out as gay while being an educator. Gay men who keep their identity a secret have more depressive symptoms than gay men who are open about their sexual orientation (Fingerhut et al., 2010). The depressive state is harmful and diminishes one's mental health (Burgess et al., 2007).

Research has aided in describing how one's mental health is correlated with the intricacies of the coming out process, which impacts resiliency (Kosciw et al., 2014). Concurrently, coming out and its impact interferes with one's ability to thrive. There is a stark contrast between the closeted and open gay male agriculture educators. The closeted men explained a fear that once they came out, they would no longer be the *agriculture educator* but the *gay agriculture educator*. There is a dread of being outed. Contrarily, the openly gay men's vulnerability to being out allows the participants to thrive, and there is no fear of being outed.

The need to assimilate to thrive in agriculture education. The researcher felt a need to explain straight passing and how gay men with straight passing are more privileged than their more feminine and flamboyant peers. The pressure to assimilate hinders one's ability to thrive (Halsey et al., 2020). Assimilating into heteronormative rural society will not help the LGBTQIA+ community to succeed in these environments. Regardless of how "gay" someone comes across, there is no need for an individual to assimilate.

Loving their jobs and students. Each gay male agriculture educator varied in lived experiences. Each man has his unique perceptions of being gay. Some had lived

experiences that contributed to the participants' ability to thrive. At the same time, others had stories that explained how gay agriculture educators are resilient. Overall, gay agriculture teachers stay in agriculture education because they love their jobs and students.

Being more empathetic and sympathetic towards others. For educators, empathy and sympathy are central to sociological thinking while interacting with students (Rockwell et al., 2019). The gay men interviewed expressed how they have more empathy and sympathy because of their identity. As children, the gay agricultural educators recall how adults treated the participants while figuring out their identity. The experiences growing up had a lasting impact on each man's life - assisting them to become more empathetic and sympathetic with individuals who share similar challenges in belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community or belong to a marginalized group (LaSala, 2010). The men are more resilient because of their challenges while coming out or identifying as gay.

Students supporting their gay agriculture teacher. Gay agriculture teachers may face unique hardships with their identity and teaching. For the educators, they stay in the profession because of their students. The teachers stated that the students did not care how the men identified if they knew that the teacher cared about their well-being and learning—the teacher recalled stories of how their students helped the participants thrive. Adolescents are resilient (Hauser et al., 2008), and their gay agriculture educator is resilient too.

RO4: How do gay male agriscience teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the peer support element of thriving?

Identified school support prohibiting homophobic rhetoric. The men shared that most of their schools have consequences for students who participate in homophobic rhetoric. The men recall when their students called the participants a faggot. Being called derogatory terms has the potential to psychological harm gay men who constantly hear these terms that are directed towards their identity (Slaatten et al., 2015). As the participants explain, by the school disciplining students who use homophobic rhetoric, they feel respected as a gay man in their rural school.

Working with homophobic colleagues. Most of the participants felt supported at their rural schools. The support stemmed from the men doing their jobs adequately and fulfilling their duties as a teacher. Once the researcher included sexual orientation, the conversations changed. The participants explained how their coworkers were homophobic. The gay agriculture teachers stated that their students were not as homophobic as their coworkers. Teachers and other adults do not understand the severity of how harmful homophobic rhetoric is to the LGBTQIA+ community (Poteat et al., 2019). One of the participants explained how teachers are entering the profession for the wrong reasons, alluding those teachers are not prepared to educate populations that vary from their own. For the closeted gay agriculture teachers, their homophobic coworkers are adding an extra stressor in the coming out process. Through these interactions, the participants become more resilient.

Other LGBTQIA+ teachers. Finding validation from other LGBTQIA+ teachers has helped gay agriculture educators thrive. Multiple participants discussed how belonging to a social media group allows a space to see they are not alone. Additionally, several men discussed how they are not the only LGBTQIA+ community member at their

rural school. Having other community members at their schools they can turn to for guidance has aided the educators tremendously.

Agricultural education profession and LGBTQIA+ identities. The men explain how the “good ol’ boys club” mentality hinders their ability to thrive. In their rural communities, the men are becoming more resilient by overcoming the “good ol’ boys club” mindset (Poulin et al., 2019). To combat the “good ol’ boys club” homophobic ways, the men appreciate seeing individuals who question the social norms of the heteronormative communities that they serve.

Schools supporting gay agriculture educators. The men overwhelmingly reveal that their administration supports the participants’ work that they complete at their schools. Some men shared the reservations that they had as gay agriculture teachers. School administration must understand how to serve their LGBTQIA+ educators. Young male students who are gay may have an attraction toward the gay teacher. Therefore, it is imperative to know how to discipline students accordingly once these acts occur.

Probationary periods in education may help dictate if educators are serving their students adequately, but it harms LGBTQIA+ educators. Probationary periods cause severe stress (Bates et al., 2010), and early career LGBTQIA+ educators do not need the added pressures of probationary periods on top of the added stressors of their identities. Men who teach at schools with probationary periods are resilient in proving their teaching abilities as gay educators.

The community supporting gay agriculture teachers. Community support is imperative for agriculture educators (Pratt et al., 2021). Therefore, gay agriculture educators agreed that having community support is essential for a successful classroom.

There were mixed reactions regarding the LGBTQIA+ community. Parents of LGBTQIA+ youth believe that their child will thrive with a gay agriculture teacher. On the other hand, several men describe leaving the classroom because of their identity. Through understanding how to navigate the community's social pressures, gay men become more resilient (Bartone, 2017).

RO5: How do gay male agriculture teachers contribute their longitudinal success in the classroom to the family cohesion element of thriving?

All the gay male agriculture educators discussed the importance of family and friends.

Support systems. Parents, significant others, and friends feed into the support systems for the gay men that teach agriculture education. One's family's system and social support can offer a sense of protection that aids in resiliency (Black & Lobo, 2008), hence why these men thrive in education.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Future Research

The researcher recommends that additional research surrounding the LGBTQIA+ community should include interviewing and surveying heterosexual agriculture science teachers and analyze their perceptions of the LGBTQIA+ community. Through this work, it will aid in the understanding of the biases and misunderstandings that heterosexual people have toward the LGBTQIA+ community. Additionally, theories and conceptual frameworks including, but not limited to, the theory of planned behavior, theory of intersectionality, theory of hegemony, masculinity, queer theory, metronormativity, heteronormativity, and urbanormativity, should be researched and used to see how researchers and practitioners can enhance behaviors and perceptions of preservice and

veteran teachers' acumens on topics surrounding the LGBTQIA+ community. Gay men are not the only members of the LGBTQIA+ community; therefore, additional research surrounding other queer populations must occur in agriculture education.

Further research into masculinity and power dynamics within agriculture science education is needed. The parameters of this work did not focus on those areas, but the literature describes in detail how these constructs impact the LGBTQIA+ community. For this work to take place, the researcher encourages individuals to work in school systems to understand how these two dynamics work together in a classroom setting. Therefore, it is recommended to research these topics and how they impact the profession and high school classrooms. The researcher also recommends continuing the work of Murray et al. (2020) states in their research to help all the identities within the LGBTQIA+ community within agricultural science education.

Further psychological research is needed to analyze the distress that governmental legislation has on educators. Several of the participants explained in this study how they feel pushed out of education because of current policies that are being passed in certain states. Therefore, there may be a correlation between teacher retention and governmental policy.

The agricultural industry is homophobic (Carrington et al., 2014). Therefore, additional research is needed to help combat homophobia in the current work. Members of the LGBTQIA+ community must feel welcomed in agriculture to help sustain the growing population.

Recommendations for Practice

An estimated 3.5% of adults in the United States identify within the LGBTQIA+ community. That implies that about nine million Americans belong to the community which is equivalent to the entire population of New Jersey (Gates, 2021). Therefore, those nine million adults were children once, and most of them went through the American public school system. Agriculture science education belongs to that system who is educating the adults that belong to the LGBTQIA+ community.

Agriscience education is a small profession; therefore, people talk to one another. The researcher encourages teachers to understand one another before gossiping about people. Gossiping may cost individuals jobs. Radically, this may increase the likelihood of outing someone that is closeted. As these men shared, not all rural communities are excepting of LGBTQIA+ teachers. When someone decides to share their identity, it is not the job of the receiver to share that news. With that said, teacher education programs must teach their preservice teachers topics surrounding LGBTQIA+ identities. Through the current research, spiritual influence may hinder the teachings of these topics, but it is essential because teachers will, not when, educate students that belong to the LGBTQIA+ community.

The researcher is not fond of advocating for the empty promises that professional development provides to their attendees. Therefore, everyone who plans to teach, regardless of subject, must take a course that explains one's bias. Everyone has biases (Czopp & Monteith, 2003), but it is essential that teachers are cognizant of what their biases are, and how to work to combat them. The researcher recommends developing a curriculum that aids in this process that could help to alleviate bias in classrooms.

Extensive training on multiculturalism must occur for all preservice educators surrounding topics on underrepresented populations. Homophobia should not be occurring in one's classroom. Therefore, teachers must ask themselves if they have the capability to serve a child that belongs to the LGBTQIA+ community before committing themselves to the teaching profession. Providing an inclusive classroom for all must be at the forefront of all educators (Lindsay, 2003).

LGBTQIA+ representation in schools is essential but tokenizing (Linley & Nguyen, 2015) needs to be monitored. It is not the responsibility of these men to educate individuals on LGBTQIA+ identities. Therefore, the researchers recommend that preservice teachers, practicing teachers, and higher education personnel attend professional development surrounding these topics. The researcher plans to develop a series of professional development that will aid in the understanding of the topics discussed in this document. He will seek guidance, but no one should feel exploited to develop a curriculum based solely on their identity. Murraray et al. (2020) has started the conversations, but the teaching must occur.

Agriculture education is on the right track, including LGBTQIA+ identities. Still, much work is to be completed to ensure that this community has a voice in this profession. The more representation that students see has the potential to encourage diverse population to help the teaching profession to become more diverse to proportionally serve students that look and relate to them (Villegas et al., 2012). Therefore, young gay men wanting to pursue a career in agriculture education must understand that they are not alone and have support.

To LGBTQIA+ agriculture educators, the researcher asks that it is time to make ourselves known to the profession. The researcher only asks if one feels safe, comfortable, and willing to take that initiative. There are limitations that LGBTQIA+ teachers face (Mayo, 2022), but students must see that LGBTQIA+ teachers are here to teach. The representation is imperative for youth to see that LGBTQIA+ populations thrive in positions of power (Dennis et al., 2019).

Gay male agriculture educators are not going anywhere soon and are here to stay. It is time to accept individuals for who they are and appreciate varying perspectives as a profession. For gay men in agricultural education, the researcher recommends calling homophobic rhetoric, facial expressions, and degrading comments that make one feel small out. Use this time as a teaching opportunity.

Final Remarks

Please allow the researcher to speak in first person for the remainder of this document.

I love agriculture education. I would not have spent the last two years studying a topic that is seen as “controversial” if I did not love my career. There will always be homophobic people in our society, but that should not limit me to seek a career as an educator. I will never know what it is like to be a straight man, but I hope that if you, the reader, and I ever interact or have interacted, you appreciate me enough to love me, for me.

I want to leave the reader with one final story. I hope this story helps every heterosexual person understand the love these gay men have for agriculture education. Tyler, with conviction and emotion, states:

I spent the biggest part of my life in the closet. And I'm glad to say things are changing where people do not have to live closeted. I'm not young anymore. I do not have a partner. So that's something I have lost. I gave it up for my profession. I would not say I like to live in the past. But something I have always thought about is if I had come out as a gay man at an earlier age, I wondered if I would have gone into agriculture education. Because I went straight out of high school wanting to be an agriculture teacher. And that was my major all the way through college. I did not change my major. And I did love it. I liked preparing for college, the college classes. Still, I always wondered if I would have acknowledged that I was gay in college or before college, would I have become an educator knowing that I probably would not be able to be out? And this was a question you cannot answer. I had inklings then when I was in college of being gay. But of course, I was not out. And I am so proud to see that things are changing at a snail's pace, but at least it's changing. And I hope everyone looks back at queer history and the sacrifices that those who came before us made so we can belong here and be more open about our sexuality. And so, you really, I think everybody needs to take that into perspective. We live in a phenomenal time right now; hopefully, it'll even get better. But I want to know if I could go back in time if I had chosen to become an agriculture educator. Many gay men that I have interacted with go into healthcare, where being gay is more accepted. Different fields are more accepting compared to agriculture education. It is tough to think about, but I hope my students will remember me as the teacher who always cared.

As a gay man that lives in a heteronormative world. *I. Am. Tired.* I am tired of tiptoeing around people's ignorant sensibilities. hooks (2003) states, "Love will always move us away from domination in all its forms. Love will always challenge and change us. This is the heart of the matter" (p.137). This is the love I seek from my educators and the love I give to my students. All students deserve teachers who genuinely care about their identity, personality, and interests.

Sexuality does not discriminate against race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, ability, location, or gender. As educators, we do not know all the hardships each child faces. Kindness should be at the forefront of our teaching. It is *not* the teacher's job to judge their students, but instead to listen and understand. I want teachers to teach with love and respect for their students.

Having lived a life in the closet for too long, I am committed to opening doors for others. It is not fair that others get to predetermine my worth based on my sexual orientation. My optimistic side wishes people could be kinder and more accepting of individuals that vary from themselves. Realistically, there are systems in place that do not allow kindness to be the only solution due to white, heteronormative power dynamics. The rural, white, straight narrative is changing, and it is time to stand up and talk about it. I love rural America, but folks, it is time for us to educate ourselves on including diverse populations in the classroom. My demeanor does not allow me to be attacking, but I can passionately write a thesis that may get people talking.

As a privileged, white, male, cisgender graduate student, I am thankful for the past two years to study a topic that is personal to me. I struggled with my sexuality due to my environment, but my perspectives on life have changed through this work. Life is too short to live in fear of what others think of you. Therefore, I must thank my village. There are no words to express my gratitude for the village that I have gained throughout my life. My village may be small, but it is mighty.

I want to take this time to thank my research participants. The men that shared their stories with me have my respect and gratitude. There is not a universal queer experience. The sympathy and empathy that the openly gay men had for the closeted individuals gave me hope. I hope that the future will be brighter for the next generation of LGBTQIA+ teachers and the impact that they will have on their communities. Writing this thesis has been an honor, and I hope that I did you justice by telling your stories.

Finally, to the queer rural youth struggling with their identity, know that you are not alone. I hear and see you. I wish I could take the pain away that you may be facing,

but know you are worth it. If you question if this profession is for you, know that some fantastic LGBTQIA+ community members will help you on this journey. You may have to climb some mountains to be successful, but know that we are in your corner, and we want you to teach agriculture education. Haters will hate, but as long as this crazy ag teacher with bold fashion choices and loud personality is around, know that you will have an advocate. Please be so unapologetically yourself that it empowers others to do the same. Honestly, Lady Gaga said it best, 'Cause you were born this way, baby! Love Always, Caleb.

Fine

APPENDICES

IRB Approval



XP Initial Review

Approval Ends:
11/7/2022

IRB Number:
70739

TO: Caleb Hickman, Community and Leadership Development
Community & Leadership Develop



FROM: Chairperson/Vice Chairperson
Nonmedical Institutional Review Board (IRB)

SUBJECT: Approval of Protocol

DATE: 11/9/2021

On 11/8/2021, the Nonmedical Institutional Review Board approved your protocol entitled:

"We Belong Here": The Resiliency and Thriving of Gay Men in Agricultural Science Education

Approval is effective from 11/8/2021 until 11/7/2022 and extends to any consent/assent form, cover letter, and/or phone script. If applicable, the IRB approved consent/assent document(s) to be used when enrolling subjects can be found on the approved application's landing page in E-IRB. [Note, subjects can only be enrolled using consent/assent forms which have a valid "IRB Approval" stamp unless special waiver has been obtained from the IRB.] Prior to the end of this period, you will be sent a Continuation Review (CR)/Annual Administrative Review (AAR) request which must be completed and submitted to the Office of Research Integrity so that the protocol can be reviewed and approved for the next period.

In implementing the research activities, you are responsible for complying with IRB decisions, conditions and requirements. The research procedures should be implemented as approved in the IRB protocol. It is the principal investigator's responsibility to ensure any changes planned for the research are submitted for review and approval by the IRB prior to implementation. Protocol changes made without prior IRB approval to eliminate apparent hazards to the subject(s) should be reported in writing immediately to the IRB. Furthermore, discontinuing a study or completion of a study is considered a change in the protocol's status and therefore the IRB should be promptly notified in writing.

For information describing investigator responsibilities after obtaining IRB approval, download and read the document "[PI Guidance to Responsibilities, Qualifications, Records and Documentation of Human Subjects Research](#)" available in the online Office of Research Integrity's [IRB Survival Handbook](#). Additional information regarding IRB review, federal regulations, and institutional policies may be found through [ORI's web site](#). If you have questions, need additional information, or would like a paper copy of the above mentioned document, contact the Office of Research Integrity at 859-257-9428.

Teachers' Resilience Scale

	Items	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1.	I am able to adapt to change – Personal Competence	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Sometimes fate or God can help me overcome my challenges – Spiritual Influence	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Sometimes I believe things happen for a reason – Spiritual Influence	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Under pressure, I am able to focus and think clearly – Personal Competence	1	2	3	4	5
5.	I prefer to take the lead in problem solving – Personal Competence	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I am not easily discouraged by failure – Personal Competence	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I think of myself as strong person – Personal Competence	1	2	3	4	5
8.	If necessary, I can make unpopular or difficult decisions that affect other people – Personal Competence	1	2	3	4	5
9.	I can handle unpleasant feelings, such as anger or fear – Personal Competence	1	2	3	4	5
10.	Sometimes I have to act on a hunch – Spiritual Influence	1	2	3	4	5
11.	I like challenges – Personal Competence	1	2	3	4	5
12.	I work hard to attain my goals – Personal Competence	1	2	3	4	5
13.	In my workplace I enjoy being together with other people – Peer Support	1	2	3	4	5
14.	New friendships are something I make easily in my workplace – Peer Support	1	2	3	4	5
15.	Meeting new people in my workplace is something I am good at – Peer Support	1	2	3	4	5
16.	In my workplace When I am with others I easily laugh – Peer Support	1	2	3	4	5
17.	My family's understanding of what is important in life is very similar to mine – Family Cohesion	1	2	3	4	5
18.	I feel very happy with my family – Family Cohesion	1	2	3	4	5
19.	My family is characterized by healthy coherence – Family Cohesion	1	2	3	4	5
20.	In difficult periods my family keeps a positive outlook on the future – Family Cohesion	1	2	3	4	5
21.	Facing other people, our family acts loyal towards one another – Family Cohesion	1	2	3	4	5

22.	In my family we like to do things together – Family Cohesion	1	2	3	4	5
23.	I can discuss personal issues with my peers – Peer Support	1	2	3	4	5
24.	The bonds among my peers and me are strong – Peer Support	1	2	3	4	5
25.	I get support from my peers – Peer Support	1	2	3	4	5
26.	When needed, I have always someone in my workplace who can help me – Peer Support	1	2	3	4	5

Case Study Interview Questions

Rapport Building Questions

1. How long have you been teaching agriculture?
2. How long have you been teaching at _____ high school?
3. What has been your biggest struggle and greatest strength in teaching?
4. What is the community support like for the agricultural education program?
5. What does it mean to you to be a mentor to your students?
6. Can you describe the community that you teach in?
7. Can you describe the school culture?

Sexuality Questions

1. Who do you share your identity with?
 - a. Which school faculty, community members, or students?
2. Are you open about your sexuality in your classroom?
 - a. If not, what is your biggest reservation?
3. Can you explain how identifying as a gay man helps you in your classroom?
4. Can you explain how identifying as a gay man hinders you in your classroom?
5. Are there any supportive clubs or organizations that you belong to surrounding your sexuality?
 - a. Are there any organizations for your students to join at the high school for LGBTQ youth?
6. Are there any other LGBTQ individuals that are out in your community?

Resiliency

1. Do you feel accepted in your school?
2. Do you feel accepted in your community?
3. Have you experienced homophobic rhetoric in your school or community? How often? Who?
4. Have you felt the need to assimilate your personality to fit the mold of your rural community?
 - a. If you have assimilated to a mold, why have you chosen to stay in the profession/community?
5. Does your school staff/administration support and/or accept you?
6. What challenges/obstacles have you overcome in your journey to be a gay agricultural science educator?

Thriving

1. What are some of your greatest achievements as an agricultural science educator?
2. Do you feel like you are thriving in your current program?
 - a. If not, what is hindering your ability to thrive?
3. What support groups do you rely on (ex. family, friends, etc.)?

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VITA

Caleb Hickman

Education

University of Kentucky, College of Agriculture, Food and Environment

Lexington, KY

M.S. in Community and Leadership Development

Expected May 2022

The Ohio State University

Columbus, OH

B.S. in Agricultural Science Education

May 2020

Professional Experience

University of Kentucky

Lexington, KY

Graduate Research Assistant

August 2021 – December 2021

University of Kentucky

Lexington, KY

Graduate Teaching Assistant

May 2020 – July 2022

National Association of Agriculture Educators

New Orleans, LA

Workshop Presenter

December 2021

Papers & Posters Presented at Conferences

“The 1619 Project”: Sparking Critical Conversation in Agricultural Education. Poster presented at American Association for Agricultural Education. National Research Conference, May 2021.

Defining Your Role: Facilitating Experiential Education. Poster presented at American Association for Agricultural Education. National Research Conference, May 2021.

Presence of Youth-Adult and Partnership in Agricultural Science Education: A Longitudinal Qualitative Study. Paper presented at American Association for Agricultural Education. National Research Conference, May 2021.

Presence of the Theory of Planned Behavior in Agricultural Science Education: A Longitudinal Study. Paper presented at the International Society for Agricultural Safety and Health Conference. International Conference, June 2021.

Picture this: Augmented Reality in the Agriculture Mechanical Classroom. Poster presented at the Southern Region American Association for Agricultural Education Conference in Feb 2022.

Closing the Gap with YAP: Utilizing YAP to Help Minimize an Achievement Gap. Poster presented at the Southern Region American Association for Agricultural Education Conference in Feb 2022.

Metronormativity: A Philosophical Understanding of the Masking of Rural LGBTQ Agriculture Teachers' Lived Experiences. Poster presented at the Southern Region American Association for Agricultural Education Conference in Feb 2022.

“The 1619 Project”: Utilizing the Theory of Planned Behavior to Enhance Preservice Agricultural Science Educators' Perception of Multiculturalism. Poster presented at the Southern Region American Association for Agricultural Education Conference in Feb 2022.

Presence of the Theory of Planned Behavior in Agricultural Science Education: A Longitudinal Quantitative Study. Poster presented at the Southern Region American Association for Agricultural Education Conference in Feb 2022.

The Realizations through Reflections: Understanding the Importance of Reflecting in Multicultural Education. Poster presented at the Southern Region American Association for Agricultural Education Conference in Feb 2022.
