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Placing Student Success and Well-being at the Center of the Educational Process: How the Magic City Acceptance Academy Promotes an Ethical and Caring School Culture

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Abstract: Schools and school leaders are well-positioned to create school cultures that are supportive of all students, including students who identify as LGBTQ+ and those who are perceived as other due to status of race, class, or ability. The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explore how faculty and staff at the Magic City Acceptance Academy (MCAA) promote an ethical and caring school culture. To guide our thinking and interpretation of research findings, our team relied on two conceptual frameworks, including queer theory and the ethical educational leadership framework ethic of care. Based on inductive coding of focus group data with MCAA faculty, staff, and administrators, four overall themes emerged: (a) Considering the whole student, (b) Being authentic, (c) Providing a brave and affirming environment, and (d) Flying the plane while building it. After studying the data and forming our findings from this research, our team is convinced that MCAA is truly an ethical and mission-driven enterprise, deeply committed on many levels to challenging societal norms by creating and nurturing a school culture that bravely and uniquely seeks to address the social, emotional, and academic needs of LGBTQ+ students and their allies. In doing so, MCAA provides an ethical, caring, and courageous school culture for some of our most vulnerable youth, one that disrupts societal norms and challenges the typical social structure of public schools.

Keywords: School culture; LGBTQ+; Ethic of Care; Queer Theory; Qualitative Case Study

Introduction

For nearly four decades, educational scholars have emphasized the critical need for schools and school leaders to address what is widely seen as an ethical and moral crisis in PK-12 schools across the United States and beyond (Foster, 1986; Fullan, 2001, 2003; Shapiro & Gross, 2013; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Starratt, 1994; Strike et al., 2005). This clarion call has been accompanied by conceptual frames and specific suggestions for how ethical educational leaders can apply robust and thoughtful ethical decision-making in their daily practice when taking administrative actions that affect the lives of students, parents, and school personnel in often profound and life-changing ways. More than 30 years ago, Foster penned this often-quoted claim, “Each administrative decision carries with it a restructuring of human life: that is why administration at its heart is the resolution of moral dilemmas” (p. 33). This claim is particularly poignant in relation to LGBTQ+ youth and students perceived as other who attend public schools in the United States and beyond (Kosciw et al., 2022).

Recently, Gower et al. (2018) reviewed the research on bullying victimization of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT[Q]) youth across the United States. Citing the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance results, Gower et al. identified that LGBT[Q] youth reported over twice as many incidents of bullying in schools as compared to their cisgender heterosexual peers (Kann et al., 2018). Gower and colleagues wrote, “Schools are well-positioned to address these disparities by creating supportive school climates for LGBT[Q] youth, but more research is needed to examine the variety of practices and professional development opportunities put in place to this end” (p. 813). It is precisely a response to this call for more research that has motivated our team to explore the work of many brave individuals and school leaders in establishing what is among the few charter or alternative schools specifically designed to address the learning and social development needs of LGBTQ+ youth, individuals who identify as non-heteronormative/cisnormative, and those who are perceived as other based on characteristics of race/ethnicity, religion, immigrant status, sociodemographic status, and/or ability (Cohen, 2005; Knight, 2000). In this article, we report our findings relative to the creation and opening of the Magic City Acceptance Academy (MCAA) (actual name), a public charter school located in Homewood, Alabama, a suburb of Birmingham. We focus specifically on the elements that have contributed to an LGBTQ+-affirming school culture in this new and innovative charter school. We suggest that this article may be of interest to a variety of stakeholder groups, including educational leaders, LGBTQ+ students and allies, parents, and others interested in school reform.
Conceptual Frameworks Informing the Study

Because the research reported in this article addresses the issues of LGBTQ+ youth in public schools, and specifically how one set of stakeholders has designed MCAA in their attempt to do exactly that, it may be helpful to introduce here the two conceptual frames our team used to analyze the findings resultant from the study. These two frameworks include the *ethic of care* and *queer theory*.

The Ethic of Care

The ethic of care referenced by our team is just one component of a broader framework of ethical decision-making developed for practicing school leaders. This multi-dimensional framework includes the ethics of *justice, critique, care, and the profession*. Each of these ethics is defined and described in detail by Starratt (1994) and later by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022). This framework paints a broad stroke in guiding school leaders in what aspects of a situation to consider when making an ethically oriented decision that will ultimately affect the lives of students and the culture of a school. For this study, however, we focused on the ethic of care specifically and used it as a kind of measuring stick from which to analyze our findings. Our research team first used the ethic of care as a filter with which to identify themes of participant thinking and behavior that were compatible with a generalized caring for all students. Then, we turned to queer theory to identify how MCAA educators addressed the needs of queer kids more intentionally and specifically through their daily practice at MCAA. In a previous article (Gurley et al., 2023), our team used the entire multi-dimensional ethical framework to analyze the perceptions and voices of students regarding their experiences at MCAA.

Queer Theory

After examining the data using the ethic of care relative to all students at MCAA, our team applied some of the tenets of queer theory to further inform our analysis of how study participants considered and responded to the needs of LGBTQ+ students more specifically. Queer theory is a post-structuralist theory that emerged during the 1990s (Butler, 1999; de Lauretis, 1991; Rubin, 1984; Sedgwick, 1990). This critical theory rejects the notion of defined and binary sexual identities and seeks to challenge and disrupt assumptions that there is a set of norms to which all people must conform. At the heart of both the ethic of care and queer theory lies the assumption that institutions within society (e.g., public schools) are morally obligated to treat all people ethically and fairly, especially individuals who are traditionally othered (e.g., LGBTQ+ people, people of Color). Two overarching tenets of queer theory informed our analysis, namely the *centering of marginalized voices* (Stone et al., 2022) and *focus on lived experiences* (Yep, 2014). Other tenets of queer theory were helpful in our analysis, as well, and are explicated in the discussion section of this article. These two conceptual frames, the ethic of care and queer theory, informed each other and helped our team think about and analyze what we learned in talking directly with faculty and staff members and school leaders and in carefully examining their perceptions of the culture of MCAA.

Queering the Work

The practice of applying queer theory helps to define our *queering of the work* in this context of exploring the establishment of an LGBTQ+-affirming school culture. We believe that directly examining this school serves to disrupt the status quo of how public schools typically address (or ignore) the identities and school-based experiences of LGBTQ+ youth by creating a school culture that more effectively meets the needs of this population of students. Wozolek (2023) wrote:

> To “queer” research is a commitment to contradictions that recognizes the multiplicity of experiences, and troubles sociocultural, political, and historical norms and values. Queering research is... a critical entanglement with making the strange familiar and the familiar strange... while seeking to exceed and abolish oppressive frameworks across scholarly dialogues. (p. 78)

We hope that this research will help to *destabilize norms of thinking* (Thomas et al., 2022) among all educators, presenting an alternative perspective of how educators, committed to the ethical treatment of all students, can establish a school culture that is sensitive to the needs of a chronically underserved and vulnerable population of queer students and their allies (Kosciw et al., 2022).

Study Overview and Research Questions

In our qualitative study, we interviewed several key leaders who played significant roles in planning, applying for a charter, preparing, and opening MCAA. These leaders included a range of individuals who worked toward this end, including school administrators. We also conducted separate focus group sessions with MCAA faculty members, staff, and administrators to explore their perceptions of establishing a supportive school culture for LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students at MCAA. We focused our inquiry on one main research question: What are MCAA faculty and staff experiences of promoting a supportive school culture?

Background

The Magic City Acceptance Academy (MCAA) opened in fall 2021 as a charter school for students in grades 6 through 12. Located near Birmingham, Alabama, MCAA (2023) has a mission to “empower all learners to embrace education, achieve individual success, and take ownership of their future in a brave, LGBTQ+-affirming learning environment” (para. 1). According to its vision statement, the expressed purpose of MCAA (2023) is to “engage students who have dropped out,
are not thriving in traditional schools, or are enrolled in home-school programs” (para. 2).

Prior to opening, MCAA administrators, teachers, and board members noted that LGBTQ+ students were disengaging from their previous school settings due to hostile or unwelcoming environments. The research literature suggests that LGBTQ+ youth and students who are perceived as other based on characteristics of race/ethnicity, religion, immigrant status, sociodemographic status, and/or ability, may lack a sense of school connectedness and become more susceptible to dropping out of school (Strayhorn, 2018). In 2014, the American Psychological Association reported school connectedness as particularly important for young people who are at increased risk for feeling alienated or isolated from others, including “students with disabilities, students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or question their sexual orientation, students who are homeless or any student who is chronically truant due to a variety of circumstances” (para. 3).

Keenly aware of the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth and their allies in traditional public school settings, Dr. Karen Musgrove, CEO of Birmingham AIDS Outreach (BAO), developed a vision for an LGBTQ+-affirming charter school in the Birmingham, Alabama area. Gaining the approval and shared commitment of the BAO board of directors, Dr. Musgrove hired a retired school principal, Dr. Michael Wilson, to develop a charter school application and to serve as the founding principal/superintendent of the school. The resilience of these and other key school leaders in navigating the arduous approval process and the resistant socio-political context are presented by the authors in detail elsewhere ( Fifolt et al., 2023b; Fifolt et al., 2024a; Fifolt et al., 2024b). Despite these hurdles, the charter school application was eventually approved, and after completely renovating an empty office building and overcoming some unique challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, school doors at MCAA opened in the fall of 2021, welcoming 204 students in grades 6-12.

MCAA enrollment has continued to grow since opening in 2021. Currently, in its third year of operation, MCAA has enrolled approximately 350 students and boasts a 22:1 student-teacher ratio (MCAA, 2023). MCAA students come from 85 unique postal ZIP codes in and around the Birmingham, Alabama metropolitan area. Approximately 52% of students receive free or reduced meals. The student body ethnicity at MCAA comprises 63% White, 22% Hispanic, 11% Black, and 4% other. U.S. News & World Report (2024) presents gender data as comprising 64% female and 36% male. (Researchers acknowledge that gender data reported for MCAA may be conflated with sex assigned at birth and treated as a binary, likely not an appropriate statistic for an LGBTQ+-affirming school. But, the data suggest that nearly two-thirds of MCAA students identify as female.) MCAA admits all students who apply and meet basic residency requirements as eligible Alabama residents. MCAA admission policy accepts students regardless of ethnicity, national origin, religion, gender, income, disability, English language proficiency, or academic ability. Being an LGBTQ+-identifying individual is not a requirement for admission. However, students and families are informed of and expected to support the MCAA mission of providing an LGBTQ+ affirming learning environment.

Review of Literature

In this section, we explore the literature base regarding several pertinent topics. These include placing MCAA in a national context of schools designed to address LGBTQ+ student needs, the development of charter schools in general, and in Alabama specifically. We also explore trauma-informed curriculum and restorative justice as guiding practices.

Schools Addressing LGBTQ+ Student Needs

In 1985, Harvey Milk School opened its doors in New York City, the first school of its kind designed for LGBTQ+ youth in grades 10-12. Since then, only a small number of alternative schools designed to address LGBTQ+ student needs have been established in various cities in the United States and Canada, including most notably the EAGLES Center in Los Angeles, CA (1991), the Walt Whitman Community School in Dallas, TX (1993), the Triangle Program in Toronto, Ontario (1995), the Harvey Milk Civil Rights Academy in San Francisco, CA (1996), and The Alliance School of Milwaukee in Milwaukee, WI (2005). Little scholarly research has been forthcoming on these unique and alternative school settings for LGBTQ+ youth (Cohen, 2005).

The Hetrick-Martin Institute (2015) in New York City was instrumental in opening the Harvey Milk High School, an LGBTQ+-affirming high school in the heart of the city. In a 2015 report, the Hetrick-Martin Institute laid out the rationale for starting an LGBTQ+-affirming, separate space or school with the expressed purpose of providing a safe space for students who had encountered many challenges, sometimes even violence, in their traditional, public school settings. The authors argued that LGBTQ+ students needed a place like the Harvey Milk High School. They wrote, “The reality of [LGBTQ+ student] circumstances demand that appropriate and effective interventions, strategies, and policies be developed to address the health, education, and safety of these youth” (Hetrick-Martin Institute, 2015, p. 26).

In keeping with the philosophy of providing safer spaces for LGBTQ+ students, educators in Toronto, Ontario, started the Triangle Program (Knight, 2000). The Triangle Program was established as a part of the OASIS Alternative School in Toronto, designed especially for students who had left school entirely due to often traumatic experiences with homophobia in traditional school contexts. The Triangle Program focuses on such key elements of safety, resources for LGBTQ+ youth, peer relationship building, and the promotion of social, emotional, and intellectual skills. Knight (2000) provided a comprehensive presentation and evaluation of the Triangle Program in Toronto, describing the program’s successes and challenges as reported by multiple stakeholder groups associated with and attending the Triangle Program.
Similarly, Uribe (1993) reported on the Project 10 initiative, a school-based outreach to gay and lesbian youth in Fairfax High School, a part of the Los Angeles Unified School District. The Project 10 initiative began in 1984 “as a way of addressing the underserved needs of gay and lesbian students” in Los Angeles. This program included explicit workshops or in-service professional training for educators, including teachers, counselors, and other support personnel, and established support groups on each high school campus for students who are or were dealing with sexual orientation issues. These support groups “make up the heart of the Project program” (p. 109). Firmly committed to the public school mission of addressing the needs of all students, Uribe concluded by providing a list of suggestions for educators relative to LGBTQ+ students, including establishing a firm, non-discrimination policy at each school site, discussing gay and lesbian issues in the classrooms, providing support for students considering the option of coming out either at school, at home, or both; and taking parent concerns very seriously, whether they be from LGBTQ+ students and families or non-LGBTQ+ parents, families, and allies (Uribe, 1993).

Progressive educators from schools and school districts ranging from New York to Los Angeles, from Toronto to Atlanta, have all been involved in trying to impact the public education system by providing safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth, whether they be through the establishment of youth support groups and services within the traditional school settings, or by opening entirely new, alternative schools and separate spaces for this vulnerable population of students. By adding to the literature regarding LGBTQ+-affirming schools and programs, the current article adds to the knowledge base and understanding of how committed educators can be more effective in meeting the needs of LGBTQ+ youth in schools. The authors hope to contribute to deepening the exploration and understanding of educators to consider how best to create school cultures that place students, especially LGBTQ+ students and their allies, at the very center of the schooling venture.

Charter Schools

As a charter school, MCAA is a tuition-free school of choice that is publicly funded but independently run (Prothero, 2018). The concept of charter schools originated in the United States in the 1970s based on the idea that groups of teachers could set up contracts or charters with their local school boards to discover new approaches and ideas in the field of education (Public Charter Schools Insider, 2022). Charter schools are frequently centered around a theme such as college preparation, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), or service-learning and recruit students based specifically on this area of interest. As of 2019, 45 states and the District of Columbia had passed public charter school legislation permitting charter schools to be governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). Hope and Hall (2018) stated that, in the United States and internationally:

Publicly funded schools now exist in many shapes and sizes, some of which have been developed to meet the needs of specific cohorts of students…. Many students no longer attend their geographically closest school, but one that has been selected for another reason. (p. 1196)

Charter Schools in Alabama

Charter schools in Alabama are a relatively new phenomenon (Cason, 2019; Zohn, 2019). After decades of opposition, Alabama’s Legislature passed the School Choice and Student Opportunity Act, also known as the Charter School Bill or SB45, in March 2015 (School Choice and Opportunity Act [SB45], 2015). Proponents of SB45 argued that it would give students in Alabama another educational choice that would improve student learning (SB45), while opponents suggested that public charter schools would further segregate the existing public school infrastructure and place greater strain on existing financial resources (Cason, 2019).

As a fully public facility, MCAA admits students from all backgrounds, regardless of sexual or gender identity. Further, the school is required to meet all state mandates regarding curriculum standards for secondary students in Alabama. But, what is motivating to founding stakeholders is that a charter school is allowed a unique level autonomy in decision-making regarding what is taught in the classroom, hiring decisions (i.e., certified vs. noncertified teachers), and budgets without adhering to certain state regulations. Charter school advocates refer to this arrangement as the “charter bargain”: more freedom for more accountability (Prothero, 2018, para. 3). It is important to point out that MCAA has chosen to distinguish itself from other public schools by its inclusion of a restorative justice oriented system of discipline to address classroom and school misbehavior by students, and by incorporating a trauma-informed approach to the delivery of curriculum and instruction. This is part of the plan by school stakeholders to fulfill their mission of establishing a brave and LGBTQ+-affirming learning environment.

Trauma-Informed Curriculum

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration ([SAMHSA], 2022) reported that more than two-thirds of children have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lives by the time they are 16 years of age, including instances of bullying, harassment, and physical violence on school property. These adverse childhood experiences, or ACES, can undermine a child’s sense of safety, stability, and bonding with others. According to Herrenkohl and colleagues (2021), trauma-informed schools:

[Providing children with the care, support, and resources they need to recover and work to their potential. Trauma-informed schools seek to increase awareness of trauma exposure and trauma symptoms, build supportive school and classroom communities,
teach children social-emotional skills, and counteract biases and harsh disciplinary practices that can re-traumatize and cause further harm to students. (p. 7)

A trauma-informed curriculum is an approach to fostering social-emotional development with practices that support all students, but it is particularly inclusive and responsive to the needs of children and youth who have experienced past trauma. Trauma-informed practices allow students to exercise agency while exploring their strengths and identities and developing meaningful, positive relationships with adults and peers. Moreover, it focuses on self-efficacy, emotional awareness, affect regulation, and prevention while also providing students with access to mental health supports (Craig, 2017).

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice theory focuses on mediation and agreement rather than punishment and serves as an alternative to traditional discipline, particularly discipline actions such as suspension or expulsion. According to Payne and Welch (2018), restorative discipline “shifts the focus from punishment and isolation to reconciliation and reintegration” (p. 224). This approach challenges students to understand how their actions affect others and why they might have taken those actions. Fundamentally, restorative justice strives to restore community by creating safe and supportive spaces in which individuals can engage in honest and sometimes difficult conversations; it allows students to recognize their mistakes, be accountable for their actions, and learn for the next time.

Pickens and Tschopp (2017) observed that a trauma-informed approach in the classroom is rooted in a safe environment, both physically and psychologically. For students, safety is based on a predictable classroom environment where every member feels respected, validated, and heard. Inherent to restorative justice, trauma-informed discipline acknowledges the role trauma may have in behavior and identifies restorative solutions to promote healthier behaviors in the future.

Brave and LGBTQ+ Affirming Learning Environment

As previously noted, MCAA was founded as an alternative to traditional school environments in which students may have felt psychological distress from hostile school environments or avoided school activities altogether due to safety reasons. This rationale is consistent with findings from the 2021 Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey in which study authors observed, “a lack of safety may lead to students missing school...Indeed, we found that among students in our survey, missing school due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable was related to increased likelihood of not planning to complete high school” (Kosciw et al., 2022, p. 47).

Similarly, in a review of the literature on school climate, Kutsyuraba et al. (2015) reported that school environments that feel exclusionary and unwelcoming are often unsafe and may negatively affect students’ emotional well-being, academic performance, and social outcomes. Previous research on MCAA reported the intentional use of the word brave instead of safe to describe the school learning environment. Stakeholders suggested that the word brave connoted an active approach to learning as compared to the more passive act of simply entering a safe space (Fifolt et al., 2023a). According to Dr. Michael Wilson, former MCAA school principal and superintendent, considering recent school shootings in the United States, it is impossible for schools to unequivocally guarantee a safe space (National Institute of Justice, 2022).

The term LGBTQ+-affirming suggests that the school environment is one in which members of the community embrace intersectional identities and celebrate an individual’s unique contributions. It intimates that acts of harassment, intimidation, violence, and threats of violence are unacceptable, and consequences are non-negotiable. Furthermore, it extends protections to LGBTQ+ youth and others who are most likely to be targeted under otherwise limited anti-bullying laws and policies. According to Dr. Karen Musgrove, MCAA was one of the first charter schools that included LGBTQ+-affirming in its mission statement (Fifolt et al., 2024b). MCAA’s approach to using trauma-informed curriculum, employing restorative justice, and providing a brave and LGBTQ+-affirming learning environment speaks to the school culture it is striving to achieve.

School Culture

Deal and Kennedy (1983) aptly described school culture as “the way we do things around here” (p. 4), noting that culture is often invisible to those who participate in it every day. Nevertheless, culture provides a key framework for collective consciousness (Gruenert & Whittaker, 2015), and encompasses attitudes, expected behaviors, and values that influence how the school operates (Fullan, 2015). According to Deal and Peterson (2009), school culture comprises “norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals” (p. 8) that shape patterns of behavior, attitudes, and expectations between students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other staff members.

The Glossary of Education Reform (2013) suggests that the term school culture also encompasses the issues of “emotional safety of students, the orderliness of classrooms and public spaces, or the degree to which a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity” (para. 1). In short, school culture describes a sense of shared belief and behaviors among key stakeholders – the way people think, feel, and act.

The research literature suggests that school culture is neither static nor immutable; rather, it is dynamic and malleable, and school culture is heavily influenced by school administrators and other key leaders (Kruse & Seashore Louis, 2009). Leadership practices associated with fostering a positive
school culture include modeling positive behaviors for others to follow, inspiring a shared vision, taking risks and challenging the status quo, empowering others to act, and encouraging and recognizing faculty and staff for achieving the goals of the organization (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Whether positive or negative, a school’s culture stems from its vision and established values (Jerald, 2006). Peterson (2002) observed that positive and negative school cultures are based on norms and values that either support or hinder growth and learning. The author noted that schools with a positive culture have a widely shared sense of purpose, collaborative and collegial relationships, and a shared commitment to and sense of responsibility for the learning of all students. A positive school culture is one that fosters an ethos of high expectations along with warm, caring, and supportive relationships (Jerald, 2006). Relational trust, however, is not something that happens overnight. According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), “Trust is forged in daily social exchanges. Trust grows over time through exchanges where the expectations for others are validated in action” (pp. 136-137).

**Conceptual Frameworks**

As mentioned above, two conceptual frameworks guided our thinking in this study and served as analytical tools. These include an ethic of care and queer theory. In this section we explain each of these frameworks in a bit more detail.

**Ethic of Care**

The ethic of care is one part of a multi-dimensional, ethical, decision-making framework developed for educational leaders (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Starratt, 1994). This framework comprises the ethic of justice, critique, and care, each of which can be applied by school leaders in their daily practice of decision-making and leadership. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022) expanded Starratt’s framework to include an ethic of the profession. For a detailed definition and description of each ethic, see Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022) and Starratt (1994).

In 2004, Furman introduced for consideration an ethic of community, suggesting it be added to the overall multi-dimensional ethical decision-making framework. Furman wrote that an ethic of community is a useful ethic to consider “in regard to achieving the moral purposes of schooling” (p. 215). Of these five unique, but overlapping ethics, we selected the ethic of care as the most useful tool in our analysis because of the specific elements it comprises.

Starratt (1994) asserted that educators who wish to establish an ethic of care must attend to the “cultural tone” of the school (p. 53). Starratt continued, stating that the ethic of care, “requires fidelity to persons, a willingness to acknowledge their right to be who they are, an openness to encountering them in their authentic individuality, [and] a loyalty to the relationship” (p. 52; emphasis added). Findings from this study address and remarkably mirror, the components of an ethical school culture described by Starratt. Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1992) were additional early advocates for an ethic of care to be applied in schools. These authors and others prioritized the ethic of care wherein “students are at the center of the educational process and need to be nurtured and encouraged, a concept that likely goes against the grain of those attempting to make ‘achievement’ the top priority” (Shapiro & Stekovich, 2022, p. 17).

**Queer Theory**

Because many of the students at MCAA self-identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, however, our team also applied many aspects of queer theory to inform our analysis and interpretation of data. Queer theory emerged from the literature focused on lesbian, gay, gender, and identity studies (among others) in the early 1990s. Informed by the work of Foucault (1976), researcher and feminist theorist de Laurentis (1991) first coined the term *queer theory*. Since then, many authors have contributed to the construct of queer theory, a theory that seeks to challenge and disrupt what is assumed to be a *normal*, binary classification and thinking about the many identities (e.g., gender, practices, sexuality, orientation) of individuals and to study those identities that exist outside of cisgender and heterosexual norms (Butler, 1999; Rubin, 1984; Sedgwick, 1990). Queer theory is multifaceted and to describe it would be expansive, well beyond the scope of this article. However, there are several tenets of queer theory that are particularly poignant and applicable to this study. These tenets include those mentioned above, *centering of marginalized voices*, and *a focus on lived experiences*, both of which have obvious implications for qualitative research. Other queer theory tenets directly applicable to this study include: (a) a *critique of heteronormativity*, (b) *fluidity and multiplicities of identity*, (c) *resistance and subversion*, (d) *collaborative and participatory approaches*, and (e) *social justice*. We discovered that these two conceptual frames each informed the other and converged into a coherent and powerful vantage point from which to interpret our research.

In the following section, we describe the methodology our research team used to conduct this study. Specifically, we describe the rationale for a *phenomenological case study* and how it is *embedded* in a larger multifaceted study, as well as best practices for qualitative research. We close this section with our positionality as researchers by describing our social identities as well as our interest in the research topic.

**Methodology**

Our team conducted a multifaceted phenomenological case study of MCAA. This method of inquiry involves studying a small number of participants through extensive and prolonged engagement to identify patterns and relationships of meaning (Creswell, 2003). According to Creswell and Creswell (2022), a phenomenological study seeks to explore contextual meaning through the situational knowledge of those being...
researched. Further, it focuses on a single concept or idea—a phenomenon.

For this study, we looked at the shared experience of establishing a school culture designed to address the needs of students. According to Frechette and colleagues (2020), phenomenological research allows participants to interpret and make meaning of their existence. Abma and colleagues (2019) further observed that participatory research offers individuals “the ability to speak up, to participate, to experience oneself and be experienced as a person with the right to express yourself and to have the expression valued by others” (p. 127). In other words, participants contributed to this article as co-investigators by sharing and interpreting their lived experiences which allowed the research team to delve deeper into the phenomenon of school culture.

In defining a case study, Creswell (2013) wrote, “Case study research begins with the identification of a specific case. This case may be a concrete entity, such as an individual, a small group, an organization, or a partnership” (p. 98). The author continued, “The key here is to define a case that can be bounded or described within certain parameters, such as a specific place and time” (p. 99). We expressed the phenomenon as the school culture and the case study as an examination of the establishment of a charter school that explicitly addresses LGBTQ+ and LGBTQ+-affirming secondary school students. This article specifically addresses school culture; we focus on various other aspects of the case in separate articles (Fifolt et al., 2023a; Fifolt et al., 2023b; Fifolt et al., 2024a; Fifolt et al., 2024b; Gurley et al., 2023).

Data reported in the present article were derived from two facilitated focus groups with MCAA faculty and staff. Focus group sessions were conducted concurrently and facilitated by members of the research team using identical interview protocols. Focus group sessions lasted approximately 60 minutes and were recorded using digital recorders; recordings were transcribed by a third-party vendor. At the time of this research, there were 17 administrative/staff members and 28 faculty at MCAA.

The research team analyzed transcripts to identify emergent codes and themes; we reached consensus on thematic analysis before reporting the findings. As recommended by Stahl and King (2020), we used multiple strategies to establish trustworthiness of the data including (a) peer debriefing, (b) bracketing, and (c) use of an audit trail.

Participation in focus groups was strictly voluntary, and the names and identities of participants were excluded to ensure confidentiality. Consistent with the current style convention, we used the singular “they” to refer to individuals who self-identified “they” as their pronoun (APA, 2020, p. 120). All participants provided informed consent prior to engaging in focus groups. This study was approved by the University of Alabama at Birmingham Institutional Review Board: IRB-300008486, the Magic City Research Institute, and MCAA administration.

Researcher Positionality

Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) stated, “The position from which we [researchers] see the world around us impacts our research interests, how we approach the research and participants, the questions we ask, and how we interpret the data” (p. 1). Given the undeniable influence that life experience has on how a researcher approaches a particular study, we believe it important here to provide some context regarding who the members of our research team are and the strengths and perspectives each brought to this study.

The first author is a White, gay, cisgender man, a father, and has been a faculty member in Educational Leadership at the UAB School of Education and Human Sciences for 12 years. He earned his Educational Doctorate from Wichita State University. The first author has no personal connection to MCAA, though the current principal/superintendent of MCAA is a former student of the first author. As a former school principal and superintendent himself, and with a research focus on ethical school leadership, the first author is keenly interested in the processes involved in developing a mission- and vision-driven school culture to become an ethical and supportive place for all children. This background naturally guided the first author’s participation in the research, paying particular attention to processes and structures in place to develop a positive and student-centered school culture.

The second author identifies as a Black, queer, cisgender man, and is a faculty member in Clinical Mental Health Counseling at the UAB School of Education and Human Sciences. He has no personal connection to MCAA, though after these data were collected, the second author began to serve on the governing/advisory board of MCAA. This author earned a PhD in School Counseling and Guidance Services from Auburn University and has a research interest in the intersectionality and lived experiences of queer K-12 students. The second author took a particular interest in all the interventions the MCAA personnel have developed to support the mental health of their students (See Fifolt et al., 2023, 2024b for detailed descriptions of these interventions).

The senior author identifies as a White, straight, cisgender man, a father, and has been a faculty member of the UAB School of Public Health for the past eight years. He earned his PhD in Educational Leadership from UAB. As a public health researcher, the senior author is interested in the factors that reduce the impact of negative life experiences and advance healthy development and well-being, often referred to as protective and promotive factors, respectively. This background and research interest naturally informed his participation in research design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, keeping an informed eye on structures in place to protect and promote MCAA students. When this research started, the senior author had no connections to MCAA; however, he now has a daughter who attends MCAA as a student. Nevertheless, all data were collected and analyzed prior to her enrollment.

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As authors, we understand that our identities and experiences may have influenced the research process and interpretation of findings; therefore, the fact that all three authors identify as cisgender males is worth noting. Nevertheless, we engaged multiple credibility measures to maintain integrity, including triangulation of the data, engaging in critical reflexivity, and incorporating thick descriptions.

Findings

In this section, we describe findings based on data collected from faculty and staff focus groups. Findings are based on codes and themes developed through inductive coding of transcripts as well as a close examination of the research literature on school culture. Four overall themes emerged, including (a) Considering the Whole Student, (b) Being Authentic, (c) Providing a Brave and Affirming Environment, and (d) Flying the Plane while Building It. For each theme, we provide sub-themes and representative quotes to highlight findings and connect the findings back to the guiding conceptual frameworks of queer theory and the ethic of care.

Considering the Whole Student

Faculty and staff unequivocally stated that they regarded students at MCAA as individuals first and students second. One participant stated, “We put the kid first, not the science or social studies or English or math first. The kid is first. And because of that, everything else falls into place.”

Interviewees noted that students at MCAA “absolutely exist separate from content.” A shared sentiment among participants was that students are whole persons. One staff member described the lengths to which teachers went to connect with students daily:

They’re going to use their class time, their after-school time, their supplies, and their knowledge to really meet the kids where they’re at. And the whole child, not just going off the syllabus and we’re going to nail these metrics and make our grades. They want the kids to succeed, but they want them to be successful as a whole person.

Another staff member summarized, “The idea of being somewhere where they treat children like people, they remember they’re whole people, not just kids, it’s not minimizing their problems and minimizing what’s going on with them. That idea was just beautiful to me.” One of the school leaders indicated that her children attend MCAA because they were not receiving the academic support they needed from one of the top-rated schools in Alabama. They stated, “The focus [at MCAA] really is the success of the kids academically, mentally, socially...And so my kid, who’s an out-of-the-box kid, this is their box. This is an out-of-the-box school.”

Addressing Past Trauma

Focus group participants discussed past challenges of MCAA students in traditional school settings, including negative experiences and preceding traumas. One staff member stated, “a lot of our kids have been marginalized by adults. Adults have been a beat down. Adults have done terrible things to them.”

Reflecting on a school assembly on the first day of class, another staff member recalled the comments of a school leader to acknowledge past trauma while also establishing a new normal for the year. According to this individual, the school leader stated:

I know a lot of you see adults as problems. Look at all of the adults up here. These people are not here to bring you down. We are a network, a resource for you, for your survival and for your success.

When asked why they chose to work at MCAA, a third staff member shared their own experiences of trauma in school; statements underscored the danger of school for some students:

I honestly chose to work here because, growing up, I am biracial, I’m bisexual, I transitioned as a teenager. So going through school...in areas that were kind of like this, but they didn’t have a place like this where generally things were not as accepting, almost cost me my life several times.

Faculty and staff agreed that helping students succeed required them to put in the hard work of addressing student pain, “We’re here and we show up every day because we want to be here, and we want to address that trauma.” Doing so, however, requires them to develop deep and meaningful relationships with students.

Building Trusting Relationships

There was consensus among faculty and staff that helping students thrive in school required them to get to know students as individuals. One teacher stated:

We spend, gosh, how many weeks at the beginning of the school year just focusing so hard on building classroom relationships. And so, when school systems talk about prioritizing children, they’re still, the average school system is still ultimately talking about prioritizing content.

Teachers were particularly vocal about building trust among students. One acknowledged that, regardless of how students identify, schools have failed them in the past. “These students have earned a very healthy mistrust of school systems. They have come by this [mistrust] honestly.” Therefore, establishing and maintaining trust with MCAA students remains an institutional priority.

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Teachers suggested that fostering positive relationships with students required them to teach students how to engage in positive and supportive relationships, sometimes for the first time, noting that students did not always know how to respond to people who expressed care and concern for them. Moreover, teachers observed that the relationships they established with students at MCAA were unlike those from previous school settings:

Our level of relationship with students in this school, I don’t know, it may be boastful to say, but I feel like, across the board, I can pretty confidently say our relationship with our students is unlike any other school probably in the entire state. Our students have come from so many different places, experienced so many different things. And we sometimes laugh that we’re not just a school, we’re a school rehab or a school treatment facility.

Another teacher acknowledged that establishing fully formed relationships, especially with vulnerable and marginalized students, takes time:

It’s not immediate… a lot of trust that I’ve seen with kids is like you say no and they associate that with “You hate me, you’re hating me for my identity”… so now it’s like when you say no, you can follow it up with “no, but I still love you.”

Our team concludes that statements such as those highlighted above can serve to inform practitioners about the need for public schools in general to more carefully consider the whole child by seeking to understand their past trauma, and through building critical relationships with students, especially LGBTQ+ students and allies.

**Authentic Approach to Curriculum**

In addition to sexual orientation and gender expression, teachers further noted that MCAA allows them to be fully authentic in their approach to curriculum and discipline. One teacher intimaded that she felt stifled in previous school settings:

I believe that learning is loud and explorative…I like for them [students] to move, I like for them to express themselves and to be their authentic self fully. And I like to be myself, fully…In [previous] public schools, I wasn’t allowed to be myself authentically and my students weren’t allowed to learn and be their selves authentically.

Others suggested that they had more freedom to teach course content at MCAA in ways that felt more sincere than in previous positions, “Being able to focus on critical thinking, meanings, focus on the effects of history and not just the facts of history…teaching with honesty…it’s the expectation.”

Another teacher described starting out each class with a non-academic question about students’ lives as a strategy to connect with them. Teachers remarked that in other school settings, they had to hide these activities since they were considered non-academic. At MCAA, however, “it’s just understood that that is very much related to instruction because the kid’s not going to learn from you if they don’t trust you. So, I don’t have to explain [it], I can [just] do it.”

**Authentic Approach to Discipline**

Similarly, teachers discussed their preferred approaches to student discipline, which were frequently out-of-step with more traditionally punitive strategies of discipline in public schools. One teacher stated:

Where I taught previously, I hated the way that they tried to make me do discipline. I felt like I was having to choose between treating kids the way I wanted to treat kids…and what my administration wanted me to do…When I read the mission statement [of MCAA], I was like, “Oh cool, I can have a conversation with kids instead of writing them up. We’re not going to have [to be] school cops.”

Similarly, another teacher described her restorative approach to student discipline:

I was never the teacher that wrote kids up. I was the teacher that called home and talked to parents and invited parents into my classroom. [At MCAA], you’re expected to…invite parents into the disciplinary process, in the conversation, and the expectation [is] that you’re going to be there for your children.

Staff members asserted that students at MCAA still engaged in misbehavior (e.g., skipping classes, smoking in the bathroom), but MCAA’s approach to discipline is different from other schools, “What we do here is teach them [students] how to restore themselves and to be resilient.” Interviewees noted that disciplinary issues frequently stemmed from previous traumas. Rather than exacerbating the trauma, faculty and staff members focus on helping students “build their toolbox” of coping strategies to face adversities, rather than simply dwelling on the mistake.

**Providing a Brave and Affirming Environment**

Faculty and staff were unified in their support for ensuring physical and psychological safety for students based on intersectional identities. One teacher described her commitment to ensuring student safety:

I want to help create that safe space [for students]. I want every kid that walks into my classroom…to know it’s safe and that I’ll be an ally, that I’ll stand up and defend them and speak up when I hear other
kids say things because, even though this is supposed to be a safe space, kids are kids and they still say things that are hurtful to other students here, I want to be part of that [safe space].

Another teacher noted that in his class, students frequently have difficult but respectful conversations about what it is like to live in the world as queer or an otherwise marginalized individual. Nevertheless, his commitment to students is that before they leave class, the one thing they will hear from him is “I love you and I care about you.”

One school leader observed that at other schools, procedures and protocols are already established. This was not the case for building a school from the ground up. “So, I explained last year to a lot of people that, ‘Oh, how did it go?’ Well…we were building a plane, flying it, and that thing was on fire 98% of the time.”

Likewise, teachers described a shared commitment to serving students but recognized that best practices around discipline, for example, continue to evolve, “Everyone has a different idea of what it looks like to be restorative, and sometimes those things can be in conflict or be contradictory, but everybody is making a genuine effort to live out [the goal of trauma-informed discipline].”

Acknowledging that MCAA is only its third year of existence, one teacher used the following analogy to describe the status of operations and teaching:

I think it’s like all the screws are in place, but someone needs to take a screwdriver…It’s like all the ideas are there and they’re wonderful…and everyone here has the heart for it, and everyone wants these things to happen. We want this big, beautiful piece of furniture, but no one has been able to take a screwdriver to it and just tighten it all up and make it beautiful.

Other faculty agreed noting that everyone is committed to “making magic out of nothing,” but suggested that it will take a whole school movement to streamline differing methodologies. Until then, they are just “surviving and not thriving.”

Reinterpreting the Vision

In addition to operational challenges, focus group participants observed that MCAA has struggled to reconcile its identity within the larger community. MCAA serves a diverse student population including many students who have been marginalized in previous school settings or for whom a traditional school environment was not a good fit. However, due to inaccurate reporting by news outlets as well as negative attack ads intended to generate support for politically conservative candidates (Fifolt, 2024b; Riley, 2022), MCAA has been labeled the gay school. In response, one school official stated, “We are not the gay school. We are a school that is LGBTQIA+ affirming and a brave space.”

According to faculty and staff, it has been difficult for individuals who are
not as familiar with MCAA to grasp this more nuanced distinction.

Additionally, teachers suggested that since they were already the ones who were making space for at-risk students in previous school settings, their ability to create a “brave and inclusive space” for LGBTQ+ and other marginalized students was “pretty easy” to accomplish. The school’s identity, however, extends far beyond simply providing a brave and affirming space:

I think what is happening now is we realize what the type of school we are, we’re a combination of a fine arts, a magnet, an alternative school, a public school, we’re this island of misfit toys and we thought it was going to be enough.

Teachers proposed that due to the complex needs and intersectional identities of students at MCAA, the school may have already outgrown its original vision. Moreover, there was agreement that the name of the institution, the Magic City Acceptance Academy, as well as its use of inclusive pride colors to affirm all identities, may lead to a certain perception of the school. One teacher mused:

We are a multifaceted institution. We do have multiple populations. And, so I’m thinking if the emphasis needs to be moved from acceptance to academy so that we can really emphasize…the fact that this is an institution of multifaceted individuals…I’m part of it [the diversity] but we’re also here to make sure that you can be the best academician possible.

Discussion

Study findings suggest that MCAA is committed to developing a school culture that respects individuals and builds community while advancing an institutional vision of “exceptional, innovative, and quality-driven education” (MCAA, 2023, para. 2). Faculty and staff inferred that their commitment to serving the whole student through meaningful relationships and helping them overcome past trauma is contrary to the currently fractured system of education that exists in the United States which assesses student and school success based on standardized test scores (Smith & Holloway, 2020).

Given the challenges that students faced in previous school settings, including bullying, harassment, and violence (Kosciw et al., 2022), it is not surprising that faculty and staff viewed healing relationships as a strategic priority for ensuring student success. The research literature demonstrates that LGBTQ+ students frequently lack a sense of belonging and, therefore, may be at greater risk than their peers for engaging in health-compromising behaviors (Yang et al., 2014). By recognizing that the adults in these students’ lives have frequently disappointed them in the past, faculty and staff asserted that establishing and maintaining trust with students was of paramount importance (Russell et al., 2016).

Focus group participants described a school culture in which students, faculty, and staff were free to express their authentic selves, which includes offering physical and verbal expressions of support, encouragement, and love (e.g., hugs, fist bumps). Andrzejewski and Davis (2008) noted that the role of human contact in building meaningful relationships is often overshadowed by the taboo nature of the topic and either implicitly discouraged or explicitly prohibited by district or school policies. Study participants, however, indicated that positive physical contact demonstrated care and concern for students and has led to the breaking down of barriers students had built prior to MCAA.

Furthermore, faculty and staff discussed their preference for and use of restorative justice to strengthen their relationships with students rather than policing student behavior. Specifically, teachers suggested that this approach to student discipline allowed them to better understand student motivations behind their behavior and to help students be accountable for poor decisions while remaining in the community. This finding underscores the research literature regarding the ways in which restorative methods help students develop social-emotional skills and values, foster healthy relationships, and, ultimately, improve academic performance (Kehoe et al., 2017).

Participants discussed the administrative, operational, and academic challenges of launching a new school, which is not surprising given the complexity of running a public-school enterprise (Peurach, 2011; Schul, 2019). Despite these difficulties, faculty and staff members indicated that they were not bound by many of the constraints of a traditional public-school setting. In this way, implementing inclusive strategies like trauma-informed curriculum and restorative justice are integral to the culture by design. Indeed, the freedom to transform itself may very well help MCAA grow into an identity that balances both sides of its vision: acceptance and academy.

In response to Cohen’s (2005) plea, this study makes a strong contribution to the research literature regarding alternative school settings for LGBTQ+ youth. As quoted above, the Hetrick-Martin Institute (2015) suggested that “appropriate and effective interventions, strategies, and policies be developed to address the health, education, and safety of [queer] youth” (p. 26). In reviewing the themes emergent from our discussions with study participants, the educators at MCAA have implemented exactly these types of interventions, appropriate and supportive of all students, including and especially queer students. On the other hand, it is concerning to see that, while educators with the Triangle Program (Knight, 2000) were committed to providing a safe space for LGBTQ+ students, educators at MCAA felt unable to go so far as to make a commitment to providing a safe space given the context of the violence occurring in so many schools and other public places. Yet, the statement that MCAA educators

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commit to providing a brave space for their students is a powerful statement instead.

Connecting Themes to Theory

The conceptual frameworks of queer theory and the ethic of care for students are strongly supported by our analysis of data gathered. Faculty, staff, truly all decision-makers at MCAA, are careful to consider the whole child, and to place the child in the center of the enterprise. Here we present some of the most obvious connections of the themes that emerged from our research and how they relate back to the ethic of care and queer theory, especially to the foci of centering marginalized voices (Erol & Cuklanz, 2020) and the lived experiences of study participants (Yep, 2014).

Considering the Whole Student

Returning to our conceptual framework of the ethic of care, this theme is consistent with admonishments from the literature (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022; Starratt, 1994) for educators to place the well-being of students, and not just their academic success, squarely in the center of the educational enterprise. We believe that these findings provide ample evidence of commitment to caring for each student in the context of their daily lives in school. Further, we see connections here with at least two of the tenets of queer theory, focus on lived experiences (Blackburn & Parker, 2022), and critique of heteronormativity (Regan & Meyer, 2021). Teachers, staff members, and school leaders clearly give priority and credence to the lived experiences of their students, especially to their understanding and tolerance of their students’ previous experiences of abuse and trauma. This theme also implies a critique by MCAA educators of the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm. What is inferred is that MCAA leaders, faculty, and staff members challenge the privileging of heteronormativity, and by extension, cisnormativity, such as what their students have experienced in other school settings.

Being Authentic

Faculty and staff members also implied how important it is that LGBTQ+ students see themselves reflected in the curriculum of the school and allowing students to play a role in a process of restoring justice to the classroom environment when norms or rules have been broken. The ethic of care requires that educators “consider multiple voices in the decision-making process” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022, p. 19). At MCAA, teachers and students bring their authentic selves and voices to school with them and participate in critical conversations that focus on acknowledging the antecedents of misbehavior (i.e., previous trauma) and holding critical conversations about restoring offending students to the community of classrooms and to the school.

Relative to this theme, queer theorists advocate for an understanding of the fluidity and multiplicities of identity (Butler, 1999, 2020). Educators at MCAA cherish each student’s authentic identity and seek to acknowledge and celebrate a multiplicity of student identities in their everyday school practice.

Providing a Brave and Affirming Environment

School leaders and other educators would do well to work toward developing and sustaining brave and affirming school cultures that support all students, not just those who identify as LGBTQ+ or those who are othered in traditional school settings. This theme of providing a brave and affirming environment further supports and confirms the centrality of establishing a culture of care for students. This theme is also consistent with the emphasis queer theorists place on resistance and subversion (Barber & Hidalgo, 2024) insofar as educators at MCAA work diligently toward enacting inclusive and equitable practices and norms in the school. By doing so, these brave educators resist and subvert exclusionary and abusive practices that often characterize the school experience for these vulnerable youth.

Flying the Plane while Building It

Descriptions of decision-making while “flying the plane” remain consistent with an ethic of care wherein decision-makers consider the voices of multiple stakeholders (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022) when developing and implementing policies and procedures and when making morally charged decisions. Leaders and faculty and staff members acknowledge that MCAA is far from perfect but appear to be willing to be flexible and collaborative in their approach to managing and organizing the everyday workings of the school.

Perhaps the most poignant aspect of this theme is the fact that the compassionate MCAA stakeholders are taking significant action to build a school and a school culture where all children, queer or not, are supported, valued, and cared for. Noddings (1992) wrote, “Caring is the very bedrock of all successful education and…contemporary schooling can be revitalized in its light” (p. 27). MCAA educators are actively engaged in queering the work they do every day by using collaborative and participatory approaches to reimagine and revitalize what it means to create a school culture that cares for and about students, and by focusing on a broader goal of social justice (Pennell, 2020).

Significance of the Study

As with any research, it is critical to address the question of significance, especially to the application of new learning in the field of practice. In other words, how do the findings answer the ubiquitous question, “So what?” First, we believe that our study makes an important contribution to the literature and knowledge bases relative to PK-12 schools and how they can better meet the needs of LGBTQ+ students and their allies.
who have not found success in traditional PK-12 school settings. Investigations into this field of study have been scant, at best (Abreu et al., 2022; Knight, 2000; Meyer et al., 2016). We hope that this article and others we have published will add to this literature and to the understanding of how practitioners can better address the needs of this student population.

Second, findings from this study demonstrate that, when concerned individuals are committed to the process, it is possible to address the unique needs of LGBTQ+ and allied students. By focusing on and removing barriers to their learning in public school spaces, school leaders and other educators can improve the experiences and learning capacity of LGBTQ+ students and their allies.

Limitations

Generalizability of findings from this study are limited, given the small sample. Further, the team recognizes that the use of a qualitative methodology further limits generalizability, given that the members of the research team were the sole gatherers and interpreters of all data. A different or larger sample may have yielded different findings, and different researchers with differing positionalities may have interpreted the data differently.

Conclusions

Our team concluded that MCAA leaders, faculty members, and staff members have worked to establish a school culture that is truly unique, profoundly caring, and deeply ethical. As noted above, faculty and staff members spoke frequently and eloquently about their commitment to providing a culture of care to the students at MCAA, in the development and delivery of the curriculum, in their daily interactions with students, in their school-wide disciplinary practices, and in allowing MCAA students to be their authentic selves within the school environment. Returning to the multi-dimensional ethical framework described above, these elements of the culture of MCAA coincide strongly with the ethic of care previously presented (Starratt, 1994), providing a genuine and brave example of what it means to build a truly ethical school.

In a previous article (Fifolt et al., 2024b), we reported on the structural elements of the school building which contribute to the deeply caring school culture. Just two of many examples include the construction of many, individual, non-gendered restrooms throughout the facility and the absence of locker rooms that eliminated what pre-MCAA students had reported as intimidating spaces in their previous school settings. Such facility-based examples (more fully presented elsewhere) add to the more human interactions described here and contribute to a culture of caring by eliminating barriers in the school facility that caused stress and anxiety for students. After studying the data and forming our findings from this research, our team is convinced that MCAA is truly a mission-driven enterprise, deeply committed on many levels to providing an ethical and caring school culture for some of our most vulnerable youth. MCAA is a shining example of how several brave and ethical leaders can, indeed, respond to the decades-long call to create and maintain ethical schools that place the success and well-being of students clearly at the center of the educational process.

Finally, though not explicitly presented as a political piece, perhaps there are implications of political activism (Greensmith & Davies, 2017) in this report that serve to challenge social structures and institutions (i.e., typical public schools) that perpetuate discrimination and inequality (Gower et al., 2018; Kann et al., 2018). Hope and Hall (2018) analyzed LGBTQ+-affirming schools in the United States and beyond. These authors stated that LGBTQ+-affirming schools should not be viewed as segregated schools (a frequent criticism of advocates for inclusive “schools for all”), but rather as separate or “other” spaces designed as “sites of resistance to typical, educational contexts” (p. 1195). Foucault and Miskowiec (1986) presented discussions of LGBTQ+-affirming schools as “heterotopias,” or “counter sites,” enabling researchers to “assess their relationship with conventional schools” (p. 1202) (see also Foucault & Miskowiec, 2003, 2004). In exploring the school culture of the MCAA, our team challenges and contradicts the status quo of typical public schools that have not adequately addressed the needs of their LGBTQ+ students (Benthard, 2004; Cohen, 2005; Hope & Hall, 2018; Meyer et al., 2016; Uribe, 1993). We hope that this work will challenge educators to consider how an ethic of care, queer theory, and queering the work can inform the need for organizational change in public schooling and involve caring educators in the process of reimagining and reshaping organizational thinking and practices centered on the needs of LGBTQ+ students, aligned with the end goal of social justice for all students.

References


