

THESIS

CROSSING THE LINE: K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER NEGOTIATION OF UNSOLICITED
REQUESTS FOR SELF-DISCLOSURE

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

CROSSING THE LINE: K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER NEGOTIATION OF UNSOLICITED REQUESTS FOR SELF-DISCLOSURE

In the K-12 public school classroom, members of the public may interpret personal information shared by an instructor with his or her students as indoctrinating or persuasive. Using Petronio's (2002) theory of Communication Privacy Management, this thesis sought to expand self-disclosure research by applying it to the public school classroom. Building on Zhang's (2007) study of the uses of instructor self-disclosure in the K-12 public school classroom, this thesis was organized around the following research questions:

RQ1: What communicative strategies are used by K-12 public school teachers to respond to unsolicited requests for self-disclosure by their students?

RQ2: How does teacher preparation affect a K-12 public school teacher's decision to either share or keep private personal information in the classroom?

RQ3: What do teachers perceive to be the benefits and drawbacks of using self-disclosure in the K-12 public school classroom?

RQ4: What rules govern these moments of unsolicited requests for self-disclosure? Where do these rules originate?

In order to address these questions, 46 public school teachers across the country were recruited to complete a five-part online survey that asked them reflect on their own experiences using self-disclosure in their classrooms. The data gathered from this study suggest that privacy rules are closely tied to public notions of appropriateness, which are impacted by normative beliefs about who teaches America's students and what the nature and purpose of teaching is in America.

In addition to the broad findings of the study, specific communicative strategies used by teachers when dealing with unsolicited student requests for private information were identified, as well as topic avoidance strategies used when a teacher wished to avoid answering a student's question. The main communicative strategies utilized by teachers in this study were direct strategies including the use of short and simple responses, indirect strategies, or redirection strategies, such as turning the question into a teachable moment. Topic avoidance strategies included many of these same strategies, as well as the use of humor or sarcasm.

The benefits of self-disclosure as perceived by teachers are also discussed in this thesis and include reciprocity, improved communication with students, and feelings of closeness with students. Teachers also frequently cited the benefit of "having my students see me as a real person" on the survey. Drawbacks included risks to security, stigma, face, and role. Consequently, many of the teachers surveyed practiced self-policing of their conversations with students. It is argued in this thesis that self-silencing can cause some teachers, particularly those whose beliefs and lifestyles exist outside of the mainstream, to miss out on positive personal and professional outcomes tied to self-

disclosure. Therefore, suggestions for how teacher education programs can better prepare preservice teachers to effectively handle student requests for private information are discussed, as well as suggestions for further research.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Headlines trumpeting the bad behavior of public school teachers are nothing new in our society. From the highly publicized sex scandals between teachers and students to the growing number of teachers being scrutinized for questionable material placed on social networking websites, criticism of teachers behaving badly outside of the classroom is popular fodder for mainstream news as well as tabloid gossip columns. Yet more and more, what teachers do and say in the classroom is of equal concern to many in the public, who fear that individual teachers may be using the classroom as a pulpit for the indoctrination. Advocacy groups such as Parents and Students for Academic Freedom (PSAF) have sounded the alarm across the country. The group's mission statement begins with the following warning:

America's schools have traditionally been the cornerstones of our political democracy, and the American idea of education has always been informed by the values of fairness, inclusion, and concern for the innocence of youth. The use of schools to indoctrinate children instead of to educate them is a tradition of totalitarian states and antithetical to the very idea of a democratic education. Yet all too frequently in our schools today, teachers are indoctrinating students in partisan ideologies and recruiting them for political

activities and agenda to an unprecedented and worrying degree. (Parents and students for academic freedom, 2004, p. 2)

For those in PSAF and others like them, the “innocence of youth” is at stake in the classroom with teachers holding the power to either protect that innocence or corrupt it. But what, exactly, are teachers doing in the classroom to warrant such criticism? And how is this criticism affecting their reasoning and communicative behavior when interacting with the students in their classes?

Though many teachers strive to keep personal and political ideologies out of their classrooms, some have found themselves in the spotlight when opinions they have shared are made public. One such instance concerns Colorado high school teacher Jay Bennish, when comments he made about then-President Bush were recorded by a student and shared with the media (Mullen, 2006). Bennish’s comparison of President Bush to Adolph Hitler sparked strong reactions from both supporters of a teacher’s right to freedom of speech in the classroom and opponents who charged that teachers like Bennish are indoctrinating students toward a one-sided view of politics. Yet context was largely ignored by media outlets, most of whom failed to mention that Bennish’s comments were made in an honors, accelerated World Geography class, and were part of a student-prompted discussion about the rhetorical tone of the President’s State of the Union Address (Niman, 2006; Riccardi, 2006). Furthermore, Bennish concluded this particular discussion with a disclaimer, which stated that the opinions were Bennish’s

alone (Riccardi, 2006). Put on paid leave while the incident was investigated, Bennish was eventually allowed back in the classroom, but his case illustrates that context and the inclusion of disclaimers may do little to convince the public of a teacher's good intentions.

Sometimes, a teacher may be seen as crossing an ideological line just by sharing personal information about himself, as student-teacher Seth Stambaugh did in the fall of 2010. When a student in his 4th grade class asked him if he was married, Stambaugh replied that he was not. When the student asked why, Stambaugh told him it was because he would “choose to marry another man” (Mirk, 2010). The student's father complained to the district and Stambaugh was removed from his post, though later reappointed after the incident was investigated (Mirk, 2010; Schabner, 2010). From cases like Stambaugh's and Bennish's, it's apparent that the laws of free speech don't necessarily apply in the same ways that they do outside of the public school classroom. Though there is no clear legal precedent barring teachers from engaging in personal self-disclosure with students—that is, “teacher statements in the classroom about self that may or may not be related to subject content, but reveal information about the teacher that students are unlikely to learn from other sources” (Sorensen, 1989, p. 260)—public opinion generally frowns on this type of communication by teachers. One example comes from a recent survey on the educational website Edutopia, which asked visitors whether limits should be placed on teachers' freedom of speech rights. Forty

percent of visitors voted “yes,” 50% voted “no,” and 10% voted “neither.” While it appears that half of visitors to the site support a teacher’s right to speak freely and without punishment in the classroom, a similar survey on BuzzDash.com showed a more decisive split. When asked whether it is “okay for teachers to share their political views in the classroom,” only 5% voted “Yes, generally,” 16% voted “Yes, in some cases,” and 79% voted “No, never” (“Okay,” 2010). Though informal, the results of these surveys add to the emerging picture of the difficulties faced by today’s public school teacher in America.

When it comes to “controversial issues” in the classroom, the issue is most often left up to individual school districts who may “prescribe both course content and teaching methods” (“Free speech rights of public school teachers,” n.d.). For example, a teacher who chooses to teach a controversial novel that was not approved by the principal or school board may find herself out of the job when the incident is reported. And, of course, any action or speech that violates the separation of church and state, such as leading a class in a prayer or displaying religious decorations in a classroom, will most certainly result in discipline or dismissal of the teacher involved (“Free speech rights of public school teachers,” n.d.). Yet prescription of course content and teaching methods by school districts doesn’t necessarily address the issue at hand: how teachers like Bennish and Stambaugh negotiate the sharing of personal beliefs or lifestyle choices with their students, particularly when asked, as in Stambaugh’s case. On their website,

the American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU] explains that, “there are limits to a school district's ability to control teachers' controversial speech in the classroom,” yet “the boundaries are not precise” (“Free speech rights of public school teachers,” n.d.). While it is difficult to accurately gauge the pressure teachers feel when exposed to stories like Stambaugh’s and Bennish’s, it is logical to assume that these high-profile cases may work to silence some teachers or, at the very least, cause teachers to take pause before revealing anything in the classroom that may later be used as ammunition against them. And, in today’s public school classroom, the line between appropriate and inappropriate disclosure is thin, with little room for error (Zhang, 2007).

A recent academic study sought to discover what topics public school teachers believe to be appropriate and inappropriate for inclusion in their classrooms. Appropriate topics were deemed to be “personal experiences/stories, personal family/relatives/friends, and personal interests, hobbies/likes and dislikes” (Zhang, 2007, p. 53). Topics considered inappropriate for teachers to speak with students about included “personal beliefs/political perspectives, and marriage/sex/alcohol/abortion/other personal behavior” (p. 53). Yet many of the teachers surveyed admitted that, “the line between appropriate and inappropriate disclosure is very blurred” (qtd. in Zhang, 2007, p. 56). How, then, are today’s public school teachers drawing this distinction for themselves? What factors influence the decision making process of a teacher when a student asks if he or she is married, or what he or she personally thinks

of the current President? Despite Zhang's (2007) study and others that have attempted to determine the use and effectiveness of teacher self-disclosure in the public school classroom, the actual communicative strategies used by K-12 public school teachers to manage private information has been generally overlooked by the academic community. This dearth of information on this issue has very real consequences for teachers. As Alsup (2006) explains, "as schools and teachers find themselves placed more and more often under the microscope of a critical society, [teachers] struggle with assuming a professional identity that both respects their personal ideologies and functions in the professional arena" (pp. 191-192).

This thesis will explore and attempt to identify some of these communicative strategies teachers utilize to negotiate requests for self-disclosure by their students as well as the ways that public opinion impacts a teacher's decision to either self-disclose or keep private information in these moments. Using Petronio's (2002) Communication Privacy Management theory to analyze the communicative experiences of teachers in the K-12 public school classroom, I hope to expand the current understanding of the ways that societal as well as district expectations impact the communicative behavior of teachers. An understanding of this nature could potentially affect the training of future teachers and the job security of the tens of thousands of teachers who are currently employed in the US, making this issue worthy of scholarly attention. The following

section will provide an overview of the literature concerning self-disclosure, both as it pertains to interpersonal relationships and to communication in the classroom.

What We Know About Self-Disclosure Based on Research

The communicative practice of self-disclosure by public school teachers is a complicated and relatively unexplored phenomenon. Although literature does exist on the utilization and effectiveness of self-disclosure by university-level instructors (Downs, Javidi, and Nussbaum, 1988; Cooper and Simonds, 1999; Cayanus and Martin, 2003; Minger, 2004), less research has been performed on the ways that public school K-12 educators negotiate the often-ambiguous lines between their private selves away from school and their public selves in the classroom. Furthermore, while much of the research on classroom self-disclosure focuses on the use of self-disclosure as an instructional tool used to clarify course content (Sorensen, 1989; Gregory, 2005), very little information describes how teachers handle unplanned or unsolicited requests for self-disclosure, such as when a student asks a teacher what church he or she attends or what candidate he or she supports in an election. When analyzing this practice, then, attention must first be paid to research that describes self-disclosure at the interpersonal level, some of which can shed light on certain aspects of the use of self-disclosure by K-12 teachers. Additional attention must be given to research concerning self-disclosure at the post-secondary level, which can explain some, but not all, of this unique self-disclosive phenomenon.

To set the framework for this study, I will first present the research that already exists related to self-disclosure and self-disclosive statements. An overview of the literature concerning self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships will be given followed by a discussion of the research surrounding self-disclosure in the classroom. Specific attention will be paid to Zhang's (2007) study on preservice and inservice (practicing) teachers' perceptions of the appropriateness and function of self-disclosure in the K-12 classroom. Zhang's work informs this particular study in that it moves the research that has been done on self-disclosure to the public school setting, which has previously been overlooked by most researchers.

Traditional Notions of Self-Disclosure

The past 60 years have yielded numerous studies on the topic of self-disclosure, beginning with Jourard and Lasakow's work in the late 1950s. Defining self-disclosure as "the process of making the self known to other persons" (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958), most researchers in the field of self-disclosure base their definitions of this phenomenon on Jourard and Lasakow's findings. According to Cozby (1973), for example, self-disclosure must be purposeful and must contain private information that would otherwise remain secret from the receiver. The majority of what we know about self disclosure today revolves around the reasons people have for disclosing (including the groups who disclose most often), the rules that govern disclosure, and the effects that self-disclosure has on interpersonal relationships.

In an interpersonal relationship, self-disclosure might occur for many reasons: in order to maintain a relationship (Rosenfeld & Kendrick, 1984; Aronson, 1984; Fincham & Bradbury, 1989; Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1991), for self-clarification (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979), to seek reciprocity from the object of the disclosure (Rosenfeld & Kendrick, 1984), or to form an impression on the object of disclosure (Rosenfeld & Kendrick, 1984). Researchers acknowledge that all of these reasons for disclosure come with risks, which must be weighed before the party chooses whether or not to disclose. Due to the private nature of self-disclosure, less than 2% of all communication is considered self-disclosure, according to Pearce and Sharp (1973). In terms of who discloses, generally, women disclose more often than men (Dindia & Allen, 1992; Cooper & Simonds, 2003); however, this figure is significantly affected by the gender of the target of the disclosure (Dindia, 2000; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958). Research also tells us that age tends to impact disclosure: adults, for example, disclose far less than children or young adults (Cooper & Simonds, 2003). Additionally, race, culture and ethnicity play a roll in how much/often a person is willing to disclose personal information (Cooper & Simonds, 2003; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958). And while all of these factors may influence whether self-disclosure occurs in a relationship, rules and boundaries outside of these factors play a major role in this type of interaction (Petronio, 2002).

Although the benefits to an interpersonal relationship can be enhanced through self-disclosure, there are certain risks one faces when deciding whether or not to

disclose (Rosenfeld, 2000). Rosenfeld (2000) frames the risks as internal struggles that we all face when choosing to disclose information, labeling them “dialectical tensions,” and describing these risks in three ways: integration versus separation, stability versus change, and expression versus privacy. The first tension—integration versus separation—involves the difficulty one faces when trying to balance the desire to be a part of a group while still maintaining a sense of independence and freedom. The second tension—stability versus change—describes the dual need for people in a relationship to integrate routine and novelty in order to keep the relationship satisfying for both partners. The last tension—expression versus privacy—is “a struggle between openness and closedness”—one that reflects “our need to maintain some space between self and other” (p. 5). All of these tensions impact an individual’s decision to either disclose information or keep information private and can have a strong impact on the interpersonal relationships affected by that decision.

The effects of self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships vary but are most often positive. In nearly all cases, self-disclosure is reciprocal (Dindia, 2000; Cooper & Simonds, 2003), and generally the targets of self-disclosure tend to disclose more around others who do the same (Collins & Miller, 1994). Liking is linked strongly to self-disclosure as are feelings of closeness between the self-discloser and the target of disclosure (Jourard, 1959; Rosenfeld & Kendrick, 1984). As a result, trust and self-disclosure are often interwoven, with trust generally increasing the more self-disclosure

is used in a relationship (Wheeless, 1978; Wheeless & Grotz, 1977). Though researchers have studied and noted many positive effects related to self-disclosure, a gap exists in our understanding of the negative outcomes of sharing oneself with others.

Furthermore, there is less research about privacy and the effects of non-disclosure, as Dindia (2000) explains: "In general, theory and research on self-disclosure presumes and addresses the positive outcomes of intimate interactions. Traditional research on self-disclosure ignores the issue of non-disclosure and the issue of balancing self-disclosure to meet the needs for privacy and intimacy" (pp. 34-35). This study attempts to address this lack by exploring the decision-making process that teachers go through when solicited for personal information in their classrooms.

Instructor Self-Disclosure

While the body of literature concerning the self-disclosive practices of those in interpersonal relationships wholly informs the research about the self-disclosive practices of classroom instructors, the latter cannot solely be understood utilizing conclusions of the former. For one, Argyle and Henderson (1985) posit that the relationship between teacher and student is not and should not ever be of the same degree of intimacy as other, highly-intimate interpersonal relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, etc. Thus, theories relating to self-disclosure between highly-intimate parties are not altogether applicable when attempting to analyze this practice by public school teachers (Minger, 2004). Furthermore, the

motivation behind teacher self-disclosure in the public school classroom is often much different than in other interpersonal relationships and cannot be solely explained using existing theories derived from study of intimate relationships between lovers or close friends.

Self-disclosure takes on a different form in the classroom, coupled with specific rules and boundaries. Defined by Sorensen (1989) as “teacher statements in the classroom about self that may or may not be related to subject content, but reveal information about the teacher that students are unlikely to learn from other sources” (p. 260), teacher self-disclosure functions somewhat differently than other forms of self-disclosure that have already been discussed. While many factors go into the decision to self-disclose or not, one that particularly affects teachers is the idea of appropriateness. Says Cooper and Simonds (2003):

A major characteristic of effective self-disclosure is appropriateness. To be effective communicators we consider the timing of our disclosure, the other person’s capacity to respond, the short-term effects, the motives for disclosure, how much detail is called for, whether the disclosure is relevant to the current situation, and the feelings of the other person as well as our own. (p. 41)

Whereas ideas regarding appropriateness govern self-disclosure in nearly all situations, cultural norms regarding the relationship between teachers and students in the K-12 classroom can be especially rigid.

As highlighted in the introduction to this study, self-disclosure by teachers in the K-12 setting is often viewed with suspicion by the general public, yet research has shown that students perceive teachers as regularly disclosing information in the classroom both intentionally and unintentionally (Nussbaum & Scott, 1979; 1980). In fact, Javidi, Downs, and Nussbaum (1988) found that mid-high (junior-high and middle school level) and high school teachers not only disclose personal information through humor and narrative on a regular basis, but that experienced teachers (Javidi & Long, 1989) and award-winning teachers do this much more frequently than less-experienced and/or non-award winning teachers. That said, most award-winning teachers use self-disclosure in a deliberate way—mainly to illustrate a point or support curricular concepts (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988; Javidi & Long, 1989; Gregory, 2005). Other reasons teachers give for self-disclosing in the classroom are to “increase affect with students, to admit personal bias, [to] raise student awareness and open their minds, to influence students, [and] to use as an emotional outlet” (Gregory, 2005, p. 71).

While experienced and award-winning teachers tend to utilize self-disclosure more often than their counterparts, perceptions of appropriateness still play a major role in how a teacher’s self-disclosure will be received by his/her class. Based on research concerning student reactions to instructors’ self-disclosive statements, “good” teachers were identified as those who used appropriate self-disclosures—i.e., those positive in content (Sorensen, 1989) and showing care and concern for students

(Sorensen, 1989; Deiro, 2003; Fisher, 2001). An example of an appropriate self-disclosive statement used by a good teacher might be: "I care about my students" (Sorensen, 1989, p. 266). Students judge teachers to be "poor" who use inappropriate disclosures that are negative and self-serving (Sorensen, 1989). An example might be "I don't make friends easily" (p. 267). Minger (2004) summarizes the research on student perceptions of appropriate versus inappropriate self-disclosure by teachers in this way:

With regard to instructor self-disclosure, the boundaries of a healthy instructor-student relationship are blurred when: 1) self-disclosures are made apart from consideration of student characteristics; 2) self-disclosures are not judicious or tasteful or are prompted by ulterior motives, including meeting the ego needs of the instructor; 3) self-disclosures are made irrespective of cultural norms and societal expectations; and 4) self-disclosures are primarily negative and exhibit a lack of tolerance. Stated positively, health boundary conditions for self-disclosures are maintained when the student perceives that 1) the instructor demonstrates empathy in choosing self-disclosive content by considering the students' apprehensions, motivations, emotional stability, and personal characteristics; 2) the instructor's self-disclosure is selective (the result of self-monitoring) and delivered with altruistic motives; and 3) that the instructor's self-disclosure recognizes and honors the norms which govern interactions in their specific context. (pp. 37-38)

Ultimately, studies have found that student investment, participation, and achievement are positively correlated with positive self-disclosures on behalf of teachers (Sorensen, 1989; Cayanus, 2004; Deidro, 2003; Goldstein & Benassi, 1994; Rouse & Bradley, 1989). On the other hand, very little is known about the effects of negative or inappropriate self-disclosures on these same factors.

Though the findings on instructor self-disclosure have added to our understanding of self-disclosure as a whole, the vast majority of studies on this topic focus on the university-level classroom and the relationship between professors and undergraduate students. Research at the K-12 level has been largely absent, and there is still much unknown about how these teachers negotiate moments of self-disclosure with their underage students. Furthermore, of the research that does exist in the area of teacher self-disclosure, most focuses on students' perceptions of the disclosive behavior, rather than the perceptions that teachers hold regarding the use of self-disclosure in their classrooms. Zhang (2007) attempts to address this gap in research by exploring the issue of instructor self-disclosure from the vantage point of the instructors themselves. With a focus on the K-12 classroom, Zhang's work effectively establishes a foundation on which this study can be built.

Appropriate and Inappropriate Topics for Self-Disclosure

Whereas most research regarding the use of, effectiveness of, and student perceptions of teacher self-disclosure revolves around the university classroom, Zhang's

(2007) dissertation explores the perceptions among preservice (not yet licensed teachers-in-training) and practicing teachers regarding self-disclosure in the K-12 classroom. Aiming to fill a hole, Zhang employs quantitative surveying techniques to question 315 preservice and inservice teachers about the appropriateness, the effectiveness, and the rules governing self-disclosure in the public school classroom. For the purposes of this particular study, results concerning the appropriateness and rules of self-disclosure will only be discussed. Furthermore, though Zhang's study focuses on both preservice and inservice teachers' perceptions of appropriateness, the focus of this research is primarily on the self-disclosive experiences of practicing K-12 teachers, so results concerning preservice teachers beyond an explanation of how Zhang identifies appropriate and inappropriate topics of teacher disclosure will not be included in the overview of Zhang's (2007) findings.

In a preliminary study, Zhang surveyed 129 preservice (undergraduate) teacher trainees in order to identify topics that were perceived to be appropriate and inappropriate for self-disclosure by teachers in the public school classroom. In order to gauge perceptions of appropriateness, Zhang utilized a Likert-type scale that asked teachers to rate topics based on perceived appropriateness for disclosure in the K-12 classroom. For preservice teachers, the results showed that "personal experiences/stories, personal family/relatives/friends, and personal interests, hobbies/likes and dislikes" were all topics considered to be appropriate for teachers to

discuss with students (Zhang, 2007, p. 53). Topics considered inappropriate for disclosure included “personal beliefs/political perspectives, and marriage/sex/alcohol/abortion/other personal behavior” (p. 53). The results among practicing K-12 teachers were similar. Overall, Zhang found that “No significant differences [existed] in the perceptions of appropriateness of teacher self-disclosure across the levels of K-12 inservice teachers’ gender, ethnic group, type of education, years of teaching, grade level of teaching, and award status” (p. 84).

Rules governing disclosure were also explored in Zhang’s study, and factors limiting disclosure included the “students’ age, grade level, or ‘the maturity level’” (p. 56). High school teachers, for example, were less opposed to sharing details about political perspectives than elementary teachers. Similarly, high school teachers felt it less inappropriate to share “information from . . . intimate relationships” while elementary teachers considered this inappropriate. In short, the perception of appropriateness of the disclosure depended greatly on context of the disclosure, yet many teachers surveyed revealed that the line between “appropriate” and “inappropriate” topics for disclosure is often “very blurred” (p. 56).

Reasons for disclosure, according to the teachers surveyed, were found to be “offering real-world, practical examples, clarifying learning materials, enhancing students’ learning interests, creating positive teacher-student relationships, creating a class environment comfortable to students, attracting students’ attention, and setting

social role models” (p. 135). The appropriate reasons for disclosing given by teachers in this study support claims made by inappropriate reasons for self-disclosure, according to inservice teachers, included “entertaining . . . students” and “pleasing themselves” (p. 135). Downs, Javidi, and Nussbaum (1988), Javidi and Long (1989), and Gregory (2005) all found that teachers most often disclose to clarify concepts from the day’s lesson.

Zhang’s (2007) study offers important new data previously overlooked by many classroom self-disclosure researchers—particularly data that identifies specific topics seen as appropriate and inappropriate for self-disclosure by teachers in the K-12 classroom. This data raises questions about what factors contribute to these perceptions amongst K-12 teachers. For example, do these perceptions stem from a teacher’s educational background or training? How do cultural attitudes about teacher behavior affect these perceptions? Because the K-12 classroom is governed by tighter rules and held to a higher level of scrutiny, it is important that researchers continue to explore the ways in which teachers at these levels use self-disclosure as an instructional tool. This study attempts to “investigate application of teacher self-disclosure . . . using qualitative research” (p. 162) as Zhang suggests in the limitations and suggestions for future research section of the (2007) study.

Summary

Research on self-disclosure up to this point has primarily examined this communicative phenomenon from an interpersonal standpoint. While findings on the

way that gender, age, and culture inform studies about the use of self-disclosure by instructors in the classroom, less is known about how self-disclosure functions in an educational setting. Previous studies on teacher self-disclosure have mainly focused on the effects of teacher self-disclosure on students. For instance, studies have been done on the ways that teacher self-disclosure affects student motivation, participation, and output. Few studies have focused on perceptions of self-disclosure among teachers or the ways that teachers utilize self-disclosure in their classrooms, particularly when it is unplanned. In addition, most studies done in this area have taken place at the university or college level, focusing on the self-disclosive practices of professors teaching undergraduate students. This study seeks to build on Zhang's (2007) findings while taking the research in a new direction: focusing on unplanned moments of self-disclosure in the K-12 classroom, a setting where teachers are generally under more scrutiny when it comes to their classroom behavior. Information provided by this study could provide information that may positively benefit future teachers by informing the way that these teachers are trained to effectively address requests for self-disclosure in their classrooms.

In the next chapter of this thesis, I will outline the methodology for this study including the theoretical framework, research questions, measuring instrument, data collection, and data analysis.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

This study examined the classroom communication behavior of K-12 public school teachers in the United States. Specifically, I asked individual teachers to anonymously complete an online survey which asked them to explain the ways that they, personally, handle moments when students in their classes ask them to share information that would normally be considered private or personal information about themselves in class, such as who they voted for in a past election or if they are married. By examining the responses given by teachers, I hoped to understand what factors influence this decision-making process, as what is said to students in the public school classroom often becomes problematic when a teacher crosses the boundary of "appropriateness" when sharing beliefs or opinions with students. An understanding of this communicative behavior could benefit teachers who are currently employed by helping them to better understand and reflect upon their own communicative behaviors. Findings could also benefit teachers-in-training by shedding light on the different ways that veteran teachers manage these situations.

In this chapter I will discuss the theoretical framework that guides the study: Petronio's (2002) Communication Privacy Management theory. An example study that utilizes CPM theory to analyze the self-disclosive practices of college instructors will be discussed which will lead into a presentation of the research questions that guide the

current study. The measuring instrument, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures will also be presented. First, an overview of CPM theory.

Communication Privacy Management Theory

As this study is primarily concerned with the management of private information by public school teachers, it is important to first define what is meant by the terms “private,” “boundary management,” and “strategies” in theories of self-disclosure. Petronio’s (2002) theory of Communication Privacy Management (CPM) provides a useful breakdown of the ways that private information is managed by individuals. CPM theory suggests that individuals use certain rules and boundaries when deciding what information to share with others and what information to keep private. Shifting the focus of her inquiry slightly from self-disclosure to “private disclosures” which she defines as “talking about our private feelings in public,” Petronio maps out the way that individuals manage private information that is both individual and collective—i.e., information that is managed privately by one individual or collectively by more than one person (p. 5).

In CPM theory, rules governing the disclosure of private information dictate everything from who is allowed to receive a disclosure, how much is disclosed to any one person or group of people, as well as when and where disclosures occur (Petronio, 2002). Generally, factors that influence the development of rules include gender, culture, motivation, context, and the ratio between the risks and the benefits of disclosure. Rules may be developed individually or, more often, handed down from organizations or collectives. Says Petronio, “Rule development focuses on the way

people come to know or establish privacy rules . . . there are times when individuals need to develop new rules, learn preexisting privacy rules, or negotiate rules that manage boundaries” (p. 38).

Once established, rules determine the construction of boundaries around private information. According to Petronio, “Boundaries function to identify ownership of information leading to subsequent control over who knows about private matters” (p. 6). She further explains that while individuals operate under their own rules and boundaries regarding self-disclosure, they also operate under rules and boundaries that govern the different types of interpersonal relationships they participate in (Petronio, 2000). Similarly, multiple people often share boundaries around information. As such, the boundaries we place around information shift and change according to the situation and are often permeable.

College Instructor Privacy Management

Hosek and Thompson (2009) applied Petronio’s (2002) Communication Privacy Management to the ways that college instructors manage private information in the classroom. Seeking to discover “the ways in which teachers develop privacy management rules and privacy boundaries in relation to what they will and will not reveal about their private lives with students,” they found that the rules that governed whether college instructors were developed based on three of the five factors described by Petronio: motivations, context, and risk-benefit ratios (p. 333).

In terms of motivation, the researchers found that “teachers were motivated to reveal private information for content and relational purposes. Other teachers reported

revealing private information to foster relational closeness with their students” (p. 333). In other words, teachers in this study often shared private information with students as a means of illustrating topics covered in class using real-life examples or to build and/or maintain relationships with students. On the other hand, contextual factors that influenced instructor disclosure included social and environmental factors. The authors explain that,

Teachers are aware of the socially sanctioned roles they have and uphold the boundaries in order to maintain a formal teacher student relationship, especially inside the classroom. However . . . when outside the classroom the boundaries become more permeable and rules that govern ‘in-classroom’ disclosure may bend when students and teachers interact outside the classroom. (p. 336)

For Petronio (2002), “the social environment includes contextual factors such as judging the appropriateness of raising a particular topic in a situation, changing circumstances, and the timing of revealing or concealing in context” (p. 25). Physical environment plays a role in privacy rule development by “impact[ing] both our nonverbal behavior and our choices about revealing and concealing private information.” Hosek and Thompson note that context impacted privacy rule formation amongst instructors whether the instructor was inside or outside the classroom, as well as if he or she was disclosing to a large or small group of students. As the researchers state, “many participants commented that they felt more comfortable revealing information about their private lives with students when they were one-on-one or interact outside of the classroom” (p. 337).

The final factor that impacted privacy rule formation in Hosek and Thompson's (2009) work was risk-benefit ratio in which individual instructors gauged whether to share information based on the perceived risk to themselves. Petronio (2002) describes five specific types of risk associated with disclosing: security risks, stigma risks, face risks, relational risks, and role risks (pp. 69-70). Hosek and Thompson (2009) highlight three of these risks pertaining to instructor privacy rule development: role risks ("those that have the potential to jeopardize our standing if we disclose private information"; p. 71), face risks (risks from an anticipation of situations where "our disclosures cause us embarrassment, embarrass others in our group, or serve as threats to face"; p. 70), and stigma risks ("risks [that] are based . . . on the assumption that others might negatively evaluate behaviors or opinions of an individual"; p. 70).

The authors conclude that "teachers do, in fact, use criteria to establish rules for disclosing their private information to students" (p. 343) and that teachers greatly weighed risks of disclosure when deciding whether or not to share personal information with their students. The authors also reflect on the fact that instructors surveyed generally did not believe that they co-owned or co-managed private information with students, a finding which troubled the authors. As stated by the authors, "These findings may be cause for concern given the fact that teachers' disclosures can impact student perceptions of credibility" (p. 345). This finding also concerned the researchers because "it stands to reason that students may share this information with others, and if needed, teachers may want to discuss how privacy boundaries should be managed depending on the content and risk associated with a disclosure" (p. 345). A final

revelation by the researchers was that teacher age and status did not significantly impact boundary management, though they do report that younger teachers (GTAs, for example), tend to be more mindful of risks to ones credibility when managing private information.

Research Questions

CPM theory offers a useful lens for analyzing the private disclosures of public school teachers as it presents a clear model for how individuals construct rules and negotiate boundaries around private information. Though it is unknown what factors (gender, culture, etc.) most influence the rules governing public school teacher private disclosure, Petronio's theory of CPM can be used to formulate questions to help uncover this information. The following research questions guided this study on public school teacher self-disclosure in the K-12 classroom:

RQ1: What communicative strategies¹ are used by K-12 public school teachers to respond to unsolicited requests for self-disclosure by their students?

RQ2: How does teacher preparation affect a K-12 public school teacher's decision to either share or keep private personal information in the classroom?

RQ3: What do teachers perceive to be the benefits and drawbacks of using self-disclosure in the K-12 public school classroom?

RQ4: What rules govern these moments of unsolicited requests for self-disclosure? Where do these rules originate?

¹ For the purposes of this study, "communicative strategies" will be defined using Berger (1997)'s criteria: "communicative strategies are composed of specific tactics or behaviors used to achieve a goal" (described in Dailey & Palomares, 2004).

Survey Design

The data for this project was collected using an online survey consisting of five sections: (1) Teacher scenarios; (2) Personal example; (3) Training and experience; (4) Reflections of benefits and drawbacks to disclosure; and (5) Demographic information. In the first section, teachers were presented with three hypothetical classroom situations that describe a student request for teacher self-disclosure. Teachers were asked to describe how they would personally respond to the student if he/she were in the teacher's class, as well as explain why they would choose to respond in the way they describe. The scenarios were developed with the “inappropriate topics for disclosure” that Zhang (2007) identified in mind; that is to say, self-disclosive topics of “personal beliefs/political perspectives, and marriage/sex/alcohol/abortion/other personal behavior” (p. 53). Scenario one concerns political perspectives, scenario two marital status/sexual orientation, and scenario three alcohol. Scenario two is specifically modeled after Seth Stambaugh’s case in which he was asked whether or not he was married by one of his students. All three scenarios presented situations in which a teacher is asked by a student in his/her class to reveal information considered to be “inappropriate” based on Zhang’s study. Additionally, all three scenarios presented questions that might be asked by students at any grade level. It was my hope that by purposefully excluding information identifying the age of students in each hypothetical situation that teachers would better identify with the situation and more accurately imagine the way that he/she would respond to the hypothetical student as if he/she were actually a student in said teacher’s class.

The second section of the survey asked teachers to provide their own example of a student-initiated request for teacher self-disclosure. The teacher was asked to state how they responded to the student, as well as explain why they responded the way they described.² Both sections one and two of the survey were designed to explore research question one and four. The third section of the survey asked teachers if they have felt prepared to handle requests for self-disclosure in their classrooms in the past. If they reply yes, they were asked what education and/or experiential training they have received that has led them to feel this way. If they reply no, they were asked what training or education would help them to feel more confident in dealing with these requests. This section addressed research question two. The fourth section of the survey asked teachers about the benefits and drawbacks to disclosure. This section helped to explore research question three. A final demographic section asked teachers for their age, gender, sexual orientation, relationship status, grade levels taught, number of years as a public school teacher, and teacher training received. Names of individual teachers as well as the names and locations of schools where teachers work or have worked were not collected as part of the survey. Demographic information was used to understand the ways that age, gender, experience, and other factors impact the

² Because much research has already been performed concerning the affect of teacher self-disclosure on student motivation, performance, perception of the teacher, etc. (Nussbaum & Scott, 1979; Chelune, 1979; McCarthy & Schmeck, 1982; Sorensen, 1989; Goldstein & Benassi, 1994; Hartlep, 2001; Gregory, 2005), I have intentionally narrowed my focus for this study on a teacher's reasoning behind a disclosure, rather than the effect the disclosure has on a given student (though it is likely that a teacher's *perception* of the effect of a disclosure on a student impacts whether or not he or she actually chooses to share private information in a given moment).

communicative behaviors of public school teachers when asked to self-disclose by students.

Participants and Procedures

46 teacher volunteers were recruited to complete an online survey for this study. Data was collected using the online survey software SurveyMonkey from March 3, 2011 to March 25, 2011. Participants were recruited via personal email contact or Facebook message. Participation criteria stipulated that volunteers must be teachers who are currently employed or have previously been employed at a public school in the United States. Additionally, teachers must be or have been employed at the Kindergarten through twelfth-grade level in order to be eligible for participation in the study. The reasoning for this distinction is because grade levels lower than Kindergarten in the United States are not generally governed nor funded in the same manner as grades K-12. For example, while some students in the United States attend government-funded Head Start programs, others attend patron-funded preschools (Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Sansanelli, & Hustedt, 2009). As a result, the expectation for teacher classroom conduct varies greatly depending on the program. Classroom conduct for college and university professors varies greatly as well, as the age of students is generally over 18, and funding and governance may be public or private. On the other hand, public K-12 schools are generally governed and funded in the same manner, regardless of the location of the school.

Subjects were recruited using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. As a former Colorado public school teacher, I first contacted teachers whom I

knew personally via personal (not district) email or Facebook. Additional instructions in the recruitment email or Facebook message asked teachers to forward the recruitment email and/or the study link to other teachers. Consent was obtained in the first section of the survey. Excluded from participation were those who are certified to teach but have not had classroom experience as the primary teacher to a class such as preservice or student-teachers. The reasoning for this exclusion is that as Zhang's (2007) study revealed, there is little difference between the perception of the appropriateness of teacher self-disclosure by pre-service and inservice teachers.

The survey was available online for approximately 3 weeks, and took approximately 15-30 minutes for participants to complete. When teachers clicked on the link to the survey, they were taken to an initial disclaimer page where they read about the purpose of the study, as well as the criteria for participation, risks of participation, etc. Consent to participate in the study was granted by agreeing to the terms of participation and by clicking on an appropriate button. Once consent was obtained, participants were taken to the online survey.

Data Analysis

By utilizing CPM theory, one can analyze the ways that private information is managed. However, as Hosek and Thompson's (2009) study illustrates, there is still a lack of understanding of *how* individuals, in this case college instructors, approach requests for self-disclosure; specifically, the strategies one uses when asked to disclose about a topic that seems risky. Though Petronio's theory can illuminate the reasoning behind whether one chooses to disclose or not disclose in a given moment as well as the

ways that individuals and groups manage private information, it does not identify a clear way to ferret out strategic management techniques used by individuals when managing information. Therefore, this study, while relying heavily on Petronio's theory of CPM, utilized both CPM theory and methods of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) Grounded Theory to discover both how privacy rules are developed by public school teachers and how, specifically, requests for self-disclosure are managed by teachers in the public school classroom.

Grounded Theory

In Grounded Theory, the researcher allows the data to lead him or her to a theory rather than the researcher beginning with a hypothesis and gathering data to test the validity of that hypothesis. Using this method, the researcher is engaging the data as it is collected, reading through the data carefully and asking questions of the data. This system of "open coding" allows the researcher to search for patterns and themes among the data set, which can later be expanded to broader categories of information (Dey, 1999, p. 10). Employing this type of data collection and analysis allowed me to explore the responses given by teachers in an effort to more fully uncover the *motivations* (to use one of Petronio's factors of rule development) behind a teacher's decision to either disclose or keep private information that is requested by students.

Once data became available from this survey, I carefully read through each survey response, coding the data as I went. According to Dey's (1999) breakdown of Grounded Theory, "The first stage involves identifying categories and their properties.

The process of identifying categories is called ‘coding,’ and ‘incidents’ initially could be coded under a multiplicity of categories. Categories (or codes) are to be generated by comparing one incident with another and then by comparing new incidents with the emergent categories” (p. 7). This “constant comparative” method of data analysis allowed me to note the similarities and differences in the description of disclosive behavior as described by teachers on the survey (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 137). Themes among responses lead to the development of categories pertaining to communicative strategies and privacy rule formation criteria. Demographic information was used to understand what factors of CPM theory most impact the privacy rule formation of K-12 public school teachers.

Summary

This chapter introduced the theoretical framework used to guide this study: Petronio’s (2002) theory of Communication Privacy Management (CPM). CPM theory departs from traditional theories of self-disclosure by shifting the focus to privacy management, a theoretical move that allows for a more thorough understanding of how individuals develop privacy rules to govern the boundaries around private information. CPM theory is particularly useful in a discussion of K-12 public school teachers manage private information in the classroom as it allows for a discussion of multiple aspects of privacy management: privacy rule formation, boundary management, and boundary turbulence. At this point, the four research questions that guided this study were revealed. Survey design, participants, procedures, and data analysis methods were also discussed. The next chapter of this thesis will reveal the results from this survey.

CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS

The results from this survey point to communicative strategies used by teachers when responding to student requests for self-disclosure in the K-12 public school classroom. Teacher training and experience, perceived benefits and risks of disclosure, and explanations for why teachers chose to utilize these communicative strategies also suggest criteria used by teachers when developing rules (culture, gender, motivations, context, and risk-benefit ratio) for privacy management as is described in Petronio's (2002) CPM theory. With this in mind, the following chapter will relay the results of the survey as they pertain to the research questions outlined in the methods section of this thesis.

Research Question One: Communicative Strategies

Research question one asks how public school teachers working at the K-12 levels respond to unsolicited requests for self-disclosure by their students. It is perhaps most useful to first explore the communicative strategies noted by teachers within the context of the individual scenarios before discussing broad patterns in communicative strategies used by teachers in all scenarios.

Scenario One—“Who Are You Voting For?”

In scenario one, teachers were presented with a hypothetical scenario pertaining to candidate preference during an election year. Nearly all teachers indicated that they would not share their candidate choice with students. Communicative strategies ranged

from flat-out refusing to answer, stating, as one participant did, “One of the reasons we vote by secret ballot in the U.S. is to keep it private; not even my husband knows who I vote for!” to attempts to redirect the student’s attention without providing a clear answer to the question asked. Voting as “private,” “secret,” or “personal” was often conveyed by teachers to the imagined student questioner, and very often, respondents indicated a tendency to turn the question into a teachable moment extolling the virtues of voting in the United States to students. Comments that displayed the communicative strategy of the teachable moment expressed a recognition that the question did not relate to what was currently being discussed in class (a recognition that was, at times, stated directly to the student), and an attempt to turn the off-topic question into a moment where a lesson could be learned, even if it didn’t directly connect to what was being taught. Many teachable moments sounded similar to the following comment:

I would say that I am planning to vote, since it's important for citizens to express their views at the ballot box. But I would tell her that my vote is private, just like the voting of all citizens is confidential.

Less often, teachable moments also included an explanation of the teacher’s philosophy of education given to students as a means of instructing them about what teachers can and cannot say in the classroom. As one teacher wrote, “I would tell the student that my vote is a personal issue, and as a teacher, I need to stay impartial. So, if I reveal who I'm voting for, it would show a political bias.”

Scenario Two: "Are You Married?"

Scenario two was designed based on Seth Stambaugh's experience when asked about his marital status by a student. Communicative strategies used to address this question were humor ("Yes, I am. Are you?"), turning the moment into a teachable moment about the appropriateness of certain questions ("I would address the student and the class about polite things to ask or say"), and answering the student in an honest and straightforward manner, though without including any unnecessary details ("I would say 'Yes, I am' and let it go at that"). Unlike the previous scenario, most teachers indicated that they would feel very comfortable answering this question forthrightly and, in fact, many teachers indicated that this question did not seem to be very personal and was, therefore, unproblematic for them to answer. Wrote one teacher: "No problem, of course I'm married. Notice the wedding ring. What could be better than married to my wife?" While some teachers wrote that they would use the moment to teach students about polite versus impolite questions to ask an adult (e. g., suggesting that asking one if he/she is married is not, in fact, polite), others used it to teach students about heteronormative symbols of one's marital status. For example, one teacher handled the scenario in this way: "I would answer truthfully, remind them of my title (Miss, or Mrs. so-and-so), [and] briefly explain how a person's title can help them to answer questions like that on their own." Very few participants stated any discomfort in answering this question honestly, even if not married, though more than one respondent clearly indicated that she would keep the response simple and not go into details with students.

Scenario Three: "Do You Drink?"

Scenario three was designed from one of the "inappropriate" topics of disclosure uncovered in Zhang's study: drugs/alcohol. Communicative strategies used by teachers to answer this question were decidedly mixed, with about a third of teachers indicating that they would answer simply without going into detail ("yes—I did drink while I was there,") a third refusing to answer the question altogether, and a third using strategies to avoid answering the question directly, either using sarcasm or redirection back to the task at hand. A handful of teachers replied that they would tell the student that they do not drink, and later explained that they do not, in fact, drink, and therefore have no problem answering the question directly. Similar to scenarios one and two, many teachers indicated that in addition to answering the question either with a "yes" or "no," they would turn the situation into a teachable moment by extolling the importance of drinking responsibly or waiting until one was of legal age or by explaining how alcohol is viewed by different cultures. Said one teacher, "I believe that I would state that it is a private matter whether I drank beer but would state also that it is important to drink responsibly." Another responded by stating that, "I would give the most honest response. Yes I enjoyed the beer in Germany and it does taste pretty different. And I would also explain how alcohol consumption is viewed in other cultures around the world."

Personal Example: "Do You Believe in God?"

Teachers were asked to describe a time where a student asked for private information. The scenarios that teachers provided generally fell into the following

categories: religion (belief in God, church attendance, religious affiliation, etc.), drug and/or alcohol use, social life/social media, sex and/or sexual orientation, demographic information (age, home address, etc.), family, and political beliefs. While most of these categories had at least two respondent examples, by far the majority of participating teachers related an example having to do with religion. Most scenarios involved a student asking if a teacher believed in God, attended church or was a Christian. Of the 18 respondents who shared a religion-based scenario, five indicated directly through their responses that they were Christian. Other faiths represented were Catholicism (1), Judaism (1), and three respondents who stated that they were “church-going” or “believed in God.” Of the remaining respondents, three stated that they were non-religious or atheist, and five did not clearly indicate a religious affiliation.

Communicative strategies used by most teachers when dealing with a question about religion were to answer the question directly using a short and simple response (affirmative responses primarily; “yes I am/do”), indirectly (by redirecting the question back to the student, sharing a general belief about religion or belief structures or stating the benefit of freedom of religion in the United States in a kind of teachable moment), or by refusing to answer, justifying that to answer would, in fact, be inappropriate. Of those who indicated they were religious (Christian, Catholic, Jewish, church-going/belief in God), all stated that they would either answer the question directly (“Yes I do believe in God/Yes I am a Christian” or “I am Jewish”) or using a short and simple response coupled with a redirection strategy (“I do go to church, but let’s get back on track”; “I do believe in God, but that’s all I can say”). None indicated that they would refuse to

answer the question. On the other hand, of those who either indicated on the survey that they were non-religious, atheist, or did not reveal a religious affiliation in either their response to the student or explanation on the survey, only two people stated that they answered the question directly by saying “no” (“I do not attend church”) or by directly stating personal beliefs (“beliefs” in this response was not clearly identified as any specific religious beliefs), while the remaining teachers either refused to answer by telling the student that the question was not appropriate and/or it was not appropriate for a teacher to answer, or indirectly by directing the question back to the student or extolling on the importance of freedom of religion in the United States.

Strategies and Dialectical Tensions

Though the subject matter of scenarios varied greatly (politics, marital status, drinking, religion), communicative strategies used and explanations given by teachers reflect many dialectical tensions that have been described in self-disclosure theory.

Rosenfeld (2000) describes these tensions, stating:

Deciding between disclosing and remaining private is an extremely complex process. This depends, for example, on how I balance the risks of disclosing with the rewards, my feelings about the information I might share, the expectations of the culture in which I live, the situation in which I need to decide whether to be more or less open, my relationship with the target of my disclosure, and the extent to which my disclosure fits the conversation. And there are still more considerations: How deeply do I need to disclose? Do I need to disclose everything, or can I disclose part of what there is to say? To what extent do I

need to talk about related topics so as to provide a context for what I choose to disclose? And what are my alternatives if I choose not to disclose? (p. 4)

Self-disclosive moments always involve one's negotiation of dialectical tensions, particularly when an individual is asked to disclose information. In response to student requests for personal information, communicative strategies used by teachers generally fell into 3 broad categories listed in order from most to least common: indirect or vague responses, redirection by way of turning the question into a teachable moment, and direct responses (including the use of short and simple replies).

While some teachers surveyed expressed a general willingness to answer student questions openly in most situations, most teachers seemed to vacillate between a desire to remain open and a worry about revealing too much about oneself to students. One way this tension was alleviated was by answering student questions in indirect or vague ways, such as this teacher did in scenario one:

I have had this scenario happen in my fourth grade class, and I responded by telling the student that I was still deciding who [sic] I was going to vote for, that I was still listening to the candidates [sic] speeches, and listening to all positions/information.

While this might be an honest response for some teachers, this particular teacher explained her choice of wording in the question, stating that:

I responded in this way because as public school teachers, we are not supposed to disclose our personal opinions on who [sic] we are voting for, and are

supposed to speak/discuss about both political parties equally if the discussion is brought up in class.

By answering indirectly or with vagueness (“I would tell the student that I am voting for the candidate I feel is the most qualified and would be in the best interest of their constituents [sic]”), teachers were able to keep control of the situation by acknowledging the question and the questioner yet refusing to share any further information that might allow students to ask a follow-up question and allow the conversation to get further off track. As one teacher wrote, “I want to praise the student for being interested, but most often when I have encountered this type of question, it is just bird-walking and the student is trying to derail classroom activities.”

Through the use of vague or indirect communication strategies, teachers were also able to avoid sharing any information that might be seen as indoctrinating or persuasive. Fear of a negative reaction from parents and/or administrators was shared by many participants, and indirect strategies used to answer questions about topics such as voting preference reflected this fear. This is seen in the following teacher response: “Children and their parents don't need to know my political status. I feel that it can also cause strife between parents and teachers.” Risks of disclosure will be explored in more detail in the discussion of research question four. Indirect and vague replies were closely linked to another common communicative technique—redirection strategies by way of teachable moment.

When faced with an unsolicited request for self-disclosure, many teachers indicated a reliance on redirection strategies, primarily through an attempt to turn the

question into a teachable moment. For example, when asked for whom they were voting in scenario one, a large portion of the respondents took the opportunity to avoid answering by extolling the “secret” and “private” nature of the voting process, as well as the importance of researching candidates and getting “all the facts.” Out of all the topics covered in the survey, voting seemed to be the topic that seemed the most inappropriate for teachers to answer, thus illustrating the need for communicative strategies that allowed for topic avoidance, such as turning the moment into a teachable moment. When responding to the hypothetical student in scenario one, one teacher wrote,

Voting is a personal decision. When you go to vote, they have you vote in what is called a voting booth. A voting booth gives you privacy so you can vote how you feel without others seeing your choices. Since it is private and personal, it really isn't polite to ask others whom they are voting for.

According to teacher responses, voting in America is marked by privacy and secrecy; a hallmark that inherently allows individuals to opt out of answering this question. In this light, teachers seem to be using this moment to teach students both about the nature of voting in America as well as the impropriety of asking certain questions to individuals, as is illustrated in the previous example. This indicates cultural criteria of rule development, which will be further explored in response to research question four.

Redirection strategies also allowed teachers to maintain student attention on the task at hand. Many teachers on the survey expressed anxiety over answering questions that were unrelated to the content of the day’s lesson plan or the overall

subject matter of the course they were teaching and thus relied on redirection to avoid answering personal questions. In scenarios one and three, for example, the question from students occurs in the middle of a lesson, and many teachers avoided answering by simply redirecting students' attention back to the activity. This can be seen in the following example from scenario one: "That's not what our activity is about. Does anyone have a question about our activity?" The question in scenario two, on the other hand, was asked by a student before class, which might explain, in part, why so many teachers felt comfortable answering this question.

Interestingly, some redirection, as well as some short and simple responses, worked to close the door on discussing the topic at that moment, but invited students to revisit the topic after class or after school. For example, in response to the student in scenario one, one teacher stated, "That's not what we're talking about right now, but if you would like to come in after school, we can talk politics." Though this was not a common response, three teachers used this strategy in response to scenario one, one in response to scenario three, and two others used it in response to questions about religion in the personal example section of the survey. When asked if she was a Christian by one of her students, for example, a teacher stated, "I take questions like this to mean that my kids care about me. I'm open, honest but short and direct in my response. If they want more information, they can see me after class." Though one teacher explained that if asked the same personal question after class she would still refuse to answer ("If the student were to ask later (after school or whatever) then that would be the time I would say that it really is a personal matter and 'none of her

business' politely"), most teachers who invited students to ask the question again at a different time did not provide any information about what communicative strategies they would use at that time. The impact of context on perceptions of appropriateness will be further explored in a later discussion of research question four.

In addition to communicative strategies such as redirection and turning the question into a teachable moment, a few teachers indicated that they would use humor or sarcasm to avoid answering the question directly. Humor and sarcasm seemed to serve a dual purpose: helping to get the teacher out of a "sticky situation" where he or she might reveal information seen as inappropriate by students or parents, and allowing the teacher to seem less uptight. In response to a student's question about marriage, one teacher stated the following:

I would again say, that the question doesn't really pertain what we are talking about right now. I usually do this in a humorous way (yes it has happened) so that they are not offended. I may say something like, 'Gee, I forgot whether I am married or not' depending on the age level.

A desire to spare students' feelings was mentioned by several teachers on the survey, particularly if the teacher chose not to answer the question directly or, in the previous teacher's case, not at all. Being seen as kind or not uptight was also shared as a concern of teachers when choosing whether or not to answer questions, as is reflected in the following teacher response:

I like a humorous response to personal questions, something that is not as stern as 'That's personal' yet something that also says, indirectly, 'I'm not going to tell

you.’ The breezy answer also says to students that I think the lesson is more important.

The desire of teachers to have students view them as “not as stern” may indicate that some teachers may feel that a flat-out refusal to answer a student’s request for private information might be interpreted by students as unnecessarily stern, an undesirable outcome in some teachers’ views. As one teacher wrote, “sometimes not telling when it gets too personal offends people.” Self-disclosure that allows students to see teachers as “real people” will be further explored in the results section for research question three.

A lesser function of humor that was reflected in teacher responses is that it allowed teachers to acknowledge their perception of the intention behind a student’s question, which was most often cited as bird walking, or trying to undermine the teacher’s authority. In response to a student question about drinking, one teacher wrote, “I would probably make some kind of sarcastic . . . remark, not mean but clearly reminding the students and the student in question that I ‘know’ what they are trying to do (undermine authority, find out too much personal info, be a smart ass etc.)”

Teachers also used redirection strategies, teachable moments, and short and simple responses to the same end—to indicate mistrust of the motives of certain students.

This suggests that if teachers mistrust the intention behind a request for private information, they are less likely to share this information with students or will choose to only share a controlled amount by using a short and simple response. This conclusion once again supports the widespread belief shared by teachers who took this survey that

class time must remain focused on the task at hand, not on personal conversations between teachers and students.

The final and least common communicative strategy was to answer a student's request for private information directly by either providing the information asked for (less common), by using short and simple responses (more common), or by refusing directly to answer at all (less common), sometimes stating that it was not polite to ask certain questions to teachers ("I would tell them that the question is not appropriate"). As previously mentioned, the only question that the majority of teachers felt comfortable answering directly was concerning their marital status, though there were a few teachers who also refused to answer this question as well.

By and large, those teachers who said that they would answer student questions directly or honestly relied on short and simple responses, thus maintaining a certain degree of control over the information. This communicative strategy was used most often by teachers in response to inquiries about one's relationship status, drinking habits, and religious affiliation/beliefs. As one teacher wrote, "This is a part of me that is (for the students) getting to know the real me. As a relationship builder it's important to know some personal details. But extravagant details aren't necessary." Short and simple responses seemed to allow teachers to share some personal details with students, which many felt helped to build relationships and establish trust. Yet, there was an overall consensus among teachers that a line did exist between sharing enough information and sharing too much. In response to the scenario about German beer, one teacher wrote,

Again, honestly [sic] and openness is key with teenagers. Especially, while teaching German. Lots of uncomfortable questions come up in a high school German class. Beer, the Holocaust, Hitler, etc. They are all raised at some point. It's best to be open and honest but short and to the point in your responses. There's no point in lying to kids but there's also no need to over share [sic] either. It is a bit of a tightrope walk.

For teachers surveyed, short and simple responses allowed them to essentially walk this tightrope of sharing versus over-sharing. It also allowed them to be “real” with students, a desire which was expressed by many on the survey, particularly when it came to alcohol consumption. As one teacher wrote, “Teachers are real people too.” Self-disclosive moments, even unplanned, allow teachers the opportunity to “be real” with their class, which as any teacher knows, comes with its own benefits and rewards.

The communicative strategies used by teachers to answer student requests for private information reflect tensions created by a desire to remain open to students and to protect oneself from unnecessary harm that might be caused if a student were to relay what was said in class to a parent or administrator. The communicative strategies utilized by teachers were also, in part, affected by the amount of experience a teacher had. This leads me into my second research question: how does classroom experience and formal education affect feelings of preparedness in dealing with student requests for self-disclosure by K-12 public school teachers?

Research Question Two: Feelings of Preparedness as a Function of Experience

When asked if they felt prepared to handle requests for self-disclosure by students in their classes, most teachers said yes, while a handful said “no” or “I don’t know.” Responses were affected to some extent by the amount of classroom experience a teacher had. For new teachers—those teaching for five years or less (nine teachers who clearly answered this question³)—an equal number responded that they did feel prepared as those who wrote that they did not feel prepared, while one replied “I don’t know.” Established teachers—those teaching between six and 10 years (six teachers)—responded “yes” more than “no” to this question with one teacher responding “I don’t know.” Veteran teachers—those who have taught 11 years or more (15 teachers)—overwhelmingly responded “yes” to this question, with only two of those responding “no” and none responding “I don’t know.” It seems, then, that as a teacher gains more experience dealing with students, he/she feels more prepared to handle these requests. But what contributes to a teacher’s feeling of preparedness when faced with these sorts of requests from students?

When asked about the knowledge and experience that led to feelings of preparedness when dealing with requests for self-disclosure from students, answers varied amongst new, established, and veteran teachers. For new teachers, those who revealed that they had felt adequately prepared cited conversations with colleagues and common sense or intuition equally when sharing what helped them to feel prepared.

³ Though all 40 teachers answered this question, some responses did not clearly address the question of whether or not they felt prepared to answer student requests for self-disclosure (ex: “I think a teacher has to use good judgment when asking a student personal questions”). Therefore, only teacher responses that directly addressed the question are discussed in this section.

One new teacher wrote that she had formal training or education classes that helped create this feeling and another wrote that she had “learned from experience” what to say. For established teachers who had felt prepared to deal with these self-disclosure moments, common sense, intuition, and formal education/teaching classes were cited most frequently, while a few wrote that they had learned from experience or had decided ahead of time what information they were willing and unwilling to share with students. Amongst veteran teachers, “learned from experience” was cited most frequently as a reason for feeling prepared to handle student requests for self-disclosure. Knowledge of community norms and beliefs, as well as laws pertaining to teaching, were cited by several veteran teachers as reasons they felt prepared to answer certain questions, as was advice from another teacher. Less common responses cited professional development, deciding ahead of time what one is willing to share, and common sense as contributing to feelings of preparedness.

For some new and established teachers, it seems that teacher education classes have provided knowledge about how to address student requests for self-disclosure. Of equal weight, however, is common sense, which one new teacher described in this way: “I suppose intuitively at the time I knew which questions felt okay to answer and which did not.” Only one new teacher stated that she knew how to handle requests for self-disclosure based on experience, stating,

I feel that experience in understanding who I am as a teacher and the atmosphere that I want to create for my students has the largest influence on how I chose to answer personal questions. I am not so sure that you can really

prepare, besides anticipating the more obvious (are you dating, do you drink, will you be my friend on Facebook) questions and deciding how you will deal with those before they happen.

For veteran teachers, only one wrote that “professional development” had helped her to know how to handle these moments, and only one cited “common sense” as a reason for feeling prepared to deal with requests for personal information. The vast majority of veteran teachers instead wrote that they learned from experience how to handle these moments. As one teacher wrote, “I've been teaching for 25 years and I'm 50 years old. I feel that my life experience has prepared me to handle these moments--and I've handled them adequately--for about the past 12-15 years.”

Clearly new teachers do not have experience to fall back on when negotiating whether or not to share personal information with students in their classes. It makes sense, then, that they would choose instead to rely on training they received as teachers-in-training, on advice from colleagues, or on intuition or common sense. Established teachers seemed to rely on similar strategies when deciding how to deal with moments like those described in the survey. Veteran teachers, however, had at least 10 years of experience in the classroom, and were able to rely on their past experiences with these types of requests when deciding how much to share with students. Because of this experience, they were able to rely much less on intuition and more often on their own understanding of what questions are okay to answer and what questions can get one into trouble. As one veteran wrote, “After decades in the classroom, I have learned what is ok and not ok. No sex or drugs. Alcohol, socially, in

passing is acceptable as it is legal and I do not mention abusing it.” Of the two veteran teachers who wrote that they had not felt prepared to handle these moments, both indicated that they had felt unprepared as new teachers, but now feel prepared due to their extensive experience. It appears, then, that the longer one teaches, the more likely one is to feel prepared to handle requests for self-disclosure. This leads to the third part of this question: suggestions for how to better prepare teachers to deal with these communicative moments.

While it is clear from survey responses that experienced teachers felt better prepared to deal with student requests for private information, there was no clear indication that the amount of education one had amassed impacted this feeling of preparedness. Very few teachers—new, establish, or veteran—cited their education as helping them to feel more prepared. In fact, only two teachers on the survey—a veteran teacher and an established teacher—stated directly that formal education or professional development had caused them to feel prepared to handle requests for private information. Two other teachers cited a general knowledge of psychology and developmental stages of children as being helpful when deciding whether or not to share information with students. By and large, however, experience was cited far more than education by teachers surveyed, which leads to a discussion of the ways that teachers felt they could be better prepared to handle student requests for self disclosure.

When asked “what knowledge or education would aid you in knowing how to best handle these moments,” new and established teachers were more likely than

veteran teachers to provide suggestions for how to better prepare teachers to deal with requests for self-disclosure. For new teachers, the most common suggestion was to engage in role-playing or a discussion of appropriate responses to these requests while in teacher education classes. Others mentioned that it would be useful to have knowledge of laws and policies pertaining to the sharing of private information with students. Deciding ahead of time what is appropriate to share with students was cited by one teacher as a potentially helpful strategy to aid in feelings of preparedness. Another shared that it could be useful to talk to colleagues about this issue to know the appropriate ways to handle requests for private information by students. Established teachers mentioned many of the same suggestions cited by new teachers including role-playing and discussing the laws and policies in teacher education classes.

Veteran teachers were less likely to give suggestions about how one can feel better prepared to handle these types of communicative moments, which is perhaps reflective of the fact that so few indicated that they currently felt unprepared to handle these moments. In fact, one veteran teacher stated bluntly that, "I'm not sure someone can be taught how to address these issues." As previously stated, veteran teachers most often relied on experience when choosing whether or not to share private information with students. It makes sense, then, that so few would offer advice for how to train teachers to deal with these requests, as one cannot be taught to have experience. But this fact need not suggest that teacher training is useless, as at least one teacher stated directly that she had felt prepared based on her teacher education courses. If anything, it suggests that when veteran teachers were trained, this topic

might not have been broached, which might still be the case for many teachers today. Those teachers who did mention effective training they had received as well as those who suggested ways that their teacher training could have been improved suggest that there are, in fact, ways to improve teacher education programs to include conversations about how to use self-disclosure in a useful and productive way.

While experience and teacher training point to some of the communicative strategies used by teachers to respond to student requests for private information, perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of self-disclosure also impacted these strategies. This brings me to my third research question: what do teachers perceive to be the benefits and drawbacks of using self-disclosure in the K-12 public school classroom?

Research Question Three: Benefits and Drawbacks of Self-Disclosure

In section four of the survey, teachers were asked four related questions: what do you believe to be the benefits of self-disclosure for you, personally; what do you believe to be the benefits of self-disclosure for your students; what do you believe the drawbacks of self-disclosure are for you, personally; and what do you believe the drawbacks of self-disclosure are for your students. For most participants, the perceived benefits to both teachers and students were clear, while the drawbacks were less so. Though respondents to the survey came from a variety of teaching backgrounds, including elementary, middle, junior-high, and high school teachers, and had been teaching for as little as one year to as many as 30+ years, the perceived benefits of self-disclosure were uniform for nearly all respondents.

Perceived Benefits for Teachers

The personal benefits of self-disclosure for individual teachers were thought to be that self-disclosure helps build relationships with students, allows students to see the teacher as a real person, builds trust allowing for reciprocity, allows students to better understand and empathize with the teacher, and promotes learning. Interestingly, all of these benefits impact one another with the broader outcome being the creation of a close-knit classroom community where authentic learning takes place. With this in mind, the most popular perceived benefit mentioned by over two-thirds of teacher respondents was that self-disclosure helps build relationships with students. As explained by one teacher, "I don't mind sharing about my family and beliefs to a limit because I feel it helps the students relate to me and know me better." Many teachers echoed this sentiment, stating that self-disclosure helped them feel connected to their classes. "[Self-disclosure] helped me connect to my student and allowed me to feel at home within my classroom," wrote one teacher.

It is interesting to note that for many teachers, self-disclosure holds a dual-benefit: it allows teachers to feel comfortable around students and students to feel comfortable around the teacher. Being able to be open with students was seen as beneficial for teachers, one of whom wrote, "[Self-disclosure] Allows me to share important parts of my life with important people in my life. My students were always important to me." Teachers, it seems, gain personally from being able to share themselves with students. This finding challenges Argyle and Henderson's (1985) claim that the relationship between teacher and student is not and should not ever be of the

same degree of intimacy as other, highly intimate, interpersonal relationships, such as between husbands and wives, parents and children, etc. For teachers in this study, self-disclosure was perceived to hold many of the same personal benefits as those that have been noted in other, more traditional, studies of self-disclosive behavior among adults, including opportunities for reciprocity and increased trust among the party disclosing and the target of the disclosure.

Relating on a personal level seems also to promote learning among students. As another teacher explained, by using self-disclosure, “Students could relate to me as a person and we could build a relationship during the year which aided in helping me help them learn.” Feelings of trust from students are tied to this belief, and self-disclosure was seen to increase these feelings and consequently, increase learning. For one teacher, self-disclosure “develops trust, community and relationships. Opens [sic] communication and learning.” Another wrote,

I feel that I have a personal connection with my students. When we all know each other on a personal level, deeper learning occurs, children are apt to take more risks in sharing/learning. They feel comfortable in their classroom environment. I enjoy teaching more when I know my students and they know me!

By opening themselves up to students, teachers are able to create a space where learning takes place and students feel comfortable taking risks. A related aspect to this benefit is that by using self-disclosing in the classroom, teachers feel that students are more likely to self-disclose, which contributes to feelings of trust between teacher and

students. This is illustrated by one teacher's belief that, "Sharing personal information with students does help to form relationships. By sharing some personal information with students, they may come to feel that they can come to you with questions and concerns." Self-disclosure, then, benefits teachers by opening up pathways of communication that allow students to share their own opinions more freely.

Interestingly, certain assignments and tasks seem to necessitate students being able to share personal information, thus creating a need for teachers to share their own personal information as a way of building trust for students to do the same. Though teachers were not asked to share what subjects they taught on this survey, subjects involving reading and writing tasks were mentioned as subjects where students must feel comfortable enough to open themselves up. For example, one teacher shared,

. . . the benefit of sharing some information about my family and activities, is building rapport and closeness as a classroom community. They understood my expectations and values better. Some of my sharing was to give examples of writing topics, which inspired students to write personal stories that gave details and expressed emotion.

Self-disclosure is seen as personally beneficial to teachers, then, as it allowed them to illustrate the kind of sharing that is necessary when completing certain assignments, particularly reading and writing.

Less frequently cited benefits that can be tied into the larger category of "building relationships" are that self-disclosure allows students to see the teacher as a real person and to better understand and empathize with the teacher. In terms of

promoting empathy, this benefit was shared most often by new teachers—those who had been teaching for less than five years. One teacher wrote, “Sometimes I think showing a glimpse of your personal life (especially as a younger teacher who often makes A LOT of mistakes) opens your students to empathy for you.” This belief—that it is beneficial for students to see teachers as “real” people who can make mistakes—leads into a discussion of the perceived benefits for students as listed by teachers on the survey.

Perceived Benefits for Students

In terms of benefits to students, the most common answer from teachers was, once again, that self-disclosure helps build relationships with students. That said, many more teachers wrote that self-disclosure benefits students by allowing students to view their teachers as real people. Having students see teachers as real people functions in a number of ways, such as allowing students to empathize with teachers, as well as to view teachers as role models or, conversely, as real people just like everyone else.

Being a role model who could “transmit values” to students was seen to benefit students by helping to promote understanding of lifestyles that differed from the student’s own, by reducing prejudice, and by showing students that they could be successful, just like their teacher. As one teacher wrote, “Knowing about some of my previous life experiences helps them see the world beyond our small town and hopefully encourages them to imagine and aspire to do interesting things in the future.” A similar belief in the inspiring quality of self-disclosure was shared by another teacher who wrote that using self-disclosure works “To let them know that other people have

lived through the same difficulties they have faced and have been able to try hard and become successful, thus giving them some motivation.” Clearly, self-disclosure is viewed as mutually beneficial for these teachers, who feel that opening themselves up creates a classroom environment where students feel inspired to do the same, or at the very least, to be inspired by the content of the disclosure.

On the other hand, self-disclosure that allowed students to see teachers as real people was perceived by some teachers to counteract the teacher-as-role-model viewpoint, thus opening up opportunities for students to see their teachers as people with lives outside of the classroom. Simply put, by using self-disclosure, “[students] see me as ‘real’ person who has a life outside of school.” The teachers who responded in this way seemed to share a belief that the prevailing view of teachers among students is that teachers only exist in the classroom and have no other identity. As one teacher explained, “sometimes . . . they (the little ones especially) think that teachers are [not] really human and almost just a part of the furniture and building.” Using self-disclosure, then, benefits students by showing them that their teacher is, in fact, a real person with a life outside of school. Although this belief was shared in the “benefits to students” section of the survey, the greater benefit seems to be for teachers who might dislike feeling like their students only know them as a teacher and nothing else. Many teachers on the survey seemed to feel that their students saw them as something other than “human,” but it is unclear from responses what, exactly, this might mean to individual teachers. Cultural perceptions of teacher identity will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter of this thesis.

In all responses regarding the perceived benefits of self-disclosure, notions of appropriateness and the difference between over-sharing and under-sharing were again mentioned by teachers. Although the main benefits of self-disclosure were seen to be, by and large, that it helps to build relationships and allows students to view their teachers as real people, most teachers expressed that the benefits were only applicable if teachers did not share too much with students. As one teacher wrote, "Much of what I shared was done in a subtle way and was not blatant." This ties into the risk/benefit analysis that is done by teachers when choosing whether or not to share personal information with students, and brings me to the perceived drawbacks of self-disclosure as revealed by teachers.

Perceived Drawbacks for Teachers

Perceived drawbacks for teachers when using self-disclosure were varied, but generally fell into the following categories: self-disclosure can blur the lines between teachers as authority figures and teachers as friends, self-disclosure can offend and/or worry parents, self-disclosure can impact respect, and students might misunderstand and/or misconstrue information shared in self-disclosure. Surprisingly, the most common perceived drawback shared by teachers was "none," which was expressed by nearly a third of participants.

For some teachers, self-disclosure holds the potential for impacting feelings of trust and respect among students, as well as blurring the lines between teacher as authority figure and teacher as friend. One teacher wrote that, "I think if you share too much information it can be detrimental because they could see you as a friend rather

than their teacher.” Once again, drawbacks were seen as occurring only when teachers over-share information, which is seconded in this response: “You are their teacher, not their friend. Too much information creates too much informality.” Respect and authority were seen as being tied up with self-disclosure for many teachers, and over-sharing can negatively impact both. As one teacher explained, “Teachers who reveal too much lose their authority over their students as well as the respect of their students. They also lose the productivity of the classroom.” Related to this fear is a worry that students might misunderstand the intention of the disclosure or worse, misconstrue the content of the disclosure and potentially pass on this misconception to their parents.

Misunderstanding the content of the disclosure was seen, by some, as a drawback for disclosing. As one teacher wrote, “Young children don't always remember exactly what has been said, so sometimes things get confused” Harmless misunderstandings can lead to false conclusions among students, which can lead students to believe something untrue about a teacher. As one teacher put it, “Students can misconstrue, believing that I approve of excessive drinking, drug use, etc. I remind my classes throughout our discussions that all of us make choices we regret and that we learn from mistakes. But some students don't hear that.” Words like “misunderstand,” “misconstrue,” and “confuse” were used to describe the dangers of self-disclosure, and more often than not, a concern that students might pass on misinterpreted readings of a self-disclosive moment to their parents was expressed. Said one teacher, “They can form false opinions or worse, run home and tattle to Mom and Dad, “Guess what my

teacher told us today?" It's not worth the risk. I teach in a very conservative community, and I don't want any judgments about my personal life." Notably, keeping responses short and simple was not always seen as completely eliminating the risk of students sharing self-disclosures made by teachers with their parents. As one teacher explained, "[A] student may choose to read too much into a short, direct statement. May [sic] get the wrong idea if it is not revisited, either in class or after class."

Perceived Drawbacks for Students

When asked what the drawbacks for students were, teacher responses were much the same as in the previous question. Fear of blurred lines between teacher and friend, as well as worries that self-disclosure could impact respect and authority were shared, as well as concern that students might misunderstand/misconstrue information. By and large, though, most teachers felt that there were minimal or no drawbacks for students when teachers use self-disclosure, indicating that when choosing whether or not to share personal information, the personal risks to teachers factor into this decision more than the perceived risks to students. In terms of the impact of these perceptions on communicative strategies used by teachers, because most teachers surveyed expressed at least a general willingness to share some information with students, these teachers either answered questions directly, indirectly utilizing redirection techniques, or with humor. On the other hand, for the few teachers who felt that the drawbacks of self-disclosure far outweighed the benefits, these teachers directly refused to answer student requests for disclosure, stating, as this teacher did, "There are many [drawbacks], that is why I don't share much with kids."

This brings me to a final discussion of the rules used by teachers when faced with a request for self-disclosure from students which addresses research question four: what rules govern these moments of unsolicited requests for self-disclosure? Where do these rules originate?

Research Question Four: Rules of Disclosure

As stated in Petronio's (2002) Communication Privacy Management theory, "CPM proposes that individuals depend on five criteria to generate privacy rules for access and protection of private information, including: (a) culture, (b) gender, (c) motivations, (d) context, and (e) risk-benefit ratio" (p. 39). Each of these criteria will be examined in the following section, though for clarity, they will be discussed in the order from least to most relevant to the discussion of teacher privacy rule formation.

Gender and Privacy Rule Development

Gendered criteria⁴ in privacy rule development has to do with the ways that men and women manage private information. As Petronio (2002) explains, "Within a boundary system, men and women appear to have distinct sets of rules for judging how revealing and concealing should be regulated" (p. 24). In terms of gendered criteria for privacy rule development, there was not much of a difference in the way that male teachers and female teachers responded to the survey. Of the 40 respondents who completed the survey, 18% were male while 82% were female. Though this may seem like a large disparity, it is actually fairly reflective of the gendered makeup of public

⁴ In CPM theory, no distinction between the terms "sex" and "gender" has been made, and the terms are used interchangeably to describe the criteria used by men and women to develop new privacy rules or adapt existing privacy rules.

school teachers in the United States where 76% of American schoolteachers are female (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Though some self-disclosure research has noted that females tend to disclose more than males, other studies have found that the two sexes disclose equally (summarized in Petronio, 2002, p. 43).

On this survey, male and female teachers responded in very similar ways to student requests for self-disclosure including those who chose to answer directly (affirmatively, using short and simple responses, and refusing to disclose), those who chose to answer using redirection, and those who chose to answer using strategies of humor or sarcasm. Sex of the target of disclosure has also been noted to play a role in self-disclosure, and Dindia and Allen (1992) note that “women disclose more than men do to other women and same-sex partners . . . [and] somewhat more than do men to opposite-sex partners. However, women do not disclose any more than men do to male partners” (summarized in Petronio, 2002, p. 43). None of these findings seem to reflect teacher responses on the survey, as teachers seemed no more likely to disclose if the student was of their same gender. What did seem to make a larger impact on privacy rule formation, however, were motivational factors.

Motivational Criteria and Privacy Rule Development

Motivational criteria for privacy rule formation supposes that individuals will choose to disclose based on what they hope to gain from the disclosure. In CPM, “goals and needs for regulating revelation and concealment form a basis for judgments about useful rules” (Petronio, 2002, p. 25). A common motivational criterion is the desire for reciprocity. Reciprocity was seen as a motivation for sharing by teachers on this survey;

many shared that by sharing personal information with students they hoped to increase the likelihood that their students would do the same. As one teacher wrote,

I feel [self-disclosure] puts them at ease with you. They will be more likely to open up to you privately. I learned one of my students was being touched by a family member. She felt comfortable telling me, not because I told them I was married, but because I was honest with them. She is in a better place and is thriving in school.

Comments such as this clearly demonstrate that reciprocity and an open channel of communication between teacher and students is a desirable outcome of disclosing; thus, privacy rules regarding self-disclosure in the public school classroom are affected by this desire. Larger factors than motivation in privacy rule formation, however, were context, culture, and risk-benefit ratios, which will be discussed next.

Contextual Criteria and Privacy Rule Development

Context of a situation where self-disclosure occurs is viewed in two ways in CPM: the social environment and the physical setting. In terms of physical setting and privacy management, “the [physical] nature of some settings influences the decision rule to disclose or protect privacy” (Petronio, 2002, p. 5). In the public school, physical environment is closely linked to the social environment as normative practices of classroom arrangement and school layout are seen as impacting one another. A conversation in the hallway, for example, might be treated differently than a conversation in the classroom. One teacher illustrates this notion, stating that, “I believe that it is OK to discuss personal views-particularly since I don't teach that

subject, but not in front of the class.” The physical positioning of the teacher at the front of the class, though a social expectation, also reflects a physical arrangement of the classroom in which the teacher is literally physically positioned as an authority figure. In most classrooms, for example, the teacher stands while the students sit. This configuration certainly perpetuates the view of teachers as educators with the potential to indoctrinate; thus, many teachers shared a desire to avoid this interpretation by avoiding answering student requests for self-disclosure.

Outside of the classroom walls, however, some teachers felt that they could share more freely with students. When asked to present an example of a student request for private information, one teacher wrote, “I had a student ask me (on their [sic] own, not in front of the class) if I go to church and believe in God.” This clarification—“on their own, not in front of the class,” again reflects the way that the physical space can impact a teacher’s decision to share information with students. The teacher explained her decision to share the information with the student because, “I didn’t feel that I was promoting church or God to the class, as the student asked me privately, so I felt comfortable answering.” Another stated that, “In one-on-one conversations outside of the classroom, I am more than willing to engage in academic discussions and debates, firmly defending my position.” It seems, then, that both the physical space impacts self-disclosure, as well as the target of disclosure. One might feel more apt to share private information in a private conversation with a student, for example, than with an entire class. This finding is reflective of the conclusions Hosek

and Thompson (2009) made regarding the impact of the physical context of the classroom on the self-disclosive practices of college instructors.

The timing of a disclosure, an element that reflects the “social environment” of contextual criteria (p. 25), was often cited as a boundary for the propriety of certain conversations, like in this example from the scenario about voting: “Questions have an appropriate time to be answered. It would be best to address this question during a class where the question is at least somewhat related to content. That way you can better optimize teachable moments.” This response partially reflects research done by Downs, Javidi, and Nussbaum (1988); Javidi and Long (1989); and Gregory (2005), all who found that teachers most often utilize self-disclosure to illustrate curricular concepts. Although teachers in this study were not initiating the disclosure, as was the case in the aforementioned studies, the desire to turn an otherwise “off topic” question into one that, at the very least, results in learning new information about cultural practices like voting, points to a similar use of self-disclosure by teachers—i.e., to illustrate concepts using private disclosure. Again, some teachers felt that while it is inappropriate to discuss personal beliefs with students during class, particularly if it doesn’t relate to the content of the lesson, it is okay to broach these topics after class, after school, or in a private conversation with students. This belief encompasses both physical contextual criteria of place, as well as social constructions of the public school classroom such as timing and appropriateness.

Though some privacy rules indicated a clear link to motivational or contextual criteria, others were general with no clear origin. On the survey, many teachers listed

universal rules about what teachers can and cannot say in order to justify their responses to students. According to teachers on the survey, public school teachers “are not supposed to talk about their view of election issues,” “are supposed to speak/discuss about both political parties equally if the discussion is brought up in class,” and “can in no way discuss . . . beliefs with . . . students as some students might take it the wrong way or see it as offensive.” Though some teachers did say that their particular school or district had strict rules relating to what topics teachers can and can’t discuss in the classroom, most teachers did not mention any specific laws or regulations, but instead implied that to be a public educator, one must adhere to certain social definitions or risk a negative reaction from the community in which one works. In these instances, cultural criteria may explain the origin of these rules, which will be discussed next.

Cultural Criteria of Privacy Rule Development

Culture was clearly seen as impacting self-disclosure on this survey. In CPM theory, “people are socialized into certain norms for privacy in their culture and those norms are basic to the way they conceive of privacy” (DeCew, 1997, summarized in Petronio, 2002, p. 34). This criterion was noted most apparently in teacher responses to scenario one, which involved voting preference. While a few teachers indicated that they would state directly who they were voting for, the majority stated that they would answer indirectly (“I am voting for who I feel is the best candidate”) or would refuse to answer altogether, telling the student instead that the question was inappropriate (“I am not allowed to discuss my personal preferences in the classroom”). These types of

responses indicate cultural criteria of privacy rule formation—namely, that who someone votes for is a private matter, that it is impolite to ask someone for whom they are voting in an election, and that public school teachers may not share voting preference or they might be viewed as indoctrinating children. One teacher voiced this concern directly, telling the student, “I politely plead the 5th amendment. I’m here to facilitate [sic], not indoctrinate.” Many others used the opportunity to teach students about the nature of voting in the United States, a practice which, according to teachers, is marked by secrecy. As one teacher wrote, “I would say that a person’s vote is confidential.” Another shared, “I would probably say that we are very lucky to live in a country where we are free to vote and we vote in a booth so that no one knows who or what we voted for”

Responses to the scenario about voting point to the ways that culture impacts the communicative practices of public school teachers. For many Americans, certain topics such as politics and religion are not appropriate topics of conversation in many social situations. Based on teacher responses, it’s clear that for most teachers, a discussion of personal candidate preference has no place in the public school classroom. As mentioned previously, teachers often responded to questions about voting by explaining to students that it is inappropriate to ask people certain questions. Thus, culture is seen as influencing the communicative strategies used by teachers, particularly when it comes to voting preference. The only allowance teachers made was if the topic of voting could be tied into the content of the lesson. As one teacher explained, “I feel that my political leanings shouldn’t be part of the classroom discussion

unless a) we are learning about politics and b) there is some useful teaching moment there.” School culture also played a role in how teachers chose to answer certain questions.

School culture was seen as strongly impacting self-disclosure in the public school classroom, particularly when a teacher felt that he or she is in the minority in a given school community. This was clearly illustrated in teachers’ responses to questions about religion. Many teachers, both religious and non-religious, explained that their response was carefully worded and reflected a consideration of the values of the school community in which they were teaching at the time. Rule formation for this question demonstrates a broader trend among teachers surveyed—that a teacher generally felt comfortable answering a question when his/her beliefs fell into the normative beliefs of the school culture.

For teachers who were Christian, Jewish, Catholic, or church going, questions about religion were most often answered directly, though simply and without going into detail. Yet for those who either indicated on the survey that they were non-religious, atheist, or did not reveal a religious affiliation in either their response to the student or explanation on the survey, only two people stated that they answered the question directly by saying “no” (“I do not attend church”) or by directly stating personal beliefs (“beliefs” in this response were not clearly identified as any specific religious belief). The remaining teachers either refused to answer by telling the student that the question was not appropriate and/or it was not appropriate for a teacher to answer, or indirectly by directing the question back to the student or extolling on the importance of freedom

of religion in the United States. Two of three who indicated that they were non-religious or atheist stated that they would not be able to share their belief structure with students due to the school climate. One teacher shared, "Being no Christian in a very christain [sic] community, it was something I had to keep very secret so I didn't have issues in the community." Another shared a similar sentiment, writing that when asked if she believed in God, she told the student "I would like to answer this question, however, I feel that if I do I will effect [sic] your own beliefs." Her reasoning for this response: "I do not believe in god--but am a teacher at a school in which this is the most common belief structure." For these teachers, sharing a belief that was not shared by the majority of students and parents was seen as problematic and thus necessitated the protection of that information.

School culture was mentioned by many teachers in response to all scenarios on the survey except for scenario two, although it is certainly plausible that teachers who are not heterosexual would certainly give strong consideration to the school climate before choosing to share any personal information with students. For all teachers, a risk-benefit ratio was carefully weighed before making the decision to share information with students, and for some teachers, the risks of opening up far outweighed any benefits one might gain.

Risk-Benefit Ratio Criteria of Privacy Rule Development

A final criterion for privacy rule formation involves weighing the perceived risks against the benefits of disclosure. As Petronio (2002) explains, "Because there is a potential for vulnerability, the consequences of telling or not telling are essential in

formulating the access and protection rules people use to manage their privacy boundary” (p. 26). Risk types include security risks, stigma risks, face risks, relational risks, and role risks (pp. 69-71). Though relational risks were not seen as impacting disclosure, security, stigma, face, and role risks were.

In CPM theory, “security risks represent instances where people cautiously disclose because telling might shift power away from them, jeopardize their personal safety, or jeopardize the safety of others.” Though safety of self was not shared by teachers on the survey, a worry that sharing might jeopardize one’s position was mentioned by several teachers. Some teachers, for example, stated that they could not answer student questions because “My employer has stated we must keep politics out of the workplace.” The safety of students was mentioned in response to the question about drinking, in which many teachers stated that they would not want to inadvertently encourage the consumption of alcohol in their underage students. Said one teacher, “This is just not something I am willing to discuss largely because I don't want them to think ‘Ms. J’ tried drugs/alcohol and she turned out fine, [sic] I can too.” Yet many other teachers felt that there was little harm in sharing information about alcohol consumption with students, given that students understand that the teacher is of legal age to drink and does so responsibly. One teacher stated, “I'm over 21 and it is legal for me to drink. I wouldn't have a problem simply telling students about the taste of the beer--good, better, similar--but I would leave it at that and not go into any further detail.” As with other scenarios, a desire from teachers to “keep it simple” and not let the conversation “get out of hand” was expressed.

Stigma risks were mentioned by teachers whose lifestyles or beliefs were not those of the majority. Says Petronio, “Stigma risks are based . . . on the assumption that others might negatively evaluate behaviors or opinions of an individual” (p. 70). Non-religious teachers whose beliefs were not shared by students or parents in the community felt that they could not share their beliefs for fear that they might lose their jobs (security risk) or that they might be seen differently by students or parents. When asked if she believed in God by a student, one teacher explained her decision to answer, “yes” by stating, “I think I answered yes because I knew it was very important to his family and he would have been very concerned if I said no.” Yet some teachers felt that sharing their religious beliefs benefitted them personally. As one teacher wrote, “Since I teach at a public school, I like that my students know I am a Christian.” For this teacher and others like her, the stigma of not answering a question about faith might cause students to speculate or misconstrue the intention or beliefs of the teacher, so it is better to answer than to avoid the question.

Face risks occur when “we may anticipate situations where our disclosures cause us embarrassment, embarrass others in our group, or serve as threats to face.” Questions about one’s past alcohol or drug use represent face risks that a teacher must weigh before answering a question. Many teachers worried that by sharing information of this nature with students, that they might risk losing their authority as a role model. In response to scenario three, one teacher wrote,

There is an element here that makes it difficult for me to answer this question. Mostly because I don't condone underage drinking--and the fact that I am a role model, etc. However, I also want my students to realize I am human.

A loss of one's status as a role model is closely tied to role risks, in which sharing personal information "has the potential to jeopardize our standing if we disclose private information" (p. 71).

When discussing the perceived drawbacks of disclosure, many teachers stated that sharing information with students might blur the lines between authority figure and friend. This role risk is illustrated in the following example:

Students do not need to know personal information about me as their teacher. I am not their friend or their peer. Keeping that power differential is important. I did not allow them to call me by my first name or tell them about my dating life or other personal information.

This risk was often expressed by young teachers, or by established or veteran teachers when reflecting on their experiences as young teachers. A loss of respect or authority was seen as detrimental to student relationships, parental relationships, and student learning and productivity. Thus, many young teachers demonstrated hesitancy when answering certain questions for fear that they might sacrifice respect in the process.

For many teachers who took this survey, the risk-benefit ratio was carefully weighed when choosing whether or not to share information with students, and for some teachers, the risks of opening up far outweighed the benefits one might gain. Short and simple responses again worked to allow for some sharing and decreased the

risk of over-sharing, thus allowing teachers to be real with their students without unduly influencing them to think a certain way. Surprisingly, though, few teachers expressed the same concern when sharing religious viewpoints with students, a topic that was deemed by both preservice and inservice teachers in Zhang's (2007) study to be inappropriate for inclusion in the classroom. Those that did express concern about the topic of religion were generally themselves non-religious in a religious community, highlighting the way that cultural criteria work to silence some teachers will promoting the opinions of others.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of 46 teacher surveys exploring the ways that K-12 public school educators view and utilize self-disclosure in the classroom. Common communicative strategies used by teachers when asked for private information by students were identified and included direct, indirect, and redirection strategies. The impact of experience and education was explored, as were the perceived benefits and drawbacks to self-disclosure. A final discussion of privacy rule formation was informed by Petronio's (2002) theory of Communication Privacy Management and suggested the criteria most relevant to the ways that public school teachers manage their private information. While motivational criteria certainly impacted self-disclosure, context, culture, and risk-benefit analysis were the most impactful criteria in public school teacher privacy formation. The next chapter of this thesis will further explore the impact of culture on self-disclosure, particularly as it

relates to teachers who fall outside of the mainstream understanding of what it means to be a public school teacher in the United States.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

Responses given by participants in this survey reveal many communicative strategies used by K-12 public school teachers when faced with a student request for self-disclosure. While previous research about self-disclosure in the K-12 public school classroom has focused on perceptions of appropriateness as well as general rules governing self-disclosure, this study highlights the ways that these communicative strategies reflect rule formation as described by Petronio's (2002) Communication Privacy Management. In this section of my thesis, I will attempt to highlight the ways that requests for self-disclosure differ from moments where teachers consciously choose to share private information with students. I will then explain how privacy rules and communicative strategies, including topic avoidance strategies, are closely tied to cultural perceptions of appropriate teacher behavior. Finally, I will explore the possible effects of self-silencing on teachers while suggesting ways that teacher training and mentorship can work to address the difficulties faced by teachers when confronted with a student request for self-disclosure. Limitations of this study, as well suggestions for further research, will also be addressed.

Requesting Self-Disclosure

When self-disclosing to a target, boundaries around private information become co-owned, according to CPM theory. Petronio (2002) explains that:

As we formulate collective boundaries and develop corresponding rules to manage them, we add to the number of boundaries that we regulate in everyday life. Consequently, CPM proposes that our disclosure process is not as simple as focusing solely on the self. (p. 86).

In sharing personal information with students, teachers are essentially making students co-owners of the information, a reality that acknowledges that students may share that information with their parents or with other students without the teacher's permission. A teacher might try to control the sharing of information by adding a disclaimer to the disclosure, perhaps stating that, "The information I shared with you must stay in this classroom." Yet many teachers on the survey recognized that they could not control how students used the information they had obtained from teachers, and consequently utilized communicative strategies that allowed them to avoid sharing information that might pose a risk if shared by students. Interestingly, this finding contradicts research that has been done at the college level, revealing one way that the communicative behavior of K-12 public school teachers differs from their collegiate counterparts.

In the discussion section of their study on college instructor privacy management, Hosek and Thompson (2009) found that the college teachers they surveyed did not seem to feel that private information shared with students was co-owned by students, a finding that surprised the researchers. Again, according to CPM,

“once a disclosure is made to someone . . . he or she is expected to take on a certain level of responsibility for managing the information revealed” (Petronio, 2002, p. 11). Yet Hosek and Thompson found that instructors at the collegiate level did not seem to recognize that the information they shared with students functioned in this way. The authors explain, “These findings may be cause for concern given the fact that teachers’ disclosures can impact student perceptions of credibility” (p. 345).

K-12 public school teachers in the present study, on the other hand, did seem to understand that by sharing personal information with students they were not able to control how students interpreted or used that information. This was most often expressed in the survey section on perceived risks and benefits, though teachers wrote of risks throughout the survey when justifying their responses to students. An experienced teacher wrote about the drawbacks to disclosure, stating, “Well, the story can always get twisted or misconstrued, so you have to think about your answers carefully, even if you've answered the same question before. I am still cautious in my responses!” This comment was reflective of many teacher comments on the survey and points to the way that self-disclosure encompasses risks to K-12 teachers that differ from those faced by their collegiate counterparts. For one, there is often more scrutiny of what K-12 teachers do and say in their classrooms. There is also more fear of indoctrination in the public, as students in K-12 are essentially captive subjects forced to attend school by the federal government. Furthermore, students at the K-12 level generally live at home with their parents and presumably have more frequent conversations with their parents about their experiences at school. As a result, parents

are more likely to hear about what a teacher said in his/her classroom than if the student was in college. All of these factors make the K-12 public school classroom a unique setting for the analysis of the communicative practices of both teachers and students. Scenarios in this study also illustrate an aspect of self-disclosure that has not been widely examined: that of requests for self-disclosure.

Over-sharing in the K-12 Public School Classroom

The scenarios described in this study illustrate the way that *requests* for self-disclosure may differ from premeditated moments of self-disclosure. While Zhang's (2007) study focused on moments where instructors choose to share information with students in order to "offer real-world . . . examples, clarify . . . learning materials, enhanc[e] students' learning interests, creat[e] . . . positive . . . relationships, creat[e] a class environment comfortable to students, attract . . . students' attention, and set . . . social role models," (p. 135) there has been less discussion of how teachers manage moments when they are *asked* to disclose information by students in their classes. Though the sharing of private information with students is inherently risky in the public school classroom, there are moments when teachers consciously choose to share information with students in order to achieve the aforementioned outcomes. Being put on the spot by a student request for self-disclosure, on the other hand, requires a teacher to quickly decide whether to answer the question directly, indirectly, or using a redirection strategy. The implications of this momentary judgment call have been previously unexplored by researchers—implications that have very real consequences.

When choosing whether or not to share private information with others, individuals rely on previously formulated rules to guide their decision-making process (Petronio, 2002). In CPM theory and other theories on self-disclosure, requests for self-disclosure function somewhat differently than moments where the disclosure of information is a conscious act. For one, the decision making process is presumably shorter. Because of this, a person might end up sharing information before fully thinking through the decision, and might regret the disclosure after having time to reflect on the consequences of disclosing private information. While sharing private information always implies the co-owning of information, over-sharing creates an imbalance of power in which the confidant to the disclosure has more power than the person who shared the information, especially if the exchange is not reciprocal in nature. At least 10 teacher responses reflected this concern, stating, as one did, "Once the kids know they cannot un-know the information." Another wrote:

There is always the chance of sharing too much information. Students don't need to know if you go to the bar every weekend, what your favorite alcoholic beverage is, or if you are living with your mate before marriage. Students do talk with their parents, and opinions and beliefs can sometimes make a parent feel uncomfortable with you being a role model for their child.

With less time to think over the risks and benefits of sharing private information, a teacher who is put on the spot by a student's question might share too much information; information that could potentially harm the teacher personally or professionally.

As discussed previously, teacher responses to student requests for self-disclosure indicate that perceptions of the motivation behind questions can affect whether a teacher is willing to answer a question or not. Petronio (2002) explains that in many instances, requests for disclosure are an attempt by the questioner to link privacy boundaries. This linkage might result from probing, asking direct or indirect questions, gaining permission, or through information seeking (pp. 98-99). According to Petronio, "Asking direct or indirect questions about private information informs individuals about the interest of others in the personal matters and is an attempt to encourage boundary linkage" (p. 98).

In the case of students, boundary linkages may be attempted towards different ends. A student may, for example, want to know personal information about his or her teacher so that he or she can feel more comfortable talking to that teacher about his or her own concerns and problems. On the other hand, a student may ask a teacher for private information in an attempt to embarrass the teacher or challenge his or her position as a role model or authority figure. Many teachers expressed this concern, stating, as one teacher did: "My experience with high school students is that the students who ask these questions [about drugs or alcohol] are the ones who are trying to either gain control of the classroom or just constantly be disruptive." When asked for personal information, then, a teacher may spend a moment attempting to ascertain the motivation of the questioner as this may impact whether or not information is shared. Given the nature of the request for disclosure, however, teachers may not have time to fully think through the benefits and drawbacks of sharing personal information, thus

putting them at personal or professional risk that they might not face if the disclosure is premeditated. When faced with a student request for self-disclosure that was seen as inappropriate given the timing, topic, or motivation of the student, teachers often relied on topic avoidance strategies. These strategies will be discussed next.

Topic Avoidance Strategies

While it is clear from this survey that there are some topics that most teachers feel comfortable answering (those pertaining to family, marital status, hobbies, etc.), those considered to be inappropriate require teachers to utilize topic avoidance strategies. Topic avoidance occurs “when an individual decides not to disclose information on a particular topic to another person” (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000, p. 166). Topic avoidance strategies, then, are communicative strategies that allow an individual to avoid sharing private information. While the majority of studies that utilize CPM theory focus on the creation of privacy rules that govern how boundaries are negotiated, the actual strategies used in response to privacy invasion have been less explored (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). Studies like Braithwaite (1991) and Mazur and Ebesu Hubbard (2004) have worked to fill this gap.

Utilizing CPM to analyze the self-disclosive practices of individuals with disabilities when asked for private information by able-bodied strangers, Braithwaite (1991) does note the communicative strategies used by this population when faced with an unwanted request for self-disclosure. As Braithwaite explains, “All the subjects indicated a willingness to answer questions if certain conditions of appropriateness are met including appropriate: relationship characteristics, context and topic, motivation,

and mood” (p. 263). Questions that were seen as inappropriate by disabled individuals in the study necessitated the use of certain topic avoidance strategies including “(a) changing the subject to avoid the question they do not want to answer, (b) ignoring or avoiding the question or questioner, (c) withdrawing physically from the person who asked the inappropriate question, or (d) asking the offending person to leave them alone” (p. 265). These strategies reflect the disabled individual’s attempts to fortify boundaries through topic avoidance communicative responses—that is, an attempt to reinforce an existing boundary by making it clear to the violator that a line has been crossed (Mazur & Ebesu Hubbard, 2004).

While responses like these might work when the request comes from a stranger, public school teachers cannot practically use some of these strategies. For example, if a teacher is asked whom she will vote for in an upcoming election, she most likely cannot withdraw physically from the questioner. Changing the subject was utilized by teachers, however, suggesting that there may be some topic avoidance strategies that are commonly used in response to requests for private information that are seen as inappropriate by the target of the request.

In a study by Mazur and Ebesu Hubbard (2004), the communicative strategies used by adolescents when asked to disclose private information by their parents were examined. Ultimately, the researchers found that adolescents used the following topic avoidance strategies to deal with their parents’ questions:

. . . discussing the topic truthfully or deceptively, rejecting discussion of the topic directly or indirectly, or terminating the interaction, managing the discussion

through reassurance, listening, and signaling disinterest, as well as conveying an assortment of emotions from crying, discomfort, assertiveness, or aggressiveness. (p. 34)

Unlike individuals in Braithwaite's study who, when faced with a question from a stranger that they felt to be an invasion of privacy utilized strategies that allowed them to avoid answering the question at all, adolescents in Mazur and Ebesu Hubbard's study expressed a wider range of communicative strategies such as responding truthfully to requests for information or crying to avoid answering directly. Presumably, because adolescents have a pre-established relationship with their parents, they cannot always shut down requests for private information and must therefore utilize avoidance strategies that reflect the tension between wanting to share some information with their parents but not too much. As such, a common avoidance strategy used by adolescents in the survey was to use deception—"concealing and omitting information"—which "neither fortifies nor renegotiates a boundary but instead seems to act as pseudo-self-disclosure" (pp 32; 35).

Though there are parallels between the communicative strategies used by teachers when dealing with requests for self-disclosure from their students and those used by participants in both Braithwaite's and Mazur and Ebesu Hubbard's studies, certain topic avoidance strategies such as redirection by turning a question into a teachable moment reflect unique avoidance strategies used by public school teachers. As stated in the results section, very few teachers utilized direct communicative strategies when answering student questions—the vast majority relied on strategies

such as short and simple responses, indirect responses, or redirection strategies that allowed them to share some information but protect other information from students. And though some teachers relied on humor or sarcasm as avoidance strategies, none indicated that they would intentionally deceive students when responding to requests for personal information. This suggests that on some level, teachers may feel that students have a right to ask questions of them, though they may refuse to answer them. As one teacher writes, “I do not feel the need to lie to my students about things like marriage or religion. They are still getting their footing and I want them to feel like I am a safe person to talk to.” This statement reflects a general belief shared by many teachers that although some questions may violate existing privacy rules governing boundaries around certain information (religious beliefs, for example), most often they are genuine attempts by students to connect with a teacher. Thus, even when refusing to answer, many teachers related that they would thank the student for asking the question in an effort to acknowledge that in this moment, they might not choose to answer, but in a different setting (say—after school), they would be more willing to open up to students.

Positioning oneself as a “safe person to talk to” also highlights a unique tension teachers face when choosing how to respond to student requests for private information. Whereas refusing to answer a stranger’s inquiry about the nature of one’s disability has little long-term impact on either party involved, teachers who refuse to answer student questions worried that they might offend or close off communication with their students. A new teacher who stated that she didn’t share very much private

information with students articulated this concern, stating that, “They [students] might have wished they had known me better since I was careful about what I shared.” Many teachers surveyed expressed a desire to open channels of communication and build trust with students by sharing certain details about their lives in the classroom and in fact, this was cited as the number one benefit teachers felt resulted from using self-disclosure. Given this finding, it’s clear that those teachers who generally utilize avoidance strategies when faced with requests for private information from students may miss out the opportunity to build relationships or position themselves as allies for students. This brings me to a discussion of the ways that cultural perceptions and notions of appropriateness can impact the communicative behavior of public school teachers, even causing some to silence themselves for fear of reprisal.

A Culture of Silence

Notions of appropriateness clearly impact privacy rule formation in public school teachers. Though previous research such as Zhang’s (2007) study have identified the topics seen by teachers as appropriate or inappropriate for discussion with students, it was unclear from this study why teachers selected some topics as being off limits and not others. By utilizing CPM theory, one can understand how culture and context impact privacy rule formation in public school teachers. This current study has revealed interesting insight into the perceived risks and benefits of sharing private information with students such as one’s religious beliefs or one’s drinking habits and hinted at the way that cultural perceptions of appropriate teacher behavior can affect the communicative strategies used by teachers when dealing with student requests for

private information. More specifically, notions of who teaches in America's public schools, as well as the role of teachers in the public sphere can work to highlight the views of some teachers while silencing the views of others.

Who Teaches in America

As a profession, white, heterosexual women have primarily performed teaching duties in America's public schools, a trend that continues today (Alsup, 2006; Blount, 1996). While most female teachers teaching before the 1950s were single, a societal focus on family and marriage after World War II changed the prevailing image of teachers as spinsters to teachers as mothers and nurturers (Alsup, 2006). Today's K-12 public school teachers are primarily white [84.3%](Provenzo, Jr., 2011), female [76%](National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), and married [73%](National Education Association, 2003). No statistics exist regarding the sexual orientation of public school teachers, but Woog (2005) posits that, "there are gay and lesbian teachers in every school building in America—probably in numbers greater than our representation in the general population" (qtd. in Jackson, 2007). Similarly, no statistics exist for religious affiliation of public school teachers, though in the United States, 78.4% of adults describe themselves as Christian (The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2010).

Given these numbers, it's not surprising that those teachers who fall outside of these norms—those who are atheist, for example—often utilize topic avoidance strategies when asked for private information by their students, particularly when they teach in a community where their beliefs or lifestyles are discouraged. As one teacher

explained, “People who are ‘different oriented’ should develop their own humorous responses to be ready when/if students ask.” Another wrote in more detail about the need for teachers to keep their private lives private, stating:

Anyone who is aware of what is going on in the world today keeps their[sic] private life private. I don't have a Facebook account. Maybe that makes me an old fuddy-duddy, but there aren't any compromising pictures or stories about my private life floating around out there . . . I have chosen to live in a city 15 miles from the city I teach in--for a reason. I don't need or want to be seen in the grocery store by my students or their parents!! I live a very moral, quiet but private life. I don't want to be analyzed or judged by anyone. I'm ‘out there’ enough as a public employee.

Being “out there” reflects a common notion held by teachers that by the very nature of the teaching profession, employees are subject to more scrutiny than their private-sector counterparts. As Sesno (1998) explains, “classroom teachers have become ever more vulnerable to allegations of misconduct or malfeasance . . . And, as every teacher knows, once a teacher is accused of *anything*, however falsely or maliciously, a career stain results that may never be removed” (p. xi). The fear that one might be “judged by anyone,” even for what one buys at the grocery store, is very real for some teachers and it is therefore not surprising that some teachers would choose to censor what they say in the classroom, rather than open themselves up to further criticism.

Normative cultural beliefs about who teaches America’s children were clearly seen impacting the communicative practices of teachers on this survey, both for those

who felt they were in the majority and for those who viewed themselves as outside the majority. One example of this can be found by examining teacher responses to scenario two, in which a student asks the teacher if he/she is married. For student-teacher Seth Stambaugh, this question was risky to answer and ultimately resulted in his termination when he chose to answer truthfully. Yet teachers on this survey (all but one whom were self-described heterosexuals) dismissed the “personal” aspect of this question, stating instead that they would feel comfortable answering either way. In fact, when asked about sexual orientation in the demographic section of the survey, one heterosexual female teacher wrote, “Please! I'm married! Haven't been asked this since the blood drive!” For this teacher, marriage and heterosexuality were obvious components of her identity as a public school teacher. For gay and lesbian public school teachers, on the other hand, seemingly innocent questions about one’s family and dating life have very real risks that must be weighed against the benefits of disclosing such information. Sanlo (1999) explains this risk, stating that, “Teachers who are aware that they do not match society’s standards may internalize these perceptions. It is also likely that such reactions lead to silence about who they are.” Teachers who find themselves in violation of more than one cultural norm may engage in even further self-policing. As Jackson (2007) states, “Race and sexual orientation act as a double oppression” (p. 11). Though laws do exist in some cities and states that limit the topics that can be discussed with students, cultural notions of the role of a teacher and the purpose of education can also be seen as impacting the communicative behavior of public school teachers in America.

The Role of Teachers

The expectations for teacher behavior in America can vacillate widely in different states, districts, and schools and are heavily impacted by both cultural and political factors (Marsh, 2003, p. 5). Members of the public view the teaching profession in many ways. For some, teaching is a profession in which “it’s still possible to effect change, to improve the lives of others” (Danielewicz, 2006). In this view, the teacher is a kind of public hero with great power, and generally this type of teacher uses his/her powers for good, not evil. Another view of the profession is more bleak, with “. . . teachers and administrators in the public schools . . . slacking off and nobody is doing anything about it” (Alsup, 2006, p. 21). In this view the teacher has little-to-no interest in the needs of his/her students and is instead merely interested in collecting paychecks and coasting towards retirement. A final, more sinister view portrays teachers as villains who “. . . prey upon society’s youngest and most impressionable members” (Inauen, PSAF.org). These viewpoints, though diverse, can have a strong impact on the way public school teachers see themselves and behave both in and out of the classroom. Says Alsup (2006), “Given the narrow cultural definition of the secondary school teacher, professional identity development for the educator is arguably more difficult than it is for professionals in other fields” (p. 191).

The “teacher as villain” image of teacher identity clearly reflects the view of groups like Parents and Students for Academic Freedom (PSAF) who believe that the power teachers have to influence or indoctrinate students is palpably real and therefore must be taken seriously. Teachers, too, seemed to feel that their positions as educators

granted them a certain power over student thinking. As a result, many teachers refused to answer certain questions (most notably about voting and drinking) because of the fear that their opinion could persuade students to believe a certain way. Says one teacher, “I fully understand that it is not appropriate to use my position of authority to in any way influence my students.” Another writes, “As an authority figure I do not want to sway my students' thinking.” As is highlighted by this study, indoctrination is defined very broadly by public school teachers and includes the sharing of certain kinds of personal information with students. A desire for students to be freethinking was also expressed by many on the survey, suggesting that the risk of influencing students unfairly does not outweigh the benefit of “having students see me as a real person.”

Differing societal notions over the role of the public school teacher are nothing new. As far back as the early twentieth-century, American educational philosopher John Dewey (1909) questioned the value of a system that asks teachers to remain morally neutral in the classroom. Though granting that the public has a stake in how its children are educated, Dewey felt that the same public should leave the business of teaching to the experts in the field—teachers—stating that, “Upon questions that concern all the manifold details by which children are to be converted into desirable types of men and women, the expert schoolmaster should be authoritative” (p. vii). Duties of the teacher, according to Dewey, include not only the teaching of core subjects but the teaching of moral values. He explains that:

The one thing needful is that we recognize that moral principles are real in the same sense in which other forces are real; that they are inherent in community

life, and in the working structure of the individual. If we can secure a genuine faith in this fact, we shall have secured the condition which alone is necessary to get from our educational system all the effectiveness there is in it. (pp. 57-8)

Dewey's work laid an important foundation upon which other, more radical, educational theorists would later stand, and reflects a version of education where teachers need not silence themselves in order to effectively teach students.

It is clear from the results of this study that many teachers do not feel that they can be totally open with their students, let alone broach the subject of moral values. Many teachers, it seems, have internalized the opinion that a good teacher is one who is neutral or silent when it comes to questions of politics and religion. And, of course, those like Bennish and Stambaugh who have challenged this norm are publicly disciplined, illustrating to both community members and other teachers the dire consequences of stepping out of line. One contributing factor to the public pressure faced by teachers is that nearly everyone in the public has an opinion on the issue. Because the majority of Americans are a product of the public school system, "the student comes in with an entire set of internal narratives that define what, to him or her, a teacher is. And all of these are not positive images or consistent with what research and theory have demonstrated comprises good pedagogy" (Alsup, 2006, p. 34). Though research has shown that award-winning teachers utilize self-disclosure more often than their non award-winning counterparts (Javidi, Downs, & Nussbaum, 1988), cultural expectations of teacher behavior clearly limit what is said by public school teachers to students in their classes as is illustrated by those teachers who carefully

guard what they say to students in response to certain questions. The result is a landscape where teachers are rewarded for their silence (Alsup, 2006, p. 29). This leads me to a discussion of the effects of self-silencing and the ways that teacher education programs can better prepare teachers to handle requests for private information by students in their classes.

The Effects of Self-Silencing and Implications for Teacher Education Programs

When asked about the benefits of self-disclosure for teachers and students, teachers surveyed shared that by using self-disclosure, teachers are able to forge relationships with students, open lines of communication, build trust, have students see them as real people with lives outside of the classroom, promote learning and understanding of assignments, and act as a role model to students. Additionally, some teachers wrote that by sharing private information with students, they were able to feel more comfortable in their own classrooms. Though teachers did perceive some drawbacks, the benefits shared were highlighted much more frequently than risks associated with using self-disclosure in the classroom. Yet for teachers who feel uncomfortable sharing personal information with students—either because they are guarded by nature or because they feel unable to share information that might violate cultural norms—these positive outcomes of self-disclosure are essentially unavailable to them. When research shows that student motivation, academic performance, and liking is positively correlated to appropriate self-disclosures made by teachers (Sorensen, 1989; Cayanus, 2004; Deidro, 2003; Goldstein & Benassi, 1994; Rouse & Bradley, 1989), those who choose not to share or feel they cannot share miss out on important

opportunities to positively interact with students in their classes. This reality is an important finding of this study—one that has ramifications for the way that preservice teachers are educated in America.

Suggestions for Training Teachers

As Provenzo, Jr. (2011) writes, “One might argue that there is little that we can do to prepare beginning teachers before they start teaching. This is incorrect. We can prepare beginning teachers by helping them to understand and reflect on the experience of others who have taught before them” (p. 2). While some teachers who took this survey stated that they did not believe that one could be prepared to handle student requests for self-disclosure, others shared that teacher education classes could do more to prepare young teachers who can’t rely on their experience to know how to address student questions. Role playing was shared as a way for teachers to practice their responses to such student requests, as was educating teachers about existing laws and policies that impact what they might be able to say in the classroom. Allowing teachers-in-training to brainstorm possible responses to student requests was also suggested by teachers as yet another way teacher education programs can help teachers know what topics might be viewed as negative or inappropriate by students, parents, or administrators, and what topics can be shared that can lead to positive feelings of trust among teachers and students.

While mentorship was cited as a way of transferring knowledge based on experience from veteran teachers to new teachers, stating, as one teacher did, “New teachers need a mentor to fill them in a bit,” I believe it should be used with a caveat.

Because veteran teachers may not have been taught about the benefits associated with self-disclosure, as well as strategies for using self-disclosure appropriately in order to maximize these benefits, mentoring new teachers may just result in a perpetuation of a culture of silence. For example, the teacher who wrote of living outside of the town where she teaches and refusing to open a Facebook account might not be able to fully advise a new teacher who would like to be more open with his or her students. Thus, care should be taken by administrators to carefully match new and veteran teachers based on educational philosophy so as not to inadvertently discourage new teachers from finding a system of sharing that works for them.

For teachers whose beliefs or lifestyles fall outside of the mainstream, communicative strategies such as redirection could be taught that allow these teachers to share some information but omit other information that might be seen as risky. Additional efforts should be made by teacher preparation programs to educate all preservice teachers about the benefits of using self-disclosure, as well as ways to talk about their personal lives or beliefs in a manner that is productive and comfortable. This can be accomplished by inviting veteran teachers to guest-lecture about their experiences using self-disclosure in the classroom, particularly those whose beliefs or lifestyles are less easily shared with students. And all teachers must be armed with knowledge of what the privacy laws are in their particular states or districts so there is less confusion about information that, if shared, could result in a teacher being disciplined or fired. As Provenzo, Jr. (2011) states:

Teachers need to understand how schools and the classrooms in which they work are part of larger bureaucratic and cultural systems. They need to understand what is acceptable or unacceptable in terms of the rules of the system and of the local community in which they work. (p. 6)

Without this knowledge, teachers unknowingly put themselves at great personal and professional risk. And, in a culture where groups like PSAF are encouraging students to expose their offending teachers to the media, today's teacher cannot be too careful regarding matters of privacy.

In the debate over free speech in the public school classroom, there is much talk about how to avoid the indoctrination of students and how to silence teachers, but little debate about what the effect of silencing teachers is on the learning process. In Fisher's (2001) view, ". . . the attempt to seal off students and teachers from potentially threatening responses by banning self-disclosure has limited usefulness. Education cannot take place without some degree of self-disclosure" (p. 138). This statement echoes the overarching question for this research—is it ever realistic to believe that teachers can keep politics out of the classroom? And, if it is possible, is this a desirable goal? Freire (1998) writes that, "it seems fundamental to me . . . that a neutral, uncommitted, and apolitical educational practice does not exist" (p. 39). This view—that no act of education is neutral—is one shared by more radical educational philosophies such as those proposed by feminist instructors who view classroom practices such as self-disclosure as satisfying the plurality of their existence as educators

and activists. Yet others see these practices as dangerous and manipulative. How, then, can the two sides be reconciled?

The answers shared by teachers in this study point to both the struggles and the potential solutions to these struggles. The immense challenges facing today's public school teacher clearly illustrate the need for teachers-in-training to have more education about the pedagogical options available to them. Efforts should be made to link philosophy and pedagogy with specific attention paid to how teachers can best meet the needs of their learners. Ideally, more should be done to educate the public of the benefits of bringing individual experience into the classroom, but this is a lofty goal, and one that is unlikely to be accomplished. If anything, new teachers need instruction not just in how to teach their subject matter but how to teach students. As this study indicates, many teachers are policing themselves on what they can and can't say in the classroom. In a tough economic climate where new teachers are often on the chopping block, it's no wonder that teachers are watching what they say lest they attract the ire of a parent or school board member. Yet past studies as well as this current research reveal that students are asking questions and teachers are answering. This leads me to a final discussion of the limitations of this study as well as areas for further research.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

While this study has leant new insight into the ways that self-disclosure functions in the K-12 public school classroom, limitations exist in both the design and outcome of the project. First, the sampling methods employed in the survey did not allow for complete control over who ended up taking the survey. Though it was originally

intended that only public school teachers would participate in the study and not charter or private school teachers, because participants may have passed on the link to friends, it's impossible to know if private or charter school teachers may have participated.

The reasoning behind the exclusion of charter and private school teachers is the same—due to the variance in funding and governance among private and charter schools, it would be problematic to compare the classroom communicative practices of public school teachers with their private and charter school counterparts. Private schools are funded primarily by tuition from students rather than from the federal or state governments. As a result, curricular choices as well as guidelines for teacher conduct are much more dependent on the needs and desires of an individual school or community. On the other hand, charter schools, a growing branch of public schools which are funded by both federal monies and private funds, are governed differently than their public school counterparts, depending on the school's individual charter (WestEd, n.d.). Because of this, charter schools are able to “operate with freedom from many regulations that apply to traditional public schools . . . [and] generally offer teachers and students more authority to make decisions than most traditional public schools” (WestEd, n.d.). With this in mind, having a section of the survey that asked participants specifically if they currently or have ever worked at a charter or private school would have been beneficial in analyzing whether or not this experience impacts the communicative practices of teachers.

Another limitation was in the sample itself. Though 46 teachers took at least part of the survey and 40 teachers finished, the vast majority of participants were

heterosexual females. In terms of gender, this survey was not entirely off base in terms of representation. Of the 40 respondents who completed the survey, 18% were male while 82% were female. Again, national statistics reveal that in terms of gender, 76% of American schoolteachers are female (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). But in terms of sexual orientation, all but one participant self-identified as heterosexual while one teacher self-identified as bisexual. Without more participants who self-identify as homosexual or bisexual, it is difficult to fully appreciate how this aspect of identity impacts the communicative practices of public school teachers. A final glaring oversight of this study is the impact of race on self-disclosure and privacy management—no demographic information was collected concerning race or ethnicity of participants, leaving this area of identity wholly unexplored. In a discussion about the ways that cultural norms may work to silence teachers who defy traditional understandings of who a public school teacher is in America, to leave out a conversation about race in a field where nearly 90% of workers are white is a regrettable exclusion (Hinojosa & Moras, 2009). Future research into how these aspects of identity would no doubt yield important results.

Considering these limitations, future analysis of this subject matter could examine the ways that both race and sexual orientation impact self-disclosure in the public school classroom. Additionally, one could explore the way that certain academic subjects such as social studies or mathematics impact the sharing of private information by teachers or students. An investigation into the differences between the self-disclosive practices of teachers in charter and private schools would be an interesting

companion piece to this study, particularly since charter schools are increasing in number in the United States. In terms of teacher training, one could analyze how teacher education programs in the United States that are addressing issues of self-disclosure are instructing their students to handle these moments. It would be additionally important to see if graduates from those programs have found their training to be helpful. This study adds to the growing conversation about the communicative practices of public school teachers—a conversation that must not end here but should instead work to examine how themes of culture, identity, and expression impact feelings of comfort, satisfaction, and achievement in both students and faculty in America’s public school system.

Conclusion

This thesis opened with an alarmist message from Parents and Students for Academic Freedom, which accused a growing number of public school educators of indoctrinating students with left-leaning ideological beliefs. Just recently, a friend of mine posted a similar concern on Facebook, stating, “I sincerely hope more & more people see the poisonous indoctrination that's being done in public education and opt for home schooling, [sic] private schooling.” When pressed about the reasoning behind this belief, he wrote:

College professors have been slinging communist-utopian doctrine for the last half-century. It's begun trickling down to secondary and even primary education in recent years . . . Classic American values like personal responsibility, LOCAL [sic] charity, and self-sufficiency are being phased out in favor of promises of

maximum pay for minimum work, turning over all responsibility to someone else, taking advantage of "handouts", [sic] and the list goes on. This country doesn't need a "fundamental transformation". [sic] The founding principles are what have made this country great. Marxism is what made the Soviet Union . . . and it is spread most easily among inexperienced, easily impressionable people . . . such as children. The point is; [sic] keep the commie stuff in college where it's not forced on anyone (yet) and teach facts and problem solving skills to first graders.

Because I did not survey individual teachers about their ideological beliefs, it's hard to know if a growing number of teachers in America subscribe to a communist political philosophy that is bleeding into their teaching practices. That said, I believe that the data collected in this study illustrate that public school teachers are aware of the fears many in the public have about indoctrination, and are actively employing communicative strategies and topic avoidance strategies that allow them to interact with their students in a politically neutral way. In fact, many teachers whose beliefs or lifestyles did not fit into the normative identity for public school teachers in America are purposefully avoiding sharing their beliefs in any way for fear that they might find themselves on the losing end of a conflict with an angry parent. Though this study is by no means comprehensive, it is safe to assume that instances of indoctrination are not widespread in America's public schools, and that if anything, these charges are succeeding in silencing teachers who believe that bringing their whole selves to the classroom might result in them being out of a job.

This study sought to expand self-disclosure research, particularly research pertaining to Communication Privacy Management theory, by applying it to the public school classroom. Building on Zhang's (2007) study of the uses of instructor self-disclosure in the K-12 public school classroom, this thesis furthers the understanding of how public school teachers develop privacy rules. Using a five-part survey that asked teachers to reflect on their own experiences using self-disclosure, data gathered from this study suggested that privacy rules are closely tied to public notions of appropriateness and cultural perceptions of who teaches America's students and what the nature and purpose of teaching of education are in America. In this thesis, an effort was made to identify specific communicative strategies used by teachers when dealing with student requests for private information, as well as an attempt to identify those topic avoidance strategies used when a teacher wished to avoid answering a student's question. Benefits of self-disclosure as perceived by teachers were shared as well as the ways that self-policing and self-silencing can cause some teachers, particularly those whose beliefs and lifestyles exist outside of the mainstream, to miss out on positive personal and professional outcomes tied to self-disclosure. A final discussion of the ways that teacher education programs can better prepare preservice teachers to effectively handle student requests for private information was included, and suggestions for further research were shared.

The findings of this thesis expand the communication field's understanding of self-disclosure, Communication Privacy Management theory, communicative strategies, and topic avoidance strategies, as well as how a particularly overlooked segment of

society—American public school K-12 educators—communicate with students in their classes. By focusing on requests for self-disclosure rather than moments where teachers consciously choose to share private information with their students, this thesis increases the knowledge of how private information is managed by individuals. It is hoped that by focusing on issues relating to K-12 education, that the training of future teachers can be improved to include a discussion of how one can bring him or herself into the classroom in a way that benefits both teachers and students. It is also the hope of this researcher that by drawing attention to the ways that normative visions of who can be an educator in America can effectively silence teachers whose beliefs and/or lifestyles don't fit into this vision, that a conversation will begin about the ways to embrace difference rather than stifle it.

At the end of this project, I'm left with skepticism about the feasibility of challenging a hegemonic structure that simultaneously positions teachers as indoctrinators and as selfless caregivers who must put their personal needs aside for the benefit of their students. Even in the academic literature about instructor self-disclosure, most attention is given to the impact of this behavior on students, not on the personal benefits reaped by teachers who use this communication practice to enhance their teaching. Additionally, when discussing benefits to teachers who use self-disclosure in their classes, most literature focuses on benefits to instructional effectiveness and not to personal benefits of enhanced relationships with students, feelings of comfort in one's own classroom, and personal satisfaction felt by teachers who are able to be real people with their students. The desire that many teachers on

this survey shared of wanting their students to see them as humans with lives outside of class reflects a cultural restraint on teachers from doing just this, which surely contributes to teachers carefully guarding what is said to students in their classes. But how real can teachers be when certain segments of society are scrutinizing their syllabi and classroom conversations, even going as far as to ask students to report their teachers to the media?

As an educator with plans to return to the public schools after completion of her master's degree, this question haunts me, as do conversations I have had with teachers who have found themselves on the losing side of a parent or student complaint. That said, the suggestions given by teachers for how to better handle student requests for self-disclosure have helped me tremendously, and I plan to sit down and write out possible responses to student questions BEFORE I'm put on the spot. I also feel that knowledge I have gained through the writing of this thesis has empowered me to challenge those in the public who are quick to peg teachers as predatory or self-interested, as the majority of teachers I have interacted with, as well as the voices of teachers on this survey, prove that this is not the case. I feel that knowledge I have gained could be shared in letters to the editor, articles in academic journals, conversations with other teachers, and in inservices that I could organize when I return to the classroom.

It is my belief that teachers in America need allies now more than ever, and I am thankful for the opportunity I have had in writing this thesis to explore the struggles of public school teachers, as well as to highlight the ways that today's teachers are finding

success in the classroom, despite the criticism they have received. Though teachers face an uphill battle if they wish to bring certain aspects of themselves into the classroom, the result can inspire students to do the same. This is particularly important for students who might be seeking an advocate or role model in their teachers, such as gay and lesbian youth who may not know any gay and lesbian adults. Self-disclosure is an important way that teachers and students can form positive connections—connections that must not be denied to those teachers whose beliefs and lifestyles position them as “other” in their communities. After all, as one teacher wrote, “Connecting with others, being known and knowing is part of the joy of life.”

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Recruitment Email for Teachers

Dear participant,

My name is Emily Moreland and I am a graduate student in the Communication Studies department at Colorado State University. As you might know, I am working on a thesis project examining the ways that public school teachers, like myself, handle moments when our students ask us for personal information, such as when a student asks whether you are married or who you voted for in an election. I have contacted you to see if you would be willing to complete an online survey about this topic, which will take between 15 and 30 minutes to complete. Participation is voluntary and uncompensated.

I am looking for other teachers to take my survey as well. If possible, please forward this email to any personal contacts you have who fit the description of formerly or currently employed K-12 public school teachers in the United States. You may also post a link to the survey on your personal webpage or Facebook page with the following description:

Formerly and currently employed K-12 public school teachers in the United States are being recruited for a voluntary, uncompensated survey about the ways that teachers communicate with students in the classroom. The survey will take approximately 15-30 minutes to complete. To learn more about the survey and to take the survey, please click on the link below:

Surveylink

Thank you for your time and your participation. Please let me know if you have any questions by emailing me at emily.moreland@colostate.edu or by calling me at 970-817-0203.

Sincerely,
Emily Moreland
Graduate Teaching Assistant
Communication Studies Department
Colorado State University

Appendix B: Teacher Survey Questions

Teacher Self-Disclosure Survey

Part I

Instructions: Please read the following teaching scenarios. Then, using the space provided, write about the way that you, as a teacher, would most likely respond to each scenario. After writing how you would respond, please provide an explanation for why you would respond the manner that you indicated.

Scenario 1:

It is November of an election year. While explaining the instructions for group-work activity to the entire class, a student raises her hand. When you call on the student, she asks you, out of the blue, whom you are voting for in the upcoming election.

Response:

Explanation:

Scenario 2:

It is the first week of school and you are still getting to know the students in your class. Before class one day, the students are filing in and taking their seats. One of them passes by your desk and notices that you have no pictures from your personal life. He asks you, loud enough for most students to hear, if you are married.

Response:

Explanation:

Scenario 3:

You are teaching a unit on Germany and the book you are using cites Oktoberfest as one of Germany's proudest cultural traditions. Many of your students are aware that you recently visited Germany for a vacation, and one raises his hand. When you call on him, he asks if you drank beer while you were on vacation and if German beer "tastes better than American beer."

Response:

Explanation:

Part II

Instructions: Please provide your own example of a time when a student asked you, during class, what you would consider to be a personal question about either your personal beliefs, political beliefs, or any other request for information that you would otherwise consider to be “private.” As in the previous questions, please explain how you responded to that student, and why you responded in the manner that you did.

Example:

Response:

Explanation:

Part III

Instructions: Please respond to the following question.

When reflecting on your own experiences responding to requests for personal information by the students in your classes, do you feel you were adequately prepared to handle these requests? If so, what knowledge or experience has led you to feel this way? If not, what knowledge or education would aid you in knowing how to best handle these moments?

Response:

Part IV

Instructions: Please respond to the following question.

What benefits do you believe the sharing of private information with students has/had for you as a teacher?

What benefits do you believe it has/had for students?

What drawbacks do you feel the sharing of private information with students has/had for you as a teacher?

What drawbacks do you believe it has/had for students?

Part V

Instructions: Please complete the following demographic information by either checking the boxes next to the answer that most applies to you, or by filling in the information in the blank provided.

Age:

Gender:

Marital Status:

- Single
- In a relationship
- Married
- Separated
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Other (please explain):

Sexual Orientation:

Grade level(s) taught (please check all that apply):

- K-5
- 6-8
- 7-9
- 9-12
- 10-12

Other (please explain) _____

Number of years at current position (If retired, please list the number of years that you were employed as a public school K-12 classroom teacher, as well as the year you retired from teaching):

Teacher training (amount/type of education you have obtained that is directly related to your current teaching position. Includes formal education, professional development, etc.):

Any other information that you feel would be useful for interpreting your responses to the questions on this survey: