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Understanding the decision-making process behind LGBTQ+ teachers in the UK openly expressing their gender and sexual identity in the workplace.

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As an experienced teacher in the United Kingdom (UK) and having witnessed the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer plus other sex and gender identities (LGBTQ+) teachers first hand and vicariously through the experiences of friends, life as a teacher varied based on personal identity. After having children being able to openly discuss pregnancy and family life with the children taught without any concern for potential consequences, was a personal privilege associated fitting with the heteronormative mould as a cis-gendered woman having a baby with a husband. This seems like a minor thing, but it is an unconscious demonstration of the privilege and security that comes with conformation to heteronormativity (Richardson, 2004). When considering other teachers in the country who may be homosexual, non-binary or any other non-heteronormative identity, would they be as secure about so prominently displaying their identity? Thus, this research project was born.

LGBTQ+ people have historically occupied a secondary position in society in the UK, with discriminative practices enshrined in law for nearly 500 years (British Library, 2022). Heteronormativity has been entrenched in society through many mechanisms, including legislation, policy and religion and has been reproduced and reinforced continuously through the education system, due to the invisibility of LGBTQ+ in the educational landscape (Edwards, Brown and Smith, 2016). As a result, there has been a differentiated citizenship for LGBTQ+ people in the UK and despite the improvements with the creation of inclusive legislation, the UK is still an unequal society where LGBTQ+ people do not benefit from the privilege of historical recognition and accepted status (Lister, 2003).

There are approximately 50,000 LGBTQ+ teachers in the UK, yet only a small proportion of these have fully disclosed their identity in their school environments despite Section 28 (*Local Government Act 1988*) being revoked in 2003 (Lee, 2020; Milsom, 2021). As will be discussed, there is a lack of academic literature regarding the decision-making processes of LGBTQ+ teachers when deciding to disclose their identity, instead, most literature focuses on the experiences of children and young people (DePalma and Atkinson, 2010; Portier-le Cocq, 2014). While this is valuable in understanding part of the landscape of education, it ignores one of the main influences on children namely teachers.

The foundation of this work is coming from a post-structural feminist perspective, with recognition that gender and sexuality are not essentially fixed, and intrinsically linked, rather constructive in nature (Butler, 1999). In line with Butler (1999), gender and sexuality are performative, and to be masculine, feminine, non-binary, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, or to ascribe to any other gender or sexual identity is a social performance, a construction created and perpetuated by societal structure (Connell and Pearse, 2015). By examining the historic legislation and current policy governing the conduct of teachers in schools in the UK against this theoretical background, it will be demonstrated that LGBTQ+ teachers occupy a precarious position in the educational landscape, marginalised by their sexual or gender identity, framed as a threat to the innocence of the children in their charge (Edwards, Brown and Smith, 2016; Gray, 2013; Lee, 2019; Lee, 2020; Llewellyn and Reynolds, 2020; Stones and Glazzard, 2020).

This research was conceived as an online survey, asking a series of quantitative and qualitative follow up questions, to gain insight into the extent to which teachers feel able to be open about their gender or sexual identity in their workplace, and the factors that influenced their decisions (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). As will be explored more extensively, the results of the survey used the statistical results to demonstrate some of the institutional mechanisms that were acting as barriers to LGBTQ+ teachers being open about their sexual orientation. The qualitative responses which outlined the empirical experiences of the teachers themselves and were demonstrative of the effect of these mechanisms and structures upon the lives of LGBTQ+ teachers (Blaikie, 2007).

This research will find that the propensity to be open about gender or sexual identity is dependent on many factors, but some themes that emerged were experience and confidence, fear of discrimination and lack of support, inclusive practises, and policies. When examining these themes through the lenses of power and examination, heteronormativity and capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Carabine, 2004; Foucault, 1977; Richardson, 2000), it was found that teachers who have more experience have increased confidence in their position within the school and are more likely to be open about their sexual orientation to everyone in the school community. Whereas less experienced teachers, and those who can 'pass' as heteronormative are less likely to be open about their sexual orientation. In the case of gender, the lack of cultural capital in understanding the construction of gender results in most teachers who identify as transgender or non-binary not disclosing their identities at all (Bourdieu, 1986; Butler, 1999). Inclusion and diversity policy is central to LGBTQ+ teachers feeling supported to be open about their sexual

orientation or gender identity however, the presence of the policy is not enough, instead these policies must be embedded into the ethos of the school creating an inclusive school culture.

The key recommendations of this research are for schools to challenge heteronormativity and to foster and embed true inclusion in their schools through three main avenues. Firstly, the creation and delivery of inclusive LGBTQ+ awareness training which would cover pertinent LGBTQ+ issues including key inclusion responsibilities and increase awareness of gender identities and their distinctiveness from biological sex (Butler, 1999). Secondly, the creation, implementation and embedding of robust inclusion and diversity policy within schools, outlining key responsibilities and expectations, with clear protections and escalations for breaking the policy. Thirdly, the creation of inclusion and diversity officers or champions in schools to take responsibility for the implementation of the policy and to act as a visible and supportive champion of LGBTQ+ people within the school community.

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