

Queer early-career experiences in navigating institutional spaces:

Critical reflections from research & practice



Why?

For many queer educators, entering education is not simply a transition into a profession, but into a space where identity itself becomes professionally negotiated.

In contemporary educational contexts, questions of:

- visibility,
- legitimacy,
- neutrality,
- and belonging

remain unevenly experienced

(Ball, 2003; Ahmed, 2012, Brett *et al.* 2024)



Professionalism

Educational professionalism is frequently positioned as “neutral,” while simultaneously shaping which identities become recognisable, legitimate, and professionally intelligible.

(Foucault, 1977; Ball, 2003)

Institutional Spaces

Schools and universities function as regulatory environments where visibility, belonging, and safety are unevenly distributed.

(hooks, 1994; Ahmed, 2012)

Performativity

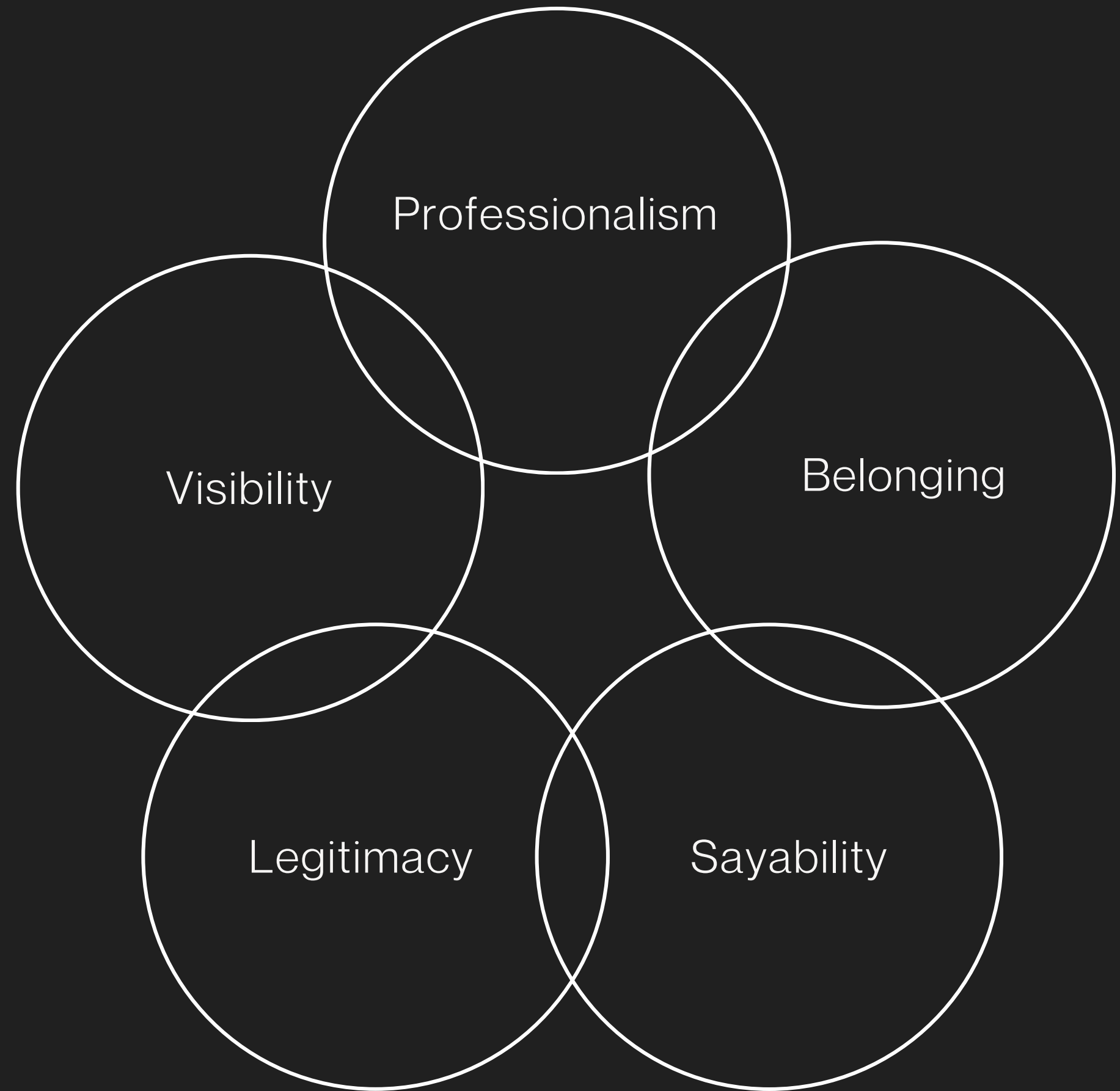
Queer professional identities are continually negotiated through discourse, institutional expectations, and repeated social practices.

(Goffman, 1959; Butler, 1990)

Becoming

Professional identity is understood as fluid, relational, and continually in process rather than fixed or complete.

(Somers, 1994; Beijaard et al., 2004; Sachs, 2005)



Insights from Research & Practice

Negotiation 1: Visibility ↔ Safety

Negotiation 2: Professionalism ↔ Authenticity

Negotiation 3: Isolation ↔ Community

Negotiation 1:

Visibility ↔ Safety

Selective visibility

- Disclosure shaped by context and perceived safety
- Visibility rarely experienced as uncomplicated authenticity

Preventative identity work

- Self-monitoring language, appearance, and interactions
- “Reading” institutional climates before disclosure

Institutional risk

- Fear of judgement, tokenisation, or professional scrutiny
- Safety unevenly distributed across spaces and relationships

Negotiation 2:

Professionalism ↔ Authenticity

Professionalism as normative

- “Neutrality” often carries implicit cisheteronormative expectations
- Certain identities perceived as more professionally legitimate than others

The performed professional self

- Queer educators navigating tensions between authenticity and employability
- Identity continually managed within institutional expectations

Emotional labour

- Balancing visibility, safety, credibility, and belonging
- Ongoing negotiation rather than stable resolution

Negotiation 3:

Isolation ↔ Community

Community as survival

- LGBTQ+ networks creating spaces of recognition and support
- Informal mentoring and solidarity reducing professional isolation

Counterspaces

- Queer communities disrupting institutional marginalisation
- Visibility of other queer educators shaping possibility and belonging

Hope and resistance

- Community not only protective, but transformative
- Relationships enabling more sustainable professional identities

Critical Reflections

As both researcher and educator, these tensions are not abstract.

The tensions shape everyday professional life, from curriculum decisions to self-presentation to perceptions of legitimacy within institutional spaces.

The question is not simply whether queer educators are included within institutions, but **what kinds of queer professional identities become possible, recognisable, and sustainable within them?**

Reflection Point: How often do we mistake visibility for inclusion?

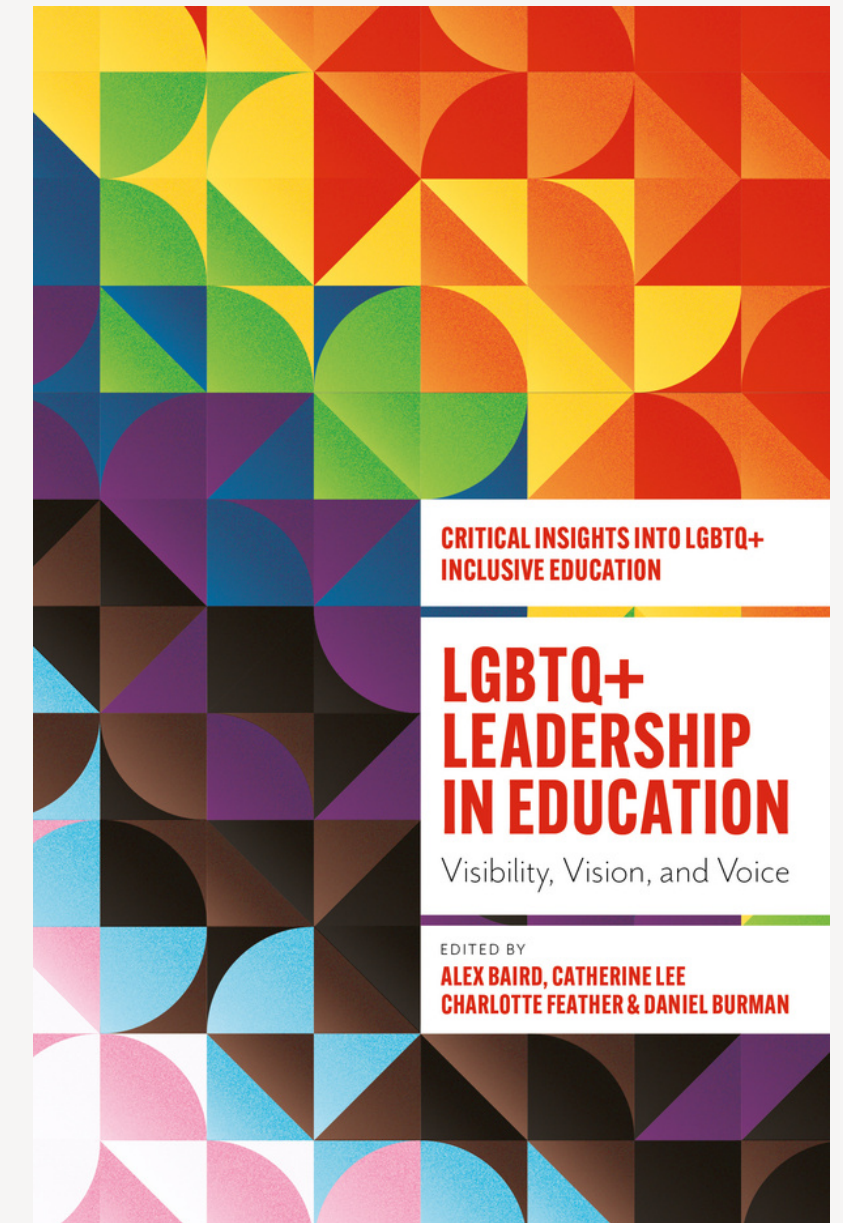
Thank You

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Baird, A., Lee, C., Feather, C., and Burman, D. (2026) *LGBTQ+ Leadership in Education: Visibility, Vision, and Voice*. Emerald Publishing Limited: Leeds, UK

