Queer Educators in Schools: The Experiences of Four Beginning Teachers

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Abstract

What are the experiences of beginning queer educators? We followed four LGBTQ-iden-tified teachers as they began their teaching careers. As pre-service teachers, they took on leadership roles advocating for LGBTQ-inclusive education. Their stories were diverse: from feeling empowered and accepted, to being conflicted about coming out, to being the sole advocate for LGBTQ-inclusive education, to experiencing school leadership

and climates that ranged from supportive to hostile. We are encouraged by their resilience and agency, yet deeply concerned by some of their negative experiences. Systemic work remains to be done not only for LGBTQ youth but also for LGBTQ educators in schools.

Keywords: LGBTQ-inclusive education, social justice education, queer teachers, beginning teachers

Résumé

Quelles sont les expériences des éducateurs homosexuels en début de carrière ? Nous avons suivi le parcours de quatre enseignants qui s'identifient LGBTQ à leur début dans leur carrière d'enseignant. En tant qu'enseignants en formation, ils ont pris l'initiative de jouer un rôle militant pour l'inclusion éducative des LGBTQ. Leurs histoires sont diverses : partant du sentiment d'avoir du pouvoir et d'être acceptés, à être troublés par le fait de s'afficher, à être les seuls à défendre l'inclusion éducative des LGBTQ, jusqu'à expérimenter une ambiance de travail et avec la direction scolaire oscillant de coopérative à hostile. Nous sommes encouragés par leur résilience et leur capacité d'action, mais aussi profondément préoccupés par certaines de leurs expériences négatives. Un travail systémique reste encore à accomplir, non seulement en ce qui concerne les jeunes LGBTQ, mais également pour les éducateurs LGBTQ dans les écoles.

Mots-clés : inclusion éducative des LGBTQ, éducation à la justice sociale, enseignants homosexuels, enseignants débutants

Acknowledgement

Introduction

What are the experiences of beginning queer educators in schools?[1] Building on a longitudinal study of pre-service teachers' abilities to create awareness and advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirited, and queer (LGBTQ) youth and families (Kearns, Mitton-Kukner, & Tompkins, 2014a, 2014b, 2017; Mitton-Kukner, Kearns, & Tompkins, 2015; Tompkins, Kearns, & Mitton-Kukner, 2018), we followed the experiences of four recent graduates who identify as part of the LGBTQ community as they began their teaching careers across Canada. As pre-service teachers, they took on leadership roles as trainers of an LGBTQ awareness program embedded in our teacher education program and helped to create a third program that engaged LGBTQ curricula critically in schools, and found moments to advocate for LGBTQ youth and families in schools. Based on the degree of success they felt in the teacher education program, we wanted to explore their experiences as beginning teachers. Stories from their first and second years of teaching were diverse: from feeling empowered and accepted, to feeling conflicted about coming out, to being the only person in a school environment advocating for LGBTQ students and families, to experiencing school leadership and climates that demonstrated a range of reactions—from supportive to hostile—in response to efforts that challenged heteronormativity and genderism. Given the complexities of the teaching environments in which our recent graduates entered the profession, we find hope due to their resilience and agency, yet we are deeply concerned by some of their experiences. We are mindful of the systemic levels of work that remain to be done for not only youth but also educators who experience genderism, homophobia, and transphobia in schools and society.

Context of Queer Educators in Schools and Society

Faculties of education in Canada are regularly called upon to teach pre-service educators about equity, inclusion, and social justice, including the discrimination LGBTQ youth and families experience (Province of Nova Scotia, 2014; Saskatchewan Ministry

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1   Two beginning teachers were teaching in elementary schools (Grade Primary to Grade 6) and two were teaching in secondary schools (Grade 7 to Grade 12).

of Education, 2015). In our Bachelor of Education program we have been mindful of these calls to action and have responded accordingly (Kearns et al., 2014a, 2014b, 2017; Mitton-Kukner et al., 2015; Tompkins et al., 2018). Dejean (2010), however, notes that in many teacher education programs there is "discursive silence around queer matters in education" (p. 234). It is important for us to consider the experiences not only of LGBTQ youth but also of the LGBTQ educators we send out into the field. For we are aware that

> no number of classroom discussions about gender stereotypes and homophobia will create a nurturing environment if teachers and parents are afraid to come out. A school that's a protective community for LGBTQ adults is a school that's going to be safe for kids. (Butler-Wall et al., 2016, p. 24)

We are mindful that sexual minority and gender non-conforming individuals have not enjoyed the same protections or experiences in law or the workforce as their cisgender and heterosexual (CH) peers. In Canada, up until 1969, non-heterosexual relations could be punished by law (Egan & Flavell, 2006). In 2005 gay marriage became legally acceptable in Canada, yet there is still a "pervasive homophobic culture of threat where physical, emotional, and psychological violence remain realities for many queer persons in everyday life, learning, and work spaces" (Grace, 2006, p. 828).

Having an education degree certainly does not protect LGBTQ teachers from experiencing homophobia and transphobia. In a study of 19 lesbian educators in Ontario, Khayatt (1990) revealed that in the late 1980s it was imperative to conceal the identity of participants, as they could experience harassment, or even job loss, for speaking about their school climates. Khayatt (1997) asked the question whether one should "come out in class"? A decade later, in 2001, a queer teacher in Nova Scotia, Lindsay Willow, was wrongly accused of having a sexual relationship with a student. After taking the case to the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission, she was finally exonerated five years later. The chair of the board recognized that an everyday activity of most physical education teachers (i.e., putting away gym equipment with students) was interpreted as sexual for Willow due to her "perceived sexual orientation," and that this was "discrimination" against a queer educator (CBC News, 2006). Eribon (2004) and Taylor et al. (2015) noted that the teaching profession lags behind other professional workplaces in acknowledging the rights of LGBTQ individuals. The question about whether an educator who is

LGBTQ should come out in schools and/or during job interviews is regularly asked to graduates of our program, causing some of them to feel uncertain about their own identities at this pivotal stage of their careers (personal communication with the four participants and others in 2014, 2015, and 2016).

Taylor et al. (2015) conducted a large study in which 3,319 Canadian teachers completed surveys and participated in 24 focus groups related to LGBTQ-inclusive education. They found that LGBTQ teachers experienced different levels of being out, and noted that "1 in 5 (21%) lesbians were out to their whole school community (including students and parents), while 15% of gay men were, followed by only 6% of bisexual participants. No transgender educators were out to their whole school community" (p. 115). According to Taylor et al. (2015), LGBTQ educators were far more likely to be out to a colleague and much less likely to be out to their administration, and one third of LGBTQ educators had been warned not to come out at school by family, friends, and other educators. Factors that influenced non-disclosure by LGBTQ educators included opposition from school administration, trustees, or colleagues; not having a permanent contract, and the negative impact on future career plans such as promotion; opposition from parents and religious groups; and potential legal implications (Taylor et al., 2015).

LGBTQ educators who are out can be role models for LGBTQ students and families (Guasp, 2012). However, Rudoe (2014) cautions that the presence of LGBTQ role models may take the responsibility off CH teachers to be involved in LGBTQ-inclusive education and lessen the chances of a whole-school critique of heteronormative practices. Whether they were out or not, LGBTQ educators in Taylor et al.'s study (2015) engaged in LGBTQ-inclusive education at higher rates than their CH peers. A discussion of the study's findings states:

> Across all of the listed categories LGBTQ educators were more likely to have incorporated LGBTQ-inclusive education… Similarly 55.6% of LGBTQ respondents had included LGBTQ rights when talking about human rights and 43.3% had critiqued gender conformity, compared with 33.% and 22.8% of cisgender heterosexual educators. (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 126)

In previous research (Kearns et al., 2014a, 2014b; Mitton-Kukner et al., 2015), we noted that power is always at play for pre-service teachers in social justice education. Heteronormativity and cisgender privilege are normalized and embedded in power

relationships. Beginning teachers are particularly vulnerable within the power structure of schools, given that they are new to the profession, on probationary contracts, and have acquired little of the cultural capital that accompanies seniority and permanence in the profession. School leadership can play an important role in the nurturing of LGBTQ-inclusive education. LGBTQ educators who "experience safety and support [from their administration] will in turn feel free to demonstrate the same level of support to their LGBT students" (Wright & Smith, 2015, p. 404). For example, Taylor et al. (2016) noted that when LGBTQ educators worked in schools with explicit "anti-homophobia policies [they] were more likely to have confidence that their colleagues and administration would support them if they were to practice LGBTQ-inclusive education" (p. 135). If we truly want to change the school climate for LGBTQ students and families in school, we also need to consider the climate LGBTQ educators encounter in schools. Our study, although small, will add to a much needed and deeper understanding of the issues these educators face.

Approaches to the Study: Theoretical Lenses

DePalma and Atkinson (2010) remind us that "there remains a tendency in both practice and guidance to focus on individual incidents of homophobic bullying [in schools] rather than understanding the cultural and institutional factors supporting them" (p. 1670). Given our critical orientation to name and dismantle the structures in schools that oppress LGBTQ individuals, we draw upon Kumashiro's (2002) anti-oppressive lens to disrupt heteronormativity and cisgender privilege in educational settings. Kumashiro notes that typically "researchers have illustrated oppression by pointing to the recognizably harmful ways in which only certain students are treated in and by schools—in other words, to the external ways in which Otherness is marginalized" (p. 33). To date much less has been written about how homophobia and transphobia impact LGBTQ teachers working in the educational system. The terrain for these teachers is complex and tension-filled. As we navigate anti-oppressive education we are mindful that

> what is produced or practiced as a safe space, a supportive program…cannot be a strategy that claims to be the solution for all people at all times, but rather a product or practice that is constantly being contested and redefined… Educators

could create safe spaces based on what they see is needed right now but constant-
ly re-create the spaces by asking, Whom does this space harm or exclude? (Ku-
mashiro, 2002, p. 38)

Often teachers are asked to take on the role of social justice advocates and act as allies;
however, we wonder if all of them are equally positioned to do anti-oppressive education
when they themselves may be marginalized by the very system in which they are work-
ing. In our study we are asking beginning LGBTQ educators to help us understand how
schools may harm or exclude them as well as students.

   We continue to anchor our research in the conceptual framework of safe, positive,
and queering moments in anti-oppressive work (Goldstein, Russell, & Daley, 2007). A
safe space would be one in which LGBTQ educators and students are comfortable and
feel free from harm. It is a minimal condition for well-being in that the educational sys-
tem is asking that people show tolerance, and interrupt overt expressions of homophobia
and transphobia, such as violence. However, it does not require genuine acceptance or
affirmation of "sexual diversity and differences" (Goldstein et al., 2007, p. 184).

   Positive school spaces support system-wide changes in the school curriculum and
at the policy level, so that not only students and educators feel safe and supported, but
also all educational stakeholders, such as parents, families, and trustees. As Goldstein et
al. (2007) state, "Within a positive school framework, an anti-homophobia approach must
be internalized where students and staff learn to respect, accept, and affirm their own
identities and those of others" (p. 185). Although broader in scope than a safe approach, a
positive approach is reacting to homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism systemically,
but it is not imagining LGBTQ identities outside of being "other" in a system of oppres-
sion. It does not challenge the culture of compulsory heteronormativity so prevalent in
schools.

   A queer educational system would allow for those who are seeking the freedom
to be who they are to be (i.e., to be immersed in a world where diversity is a given and
not subject to oppression). Goldstein et al. (2007) suggested that "queer moments" may
be a more apt term to reflect and imagine anti-oppressive moments and possibilities in the
educational system. Broadly, they explained, that

   a queer schools model would require pedagogical practices that trouble the
   official knowledge of disciplines; disrupt heteronormativity and promote an

understanding of oppression as multiple, interconnected, and ever changing. This suggests that a queer schools approach would not only aim to promote the acceptance, tolerance, and affirmation of queer students and educators, but also, seek to transform how we think about sexuality and desire…importantly, a queer schools approach would ask us to consider how the sexualities and desires of queer—and straight—students and educators are recognized and acknowledged as well as denied, negated or distorted through normative pedagogical practices. (p. 187)

A queer model opens up the possibility of diverse genders and sexualities, and allows for a fluidity and intersectionality of identities making school a more inclusive space. There are moments where LGBTQ youth and educators and stakeholders may feel a sense of belonging and as though their full identities are valued; however, this dynamic is not sustained over time in safe and positive school environments.

We find this theoretical framework aptly describes the advocacy work that is needed at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels in schools to affirm LGBTQ students and educators. It further allows for a space for agency and resilience. The work of challenging oppression and affirming multiple identities in the educational system is complex and ongoing and we continuously strive to learn more.

Context of the Study

The teacher education program from which these beginning teachers graduated is set in rural Atlantic Canada. The historic and contemporary processes of colonialism and systemic racism in this area have marginalized both Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities. Systemic racism has been named as a factor that has caused these communities to be underserved in the public education system (Black Learners Advisory Committee, 1994; Province of Nova Scotia, 1989). Situated in an economically depressed region of the country, the province experiences more out-migration than in-migration. The rurality in which the university is set exacerbates the problem, as employment is higher in the urban centres and consequently the urban centres are more racially, linguistically and ethnically diverse, attracting New Canadians and Canadians from other regions of the country. There are small numbers of international students in various undergraduate programs at our university, but few enter teacher education. Partnerships over two decades between the Mi'kmaw community and our faculty of education have

led to the increased presence of Mi'kmaw teacher candidates in our program; however, the number of African Nova Scotian teacher candidates remain small. Measures are being put into place (scholarships, mentorships, partnerships with communities) to increase their presence in our program. It is important for the reader to understand therefore that the context of this study is vastly different from what one would encounter in teacher education programs in urban settings. It is often stated that our campus, while evolving, is more akin to 1950s rural Canada than Toronto, Montreal, or Vancouver in 2019! The overall face of the campus in which the teacher education program is situated is therefore largely still white, and not surprisingly the participants in this study are all white.

The number of participants in this study is small, which poses an obvious limitation; however, we note that the four participants in this study were teaching in a variety of contexts throughout the country. Two were teaching in elementary schools in urban environments in Ontario and Alberta. The other two participants worked in secondary schools in rural and remote communities in Alberta. One participant also spent a year in a large consolidated high school in rural Nova Scotia. While the number of participants is small, they provide snapshots of a variety of contexts throughout Canada. We note that, to date, there is a limited amount of research about the experiences of early career LGBTQ teachers and we hope that this study contributes to beginning a deeper, national conversation about the safe and equitable work environment that LGBTQ educators need.

Method and Data Collection

Qualitative interviews contribute to the construction of knowledge and understanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The four educators in this study had previously been invited as pre-service teachers to reflect on their field placement experiences and describe the challenges or successes they experienced in identifying and addressing homophobia in schools (Kearns et al., 2014a, 2014b, 2017; Mitton-Kukner et al., 2015; Tompkins et al., 2018). As faculty in a small, post-degree teacher education program ($n = 200$), all three of us had worked closely and intensely with these beginning teachers. We had taught them foundations or curriculum and instruction courses as part of their studies in our two-year program. In addition, we had led the Positive Space Training sessions, which gave them their training credentials. One participant had worked with us as a research assistant and two of the participants had co-presented with us at professional learning events. From

this place of deeply knowing our participants and the trust we had established with them, we felt we were able to engage in honest and authentic conversations as they transitioned into the profession. During the academic year of 2015–16, we conducted individual interviews with these beginning teachers. The interviews focused on their successes and challenges as LGBTQ teachers advocating for LGBTQ-inclusive education. The interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes in length. All interviews were digitally recorded for accurate transcription and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were given to each participant: Dennis, Craig, Rose, and Kelsey. The data were thematically analyzed and coded.

The Experiences of Beginning Queer Educators in Schools

The stories shared by these educators were diverse. Several themes emerged from the data: from feeling empowered and accepted, to feeling conflicted about sharing personal information, to being the only person in a school environment advocating for LGBTQ students and families, to experiencing school climates and school leadership that ranged from supportive to hostile. The following portraits provide windows into their early years of teaching as well as insights into the impact of the Positive Space Training they experienced as pre-service teachers.

Dennis

Dennis graduated in 2014 and self-identifies as gay. At the time of the interview he was a second-year elementary French immersion teacher in an urban Albertan public school board. From his lived experience, Dennis knows the importance an elementary teacher can play in LGBTQ-inclusive education. He said:

> I would have loved to have had an early elementary teacher who supported me…
> I was lucky in middle school a teacher supported me in so many different ways…
> So I thought that going that next step further and taking the Positive Space Train
> the Trainer program, I could be there for my students in a similar way. (Dennis,
> Interview, January 2016)

On a personal level, Dennis has a sense of the importance of supporting LGBTQ youth. He has developed a sense of agency and tools to support LGBTQ youth at the curriculum

level as well. He sees possibilities where LGBTQ-inclusive education can be brought into both the formal and informal curriculum in elementary schools:

> It's going to be there in the back of your tool box… I think as long as they [teach-ers] are aware of what privilege is, what inclusion is…it doesn't necessarily need to be in formal activities, but in just the language and the way you conduct your-self. (Dennis, Interview, January 2016)

Dennis provided an example of how he attempts to challenge the rigid gender binary so pervasive in elementary schools. "We have three fish in our classroom and we talked about gender-neutral names and how they didn't necessarily have to have a girl and a boy's name and it didn't necessarily have to be a family of three with a mom and a dad" (Dennis, Interview, January 2016). In this example Dennis demonstrates his confidence to normalize a diverse range of genders, families, and identities.

However, at the time of the interviews, Dennis was not out about his gay identity in his school. He shared:

> Very few staff members know I am gay. I'm sure everybody assumed…it was just a very awkward point for a little while…It's Alberta and people are very, very conservative…I miss being able to talk about progressive thinking and inclusivity in different ways. (Dennis, Interview, January 2016)

Dennis noted that not being out caused him some isolation and he missed the inclusive community he experienced in his pre-service teacher education program: "So, sometimes I found it very, very difficult because I wasn't in that community that we had [at the BEd program]" (Dennis, Interview, January 2016).

Dennis acknowledged that his school climate is one in which critical conver-sations around LGBTQ issues are not welcome, noting that many teachers confused LGBTQ-inclusive education with sex education and did not understand its place in elementary schools. He noted that promotional materials to support LGBTQ students and families were posted only in the teachers' lounge, where most children would likely never see them. Not having a permanent contract, Dennis felt the power differential between himself and other tenured teachers, making it more difficult to speak out.

> It's definitely difficult because you don't necessarily know where people stand…
> so it's like 1: How do they feel about the issue? And 2: How do they feel about
> me?...That is what is difficult from being a student-teacher to going to having
> all of these ideas, having all of these resources, and not being able to implement
> quickly. (Dennis, Interview, January 2016)

Dennis provided an example of how, in spite of being somewhat fearful, he nonetheless provided leadership on the issue of gender-neutral washrooms. Dennis shared the following example from a staff meeting in his first year:

> This teacher was opposed to gender-neutral washroom and she said "Why in an
> elementary school would we need to have gender-neutral washrooms?" I was
> thinking "I'm going to lose my job. I can't believe I'm even speaking up." So I
> said, "This is the direction that public schools are going to be going in and if we
> can support this service, even for one or two of our students in our building, then
> we're making the world of difference. It's just a washroom!" (Dennis, interview,
> January 2016)

Dennis was able to help advocate for the gender-neutral washroom but he did not receive support from his colleagues. Dennis expressed frustration around the school's lack of courage to lead LGBTQ-inclusive education. The school's refusal to name the gender-neutral washroom as such, and keeping LGBTQ-positive posters in the teachers' lounge, suggested the school was disingenuous in including LGBTQ students, families, and teachers in the school.

Craig

Craig graduated in 2014 and self-identifies as gay. He is a high school math and social studies teacher in northern Alberta, and received his permanent contract upon completion of his first year of teaching. When we caught up with him in December 2015, he was bursting to tell us that "I absolutely love the school I'm teaching in…it is an amazing environment" (Craig, Interview, December 2015). It was clear that he was feeling empowered and accepted. He attributed the positive school climate to a "vibrant staff"; in part this was due to "quite a young staff…about 15 of us are under the age of 35" but overall it was because "everybody has a lot of energy…communicates well…we have

fun…we have Friday morning music…we've got artwork displayed all over…sports teams…we've really created a great community." The school where Craig was teaching was a new school and he had been there since its opening.

Craig acknowledged that he had to navigate the complexity of being an overtly gay male teacher, but described his overall teaching experiences as positive. He shared that "the [geographic] area I'm in is not overly inclusive and accepting. The school itself, actually, I mean aside from comments here and there, and kids saying stupid things, it's actually, it's quite inclusive" (Craig, Interview, December 2015). In the school, he said,

> There are a lot of same sex female couples that will walk around holding hands. It's not seen as often with males. Everyone on staff knows that I'm gay and the staff is very supportive of everything I do here in the school…everything here in the school is good, it could certainly be improved upon, but…it is quite, quite good…students are still becoming accustomed to it, like the straight students in the school, they have no idea what any of the terminology means… I just take every opportunity that I can to explain it…I would say they/we're still working on knowledge. (Craig, Interview, December 2015)

Although he had some female gay colleagues in his school, Craig did feel alone at times. He said, "I make jokes all the time…about how I'm the only gay man in [Alberta town]…within my school board…" (Craig, Interview, December 2015). As such, he found that people sought him out. He shared:

> People that I have never met in my life will come up to me and say, "Oh hey, you're Craig, how's it going? I have some questions for you"... It's great that they're asking, but I think I'm one of the very few people doing any type of education in terms of sexual minority education…a lot of the older teachers are not comfortable talking about a lot of stuff…for the most part any LGBT policy or environment stuff it's kind of on my shoulders… Whenever there's a student, questions are directed to me; but I am only one person, so there is only so much I can do. (Craig, Interview, December 2015)

Craig felt equipped to lead professional development on LGBTQ education, in part because of the training he received in our Bachelor of Education program. He is often sought out as a member of the LGBTQ community. He feels "quite honoured" when

students choose to talk to him. In one instance, a student told Craig that he "was the first person she came out to" (Craig, Interview, December 2015).

Craig did not have to negotiate how much he shared and whether he should share personal information or not, as he stated:

> From day one, I could not ask for a better administration…[they] are easy to talk to, they are open and they are supportive of the things…it was the day before school started and I went to my principal to pitch the idea [about starting a GSA], and I thought it would have to be a discussion. I said, "Hey, I'm interested in start-ing a GSA at the school," and she goes, "Great idea, go for it!" and that was it… Any time I've ever had any kind of idea or concerns they have always been open to hearing them. (Craig, Interview, December 2015)

Having a supportive administrative team and colleagues allowed Craig the freedom to be himself. Given that in Alberta legislation only recently passed allowing for GSAs in schools, to ask his principal to start a GSA was no small feat as a beginning teacher. Craig explained,

"Bill 10 got passed this year, so that's our GSA bill…but there's still the language written in the legislation regarding talking about sexual minorities in the classroom that is still a bit shaky" (Craig, Interview, December 2015). In leading the GSA, Craig felt he had already experienced tremendous success with the youth. He noted that "a lot of the parents of the students that I work with in the GSA…are a challenge." While some students did not tell their parents they were attending the GSA, Craig mentioned that the parent of a student who was part of the GSA "came to my room…to thank me for what I was doing" (Craig, Interview, December 2015). Craig demonstrated how supportive administrators can enable LGBTQ educators to engage in LGBTQ-inclusive education. Craig said that working with many different youth, who "don't necessarily have voice to speak up for themselves," has "livened up the advocate in me" (Craig, Interview, December 2015).

Rose

Rose graduated in 2014 and self-identifies as queer. She has been working as an elementary substitute and contract teacher in both private and public schools around southern

Ontario. Rose acknowledged that she did not have a strong foothold in the school system as a substitute teacher and was often simply told what to teach.

Rose keenly understood the roles that elementary schools play in reinforcing the rigid gender binary system. In spite of her limited power due to her job status, she had a strong sense of agency in her ability to trouble the gender binary and homophobia in informal curricular spaces:

> I try my best, even though I find it is a tough battle… I can step in to those informal, those little language things, those little times when I can informally try to make a kid feel better or try to stand up for them. (Rose, Interview, March,2016)

She provided several examples to illustrate the agency she felt.

> I am hyper aware to certain things…you know, it's all about the gender stuff… I had this one little boy in Grade 1. He always hangs out with the girls. For some reason, he and I just have this connection. He came up to me at recess. "Ms. Rose, the girls…we were playing, hairdresser or something and they asked me if I wanted make up and I said, 'Yes.'" And then I just was like, "That's okay Henry. That's alright," and then he was just like "oh" and then just ran away…I try my best to really, when I can, step in to those informal times when I can informally try to make a kid feel better. (Rose, Interview, March 2016)

In another example, in the staffroom a teacher was struggling to describe a trans boy to kindergarten students. Rose tried to step in and educate:

> And the teacher was like, "I don't know what to tell them [the other children]," and I was like, "You just say he's a boy." And she was like, "Who the hell are you?" And I just stopped talking. I was like, "Alright, I just tried to say that you say he's a boy. You know what I mean." (Rose, Interview, March 2016)

Rose described her efforts to become better at reading the climate and culture of each school. In many schools, she noticed that she appeared to be the only person in a school environment advocating for LGBTQ-inclusive education. In environments that were not visibly LGBTQ-inclusive, where there was a lack of LGBTQ posters or the Pride Flag, or where there were no specific anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia policies posted, Rose was unsure about how the school would react if a parent complained about her advocacy

efforts. It caused her concern when she showed a video about diversities in a Grade 5 class:

> [There were] different races, different religions, different abilities and the video had two same-sex people kissing. A mom and mom kissed…but the kids were like freaking out… But leaving that classroom, I was still nervous that somehow I would get in trouble for showing the video. There is just this level of anxiety that sometimes happens. (Rose, Interview, March 2016)

In deciding how out she can be as a gay teacher, Rose found some places in her school board where her LGBTQ identity was welcomed and valued:

> I talked to the HR woman who was kind of running the whole wellness week and I told her [I was gay] and she was like, "Oh my gosh, the kids would be totally fine with that"… And then when I presented, the kids wrote on my exit cards, they were like… "thank you for sharing your story"…"thank you for being so brave." (Rose, Interview, March 2016)

There are clearly challenges in knowing if and where a beginning LGBTQ teacher, without a permanent contract, can come out. Nonetheless, Rose described a great deal of agency, driven in large part by her moral obligation to make a difference in the lives of LGBTQ students.

Kelsey

Kelsey graduated in 2014 and self-identifies as gay and gender non-conforming. She spent her first year after graduating teaching English Language Arts (Grades 7–9) in a First Nations community in northern Alberta. In her first year, she faced troubling levels of discrimination from colleagues and administrators for being out and gender non-conforming. Although she felt committed to her students, staying in that environment was untenable. She resigned, moved provinces, accepted a term contract, and in her second year of teaching had much better colleagues and support. However, she still felt like one of the only advocates and allies for LGBTQ youth in her school.

When Kelsey began looking for jobs, she was interviewed by phone for her first teaching position. Kelsey explained she has "a very feminine voice," so she thought the

school's expectation was that they were going to get a "feminine, white lady from Nova Scotia" (Kelsey, Interview, July 2016). On the phone, Kelsey recalled that the vice-principal was "very, very sweet" and understood that this was Kelsey's "first big job interview," and the vice-principal even told her that "it is OK to be nervous." The subsequent job offer was very welcoming and supportive. Kelsey knew there might be challenges as a gay and gender non-conforming person, but she felt the administration would be supportive. Yet upon meeting the administration, she began to be concerned:

> I'm not feminine. I have short hair. I wear masculine clothing. I don't wear make-up…when I was picked up from the airport by the vice principal…I remember seeing her in the airport, and I remember her just having a scowl on her face… She didn't greet me with a hug. She was just like…she was just very blunt and aggressive, and questioned me twice. "Are you Kelsey? Oh, Kelsey is it?"… And the principal, well the whole nurturing aspect of when I was interviewed, and then how she reacted when she met me was entirely different. Almost like it was a mistake that she hired me. (Kelsey, Interview, July 2016)

Kelsey's initial concern was confirmed throughout her tenure as a first-year teacher. Although Kelsey felt she had success with her students—"For example, I taught a child how to read at grade level"—the administration "never came to see how I was doing" (Kelsey, Interview, July 2016). Kelsey "asked to be evaluated," as she felt she "was competent in [her] teaching abilities." No concerns about Kelsey's teaching ever arose, and yet Kelsey continued to feel unwelcome and unwanted. The following story is an example of how Kelsey felt her gay and gender non-conforming identities were not accepted:

> I was pulled into the office [before Christmas break], and I had to sit down with the principal and the vice-principal…and they said, "Kelsey, we need to have a discussion." And I was like, "What did I do?"… They told me, that my attire is inappropriate. So…I said, "What do you mean it's inappropriate?" [They said,] "Well, you just need to dress different." I said, "What do you mean I need to dress different?"… And then the vice-principal said to me, "Kelsey, perhaps you would be more happy if you lived in Edmonton, with more eccentric people like yourself."… So telling me that I don't belong. This is a white lady telling me, so it had

nothing to do with my race… I had never explicitly been told that I don't belong because I'm different. (Kelsey, Interview, July 2016)

Kelsey recognized that her appearance sometimes garnered questions from the larger heteronormative society. She said, "I'm not transgender, but I am on a spectrum that doesn't necessarily line up with the gender binary of how society works" (Kelsey, Interview, July 2016). She has had "random strangers saying faggot or homo or whatever," but she had never been discriminated again that "blatantly." She had never been told by colleagues, or work superiors, that she did not belong because she was "different." She understood that this "had everything to do with my gendered expression, perhaps my sexuality." She was so overcome with hurt that in the face of her administration she "proceeded to cry, because I had never been marginalized like that" (Kelsey, Interview, July 2016).

As Kelsey's former professors who work in teacher education, we are alarmed that this could happen to any of our graduates. There are laws in Canada designed to protect LGBTQ individuals, but clearly they are not being practised everywhere. It is hard to listen to Kelsey's story and not be moved to tears. Although Kelsey experienced levels of discrimination that were hurtful and clearly against the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, she did not give up on her passion for teaching youth.

In her second year, Kelsey returned home to teach and explained that she felt "more welcomed and accepted here" (Kelsey, Interview, July 2016). She said:

My department head had a huge rainbow flag in her room, and it was there all year. And I was very, very thankful for that. Because that is a heterosexual female who didn't have to have that flag up there... And she did, so that students could be reflected. And the teacher beside her, she worked up North, so she had a lot of things that reflected First Nations cultures in her room. So students could see their own reflections. (Kelsey, Interview, July 2016)

In Kelsey's experience, being affirmed by her department head made her feel valued and, in turn, she could better support her students. Kelsey was able to learn and deepen her teaching pedagogy in her second year of teaching. She said she "made sure…[her] classroom was equitable." She had a lot of visuals on her door. "I had a big positive space [symbol]…the trans flag…the gay flag…the bear flag…a safe space" (Kelsey, Interview, July 2016).

She added that although there was a GSA at her second school, she helped to create a more deep-rooted GSA. "I forced those conversations. We had a huge turnout of allies as well as members of the LGBTQ+ community. We had tough conversations... I started doing…circles…conversations…open dialogue about everything" (Kelsey Interview, July 2016). When educators who are LGBTQ are supported, they in turn have the ability to support, nurture, and navigate learning opportunities for all. Kelsey shared that, perhaps, if she "wasn't LGBTQ, I would never know how much my voice is worth… I had a lot of issues… [I am also] privileged… I didn't realize I was white until I went [up North]… I have a voice" (Kelsey Interview, July 2016). For Kelsey, becoming a racial minority helped her realize the the nuances of power and privilege. Although she was minoritized and experienced oppression based on her sexual orientation and gender presentation, the experience of seeing and understanding white privilege enabled her to find some place in the education system and to use her voice.

Learning from Beginning Career LGBTQ Teachers

In this discussion we expand upon four themes that surfaced from the findings. On a optimistic note, a theme of feeling empowered and accepted to engage in some level of LGBTQ education was experienced by all of the participants, although the degree to which they could engage in challenging homophobia and transphobia in schools varied. A second theme that surfaced related to the ability to which each participant could bring their LGTBQ identity 'out" in the context of their teaching contexts, which varied for each educator. The extent to which the responsibility for LGBTQ education was a shared responsibility among many educators or fell on the shoulders of these beginning LGBTQ educators is the third theme examined. School leadership and climates was the fourth theme to emerge; not surprisingly, these LGBTQ beginning educators were more likely to engage in LGBTQ-inclusive education and feel supported as educators when the school leadership and climate were supportive and much less so when they were hostile.

Feeling Empowered and Accepted

Taylor and Peter (2011) noted that the gender and sexual identity of educators influences their ability to be aware of and engage in LGBTQ-inclusive education. The beginning

LGBTQ educators in this study were driven to affirm LGBTQ students and families and disrupt heteronormativity and genderism in schools. For example, Dennis advocated for gender-neutral washrooms and sought to challenge the gender binary in his classroom. Craig and Kelsey became actively involved in their middle and secondary schools' GSAs, and Rose used every opportunity available to her to interrupt the rigid gender binary that elementary schools so often normalize. Unlike most pre-service teachers, who receive little formal instruction on leadership topics related to sexual and gender diversity in their teacher preparation programs (Meyer & Leonardi, 2017), these beginning teachers had been leading professional development to challenge the "heteronormative matrix" (Butler, 1990) in schools prior to graduating. This had empowered them to be social justice educators.

The degree of empowerment each participant felt varied greatly. We acknowledge that, because all four participants were white, a level of race privilege intersected with their LGBTQ identities, contributing, no doubt, to the varying levels of agency they felt. The results of this study must be read with this in mind, and we would expect that beginning teachers who are from minoritized and racialized communities would likely have different and perhaps more difficult stories in their first years of teaching. Three of the four participants were also cisgender, and that likely afforded them another level of privilege. Had they showed up to school as transgender or genderfluid, as one of our participants did, their stories might well have been different. Identities are multifacted and intersectional, and the field will benefit by bringing in further stories from beginning teachers whose identities are differently layered and constructed.

Craig experienced a high degree of affirmation from his principal, who urged him to provide leadership to students and staff and to those on the board. Kelsey, however, experienced a hostile rejection to the gender and sexual identity she brought into her first school, and like Castro (2016), a trans teacher who experienced transphobia on the part of her administration, Kelsey resigned her position. Wright and Smith (2015) noted that "educators need to feel safe and accepted to provide the best education for their students" (p. 395). In her second school, Kelsey experienced a more positive administration and school climate and was able to regain her sense of being accepted and empowered. Dennis felt a lukewarm acceptance in his elementary school. He was welcomed professionally, but in his school teachers' personal lives were private. This caused Dennis some isolation as a new teacher, as he was one of only two LGBTQ teachers in the school. Rose noted that

the transient nature of substitute teaching means that the level of acceptance she received varied from school to school and this was a source of some stress.

Dennis appeared to have the most challenges working at the elementary level, where many teachers and parents still assumed that any discussion about LGBTQ-inclusive education involved sex education. DePalma and Atkinson (2010) noted that "few [elementary teachers] were willing to engage in curriculum-based work…there was a general fear that parents would disapprove of *promoting* homosexuality on religious or moral grounds" (p. 1671). Taylor et al. (2016) noted that discussions about families in early elementary school rarely included LGBTQ parents and suggested that "many LGBTQ [elementary] students will have to wait until high school to have a reasonable chance of hearing a teacher acknowledge the existence of LGBTQ people" (p. 131).

Coming Out

Coming out professionally as an LGBTQ educator can be liberating in at least three different yet equally important ways. It can allow an LGBTQ educator to bring his/her/their full self to their professional work by allowing a higher degree of personal authenticity. Sokolower (2016), an out lesbian teacher, adds that it can also increase safey for LGBTQ educators. Sokolower explained, "coming out can protect lesbian or gay teachers, too, in many situations…Once it's out in the open, you can see where everyone stands and it's possible to engage the issues. When it's all rumor, nothing changes for the better" (p. 269). Coming out, Sokolower argued, also provides much needed role models for LGBTQ students or students with LGBTQ family members:

> The overwhelming reason to come out is to make school a safer place for youth who know, think, or fear that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual…in so many ways, silence is the enemy. Having it out in the open makes it easier for kids struggling with their own sexuality, but it also makes it easier for kids with lesbian/gay parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles. (pp. 268–269)

The degree to which an LGBTQ educator comes out depends on context and, as we see in this study, school contexts vary greatly. Sapp (2016), an out gay teacher, stated that coming out is not nessarily a given for every LGBTQ educator: "[Coming out] isn't a decision every LGBTQ teacher makes, can make, or should make" (p. 264). He further

explained that issues of power, in this case heteronormativity and cisgender privilege, have been historically and are contemporarily at play in school systems. While legislation and human rights policies exist in many school districts and states/provinces, there continue to be many covert ways that gender identity and sexual orientation can be policed. Sapp reminded educators that strategic thinking is necessary before making the decision to come out in schools. Sapp explained,

> For LGBTQ educators, being out is about bringing the most authentic selves we can into the classroom. It's the central issue we grapple with in the first difficult years of teaching and afterward as well. An issue that requires thoughtful and strategic thinking about what is possible and what is safe. And one that our straight colleagues need to understand, too. Allies make a difference. (p. 265)

In our study, Craig was immediately shown support for his identity from his principal and his colleagues. This supports what we know from the literature that LGBTQ educators who experience clear, explicit, and felt support from their school leadership will be able to demonstrate support for LGBTQ students in their schools (Wright & Smith, 2015). Craig's school is set in a rural part of Alberta, and one might assume that coming out could be problematic because of potentially more conservative views about the LGBTQ community. However, of the four participants in this study, he was the only one fully out in his school.

Being unsure about whether and how much of their LGTBQ identity they could bring into schools was problematic for Kelsey, Rose, and Dennis. In Kelsey's case, the first administration made negative assumptions about her gender presentation and sexual orientation. They immediately distanced themselves from her, providing her no professional support, became hostile, and made her feel unwelcome to the point where she left the community after the first year. It appeared more difficult for Dennis and Rose to be out in elementary school settings. Lundin (2016) states that not being out can be problematic, causing LGBTQ educators to be private and vigilant, frequently distancing themselves from other staff. Yet, it is often other staff who serve as important professional mentors and guides for beginning teachers.

Sokolower (2016) offers advice to LGBTQ educators who are grappling with the decision to come out. She pragmatically advises that LGBTQ educators should wait until they are ready, line up the necessary supports ahead of time and, in particular, seek

out and talk to their union (assuming they are part of one) about the protection they can expect, as well as seek out the support of potential CH teacher allies. When asked about whether it is worth the risk for an LGBTQ educator to come out, particularly in a conservative workplace, she stated, "Every situation is different and there is definitely a 'can't put it back in the box' quality to this decision" (p. 271).

As teacher educators deeply interested in inclusive education, we conclude that the topic of coming out is an area of professional learning not addressed nearly enough in our teacher education program. Our CH beginning teachers do not struggle with bringing their gender identity or sexual orientation into the classroom; but in this study, three of the four candidates were left trying to navigate a politically tricky terrain. They were doubly vulnerable as teachers new to and in a profession known to be slow in acknowledging the rights of LGBTQ individuals (Eribon, 2004; Taylor et al., 2015). Clearly, space needs to be created to raise the complexities of coming out professionally with LGBTQ pre-service teachers. Already we envision inviting our Year 2 LGBTQ pre-services who are moving into the profession to a session in which we share the literature and research that is available on this topic. We have, as teacher educators, had conversations with equity officers from our provincial teachers' union, but we will in future go one step further and invite a union representation to come to speak to our LGBTQ pre-service educators to provide another perspective on this topic. We remain in contact with our research participants who are now completing their fourth year in the field and we could easily invite them in for a phone conversation with our LGBTQ pre-service teacher candidates.

Advocating for LGBTQ Students and Families

Given that LGBTQ educators have often experienced homophobia and transphobia, it is not surprising that Taylor et al. (2015) found that they are more likely to be aware of issues related to harassment and see their schools as unsafe for LGBTQ students. The researchers noted that LGBTQ educators were engaged in LGBTQ-inclusive education at almost double the rates of their CH peers. The researchers also encountered educators who did not believe it was their job to affirm and provide support for LGBTQ students. When educators were asked what prevented them from becoming involved in LGBTQ-inclusive education, "LGBTQ educators were much more likely than CH to cite

job insecurities, and CH educators were much more likely to cite insufficient training and resources" (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 21).

The teachers in our study, like those in Taylor et al.'s (2015) study, were far more likely to see themselves, rather than their administration, showing LGBTQ-inclusive leadership. Craig brought with him previous LGBTQ training that allowed him to immediately lead this work in his classroom, school, and board. While he was pleased to take up this leadership role, he noted that the guidance counsellor deferred to him. In her second school, Kelsey was able to take on a leadership role supporting the GSA and she was pleased to report that other educators were active in supporting LGBTQ students. Dennis felt that he was the only teacher in his elementary school advocating for LGBTQ-inclusive education in his school. Rose noted that in the many elementary schools she worked in, few other educators appeared aware of and willing to challenge the rigid and pervasive gender binary. Her story about the kindergarten teacher unsure of how to address a trans boy in her class suggests that teachers did not feel they had the training to engage in LGBTQ-inclusive education. Krywanczyk (2016), a trans middle school teacher, argued that the job of leading LGBTQ-inclusive education cannot be left to LGBTQ educators, and that every educator has a responsibility to take on these issues, regardless of their personal experiences.

School Leadership and Climates

Taylor et al. (2016) found that "strong support from school leadership is a key factor in overcoming educators' fears, misgivings, and misinformation" (p. 134), thus addressing some of the current gaps in practice reported in *The Every Teacher Project*. One important way that school administrators supported LGBTQ-inclusive education was by making it visible and enforcing anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia policies in schools (Taylor et al., 2016). Jackson (2007) noted that administrative support was a major factor in the level of out-ness of LGBTQ educators.

The experiences of the teachers in this study confirm that school climate and culture influenced how much of themselves they can bring into a school. Craig experienced a supportive administration and it set him off in a positive direction, while Kelsey faced discrimination from the administration in her first school and it caused her to ultimately leave the school. However, she was able to engage in LGBTQ-inclusive education when

she had the support of her administration in her second school. Dennis felt ambivalence and distance from his administration and was sometimes left feeling unsafe and isolated in his advocacy efforts. From having been in many schools, Rose was able to clearly see the impact of administrative support on school climate. She encountered only a very few elementary schools engaged in LGBTQ-inclusive education fully and formally. We need to be very mindful of the school spaces that LGBTQ educators go to work in. As Harris and Gray (2014) remind us:

> Working within the heteronormative space of school has sometimes devastating effects upon queer people working and studying in such places…schools are spaces that position sexuality as private while simultaneously enabling heterosexual teachers to speak about their sexual identities unproblematically (Gray, 2013; Harris, 2013; Horvitz, 2011, Grace & Benson, 2000) and this leads to ontological, epistemological and spiritual isolation for queer teachers. (p. 4)

School leadership, colleagues, curricula, and climates all have critical roles to play in making schools safe spaces for all. Wright and Smith (2015) noted:

> Given the variety of challenges facing educators today, it is vital that school leaders support each teacher in his or her development. Making each teacher feel comfortable in the school is invaluable…to helping teachers feel safe in providing the very best instruction and support to each student. (p. 405)

The task of realizing LGBTQ-inclusive education is a school-wide effort. We affirm that school-wide initiatives are needed "to challeng[e] the limits of binary gendered thinking and to rais[e] the marginalized status of sexuality education" (Rudoe, 2014, p. 74).

Conclusion

Our study sheds light on the ongoing work that needs to be done to create equitable learning and teaching conditions in the educational system for LGBTQ educators. We are heartened as we learn of the agency, advocacy, and resilience of the four LGBTQ beginning teachers in this study, Craig, Kelsey, Dennis, and Rose. They are, to varying degrees, engaging in *doing* LGBTQ-inclusive education in different curriculum spaces to support

LGBTQ youth and families and challenging heteronormativity. As to how their LGBTQ identities are taken up in their educational spaces, a continuum of safe, positive, and queer spaces and moments (Goldstein et al., 2007) existed.

Craig, with the immediate support and encouragement of his administration in a secondary school context, was able to flourish and have greater agency as a new teacher committed to social justice. He had the most professional security and administrative support enabling him to experience several safe and positive school spaces. Craig was also asked to lead professional learning for his colleagues, which recognized that he had the training to do this work as a positive space trainer; but we are worried that the responsibility of LGBTQ education seems to so easily fall on the shoulder of LGBTQ teachers. As Taylor et al. (2016) remind us, while most educators express support of LGBTQ-inclusive education, "fewer teachers would be comfortable practicing it, and fewer still are actually doing it" (p. 130). Dennis and Rose often had to navigate heteronormative school cultures completely on their own. In the elementary context, LGBTQ education is often erroneously construed as sex education and irrelevant until students reach the age of puberty. Nonetheless, they both demonstrated agency in their attempts to diversify the heteronormative curriculum, and challenge the rigid gender binary, thereby helping to create safe and positive school spaces for their students; but we do note that their comfort and levels of professional safety varied. We are deeply concerned by some of the overt and covert negative experiences these beginning teachers endured. In Kelsey's case, one school culture did not provide a miminum level of safety as she experienced levels of discrimination that were unprofessional and against the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. Although she was resilient and continued to teach, her initial experiences were far from safe and positive. There were a few moments where our early career educators were empowered and experienced queer moments; they were able to bring their full selves to certain spaces, like in the GSAs they led or with certain colleagues who helped normalize their full idientity. We note that these are moments. Until our LGBTQ colleagues have the same freedom to express who they are as their heteronormative counterparts, there remains a lot of work to be done in queering the educational system.

The implications of our small study are multiple. Our participants' experiences demonstrate that there still exists a tremendous level of vulnerability and unpredictablility in being an LGBTQ educator. We need a critical mass of educators, both LGBTQ and CH, to transform heteronormativity and cisgender privilege. In our study we also

learned of the crucial roles colleagues, leadership, and school climates play in support-ing teacher agency and socially just school environments. The voices of four LGBTQ educators show that anti-oppressive education is needed not only for LGBTQ youth and families in schools, but for the LGBTQ educators who work in the educational system. As Kumushiro (2002) humbly reminds us, discrimination is highly nuanced and changes in different places and spaces. As we ask "whom does this space harm or exclude?" we need to be mindful of the voices of LGBTQ educators who have and are experiencing marginalization.

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