‘It’s not over yet!’: Workplace experiences of lesbian public school teachers

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the workplace experiences of 12 lesbian public school teachers in Southern New Jersey. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, teachers discuss the tensions, contradictions, rewards, and challenges of teaching at this unique historical moment when laws, policies, social practices, and attitudes are in flux. Queer theory guided the development of the study and provides the primary analytical lens for examining and interpreting data. Findings cluster around the following interrelated themes: 1) queer teachable moments; 2) being ‘that’ teacher; 3) self-disclosure, and 4) It’s not over yet. Findings provide insight into what lesbian teachers are saying about their experiences, their teaching environments, and popular perceptions of difference. These voices, largely unheard, bring insight to teaching as a profession.

Keywords: lesbian, public school teachers, queer theory, qualitative research, pedagogy, K-12 education

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INTRODUCTION

In 2015, when the Marriage Equality Act and federal workplace protections[2] converged to address discrimination, these very laws in support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) teachers were often eclipsed by social practices and by state and local policies, a counterreality lesbian teachers continue to face. Before the June 2020 Supreme Court ruling protecting gay and transgender employment rights, it was legal in 29 states to discriminate in the public workplace based on sexual orientation (ACLU, 2020). Even in the states with legal protection against employment discrimination, LGBT+ teachers perceived their right to be open in their day-to-day educational practice was limited (Biegel, 2010). As of 2018, seven states (OK, TX, LA, MS, AL, AZ, and SC) had so-called No Promo Homo laws requiring teachers to take a neutral stance when discussing LGBT+ topics (GLSEN, 2018). With dubious legal standing, a 'don't ask, don't tell' workplace policy persists in many schools, resulting in a "compulsory heterosexuality" (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001, p. 121) a condition that regulates and limits all teachers and students. The story of Stacy Bailey, a Texas elementary art teacher, illustrates the bind that compulsory heterosexuality practices place on lesbian public school teachers.

In 2017, Bailey was accused by a parent of forwarding her gay agenda in the classroom. Bailey had followed a common first-day practice of sharing a family photo with her 4th grade students. Performing a normal act as a lesbian public school teacher was considered transgressive and potentially illegal by district administrators. After being placed on paid leave for eight months, Bailey was forced to move to a high school position the following year. It was then that Bailey sued the Mansfield Independent School District for sexual orientation discrimination. Three years later, in 2020, a federal judge ruled her suspension was unconstitutional. The district challenged the ruling and Bailey settled out of court for $100,000.

In June 2020, a landmark U.S. Supreme Court case, Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia, decided 6 - 3 that employers cannot discriminate based on sexual orientation or gender identity. In this case, Gerald Bostock, a Clayton County employee, was fired shortly after expressing interest in a gay recreational softball league. This ruling, based on Title VII of the 1964 Civil Right Act, extends to LGBT+ educators working for public schools and non-religious charter and private schools, making it illegal to face discrimination (e.g., not hired, fired, denied a promotion) based on sexual orientation or gender. Such legal support eventually will impact education policy and workplace cultures in public schools. The question remains; How will court rulings such as this change the everyday work environments of lesbian teachers, and to what extent?

The potential for LGBT+ teachers to become more visible and influential is realized precisely at a time when the need for a sexually diverse teaching staff is greater. Data suggest there are growing numbers of same-sex parents and LGBT+ students in the public school system. According to the Williams Institute's analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2013 American Community Survey data, nearly 210,000 children lived in households with same-sex parents. Female same-sex couples accounted for more than three-quarters of married same-sex couples raising children (Education Week, 2015). A U.S. Centers for Disease Control 2016

[2] In 2015, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission concluded that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 does not allow sexual orientation discrimination in employment because it is a form of sex discrimination.

survey suggests roughly 8% of all high school students in America report being lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

Curriculum changes that more honestly represent sexuality are also in progress. New Jersey, the location of this study, became the second state after California to institute legislation "…requiring boards of education to include instruction, and adopt instructional materials, that accurately portray political, economic, and social contributions of persons with disabilities, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people" (Synopsis, 2019). The widespread absence of LGBT+ perspectives in curriculum needs to be rectified, as does the lack of visible LGBT+ faculty. The everyday practices of modeling and honoring diversity and inclusion in schools, including the rights of lesbian teachers to live public lives in public spaces, will positively impact the success of all diversity and equity laws, policies and initiatives. Laws and mandatory curriculum, however, are not enough.

PURPOSE

This project focuses on the vitally important but underrepresented lives of lesbian teachers whose multiple non-dominant subjectivities can aid in a more comprehensive understanding of teaching as a profession, learning environments, and popular perceptions of difference. The purpose of the study is to better understand how their daily work lives are being affected in the midst of legal, political, social, and cultural change and, in turn, how they shape their work environments. This study serves to interrupt further marginalization of lesbian teachers and more fully recognize and consider their lived realities within the larger teaching profession.

Queer Theory

Queer theory has been characterized as difficult to capture (Sullivan, 2003) perhaps because so much of our knowledge has been unchallenged and our assumptions have been unexamined. Heterosexuality and the power it affords has been so embedded as an institutional construct for the last 200 years, to the uninitiated its oppression is nearly invisible. Research to understand queer ways of thinking and seeing takes new language and a willingness to make the invisible visible. Used here, queer theory is intended to challenge the logic on which oppression is based, and to unpack and disrupt understandings of power, normativity, privilege, and reinforcement of binaries from a queer perspective. In this study, queer theory is used as a lens to explore and explain social norms and bring insight into how lesbian teachers work within, and against, the status quo.

This research continues a line of inquiry combining qualitative research, queer studies, and education. The first era of publications spanning the 1950s-1980s was concerned primarily with first-person narratives about LGBT+ teacher experience. *One Teacher in 10*, edited by Kevin Jennings (1983), is representative of this era. Educator narratives continued in the 1990s, illuminated by theoretical perspectives addressing curriculum and pedagogy (see Bryson & DeCastell, 1993; Britzman, 1998). William Pinar's edited volume (1998) led to the next significant shift: While building on earlier works, the authors in Pinar's scholarship brought queer theory to educational research. This important turn toward a queer reading of education, and a challenging of normativity in education, has been widely acknowledged (Pinar, 2003; Kumashiro, 2000; Tierney & Dilley, 1997). Summarized below are relevant concepts from

queer theory applied to this research that help define and explain themes from the interviews. Jargon is avoided as much as possible while foregrounding words and their shifting meaning, an important tenet at the center of queer theory.

The construction of sexual identity

One of the basic practices of queer theory is to trace the history of our terminology. Like clichés, words in pervasive use today can go unexamined and create misunderstanding. A primary example of such a misunderstanding – one that is supporting the oppression of LGBT+ people - is the word 'heterosexual.' The word 'heterosexual' first appeared in 1886 in a published study by German sexologist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing. While religious institutions dictated against certain sexual practices, 19th century Western researchers redefined thinking about sexuality from a behavior to a biologically based identity. Hence, ***homosexuality*** developed as a medical diagnosis while taboo sexual behaviors, e.g., masturbation and sodomy, continued to be viewed as sins and prosecuted as crimes. In December 1973, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed 'homosexuality' from its psychological disorders list in the second edition of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*. While no longer viewed as a disorder, the conflation of legal, religious, and social proscriptions continues to be used as a tool of oppression. ***Bisexual*** and ***homosexual***, identity labels still in use today, led to grouping people who, in many cases, had little in common. This laid the groundwork for later queer identity politics of the 1970s, and an eventual understanding of identity as unstable and possibly disruptive, thus creating an opening for more responsive and successful identity politics (Fuss, 1989).

Identity politics

The intention to acknowledge and respect sexual diversity is exemplified by LGBTQ+, an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, with the plus sign as a marker for the ever-expanding terminology for sexual and gender identity. 'Queer,' 'trans' and 'gender non-conforming' are signifiers when referring to LGBT+ individuals and communities in the present day, and as inclusive words for those who identify beyond, across, or outside of binary understandings of sex and gender.[3] Yet, there are problems inherent in privileging sexual orientation as a governing feature of social and political identity. Although identity categories remain in common parlance, categories themselves are debated not only by queer theorists but also by oppressed groups. Race, gender, physical ability, age, labor status, class, and other categories, for example, are ways in which people are stereotyped and regulated. In Foucault's terms, labels and the images they project produce a power/knowledge effect that, in turn, produces social hierarchies resulting in systemic inequalities (1980).

Even as queer theorists resist the notion of a fixed identity all together, and they challenge categories as repressive, dogmatic, narrow, and limiting (Seidman, 1995), the strategy of fighting for rights based on a shared cultural experience has proven politically effective.

The mainstream Gay Rights movement that developed in the wake of the Stonewall uprising achieved marked gains for LGBT+ civil rights. However, many of the foundational concerns of the Stonewall participants who revolted in the summer of 1969 remain unresolved. Most notably, the idea of a coherent and cohesive gay community pushing against mounting

[3] See page 8 for discussion on how the acronym LGBT+ is used in this paper.

cultural pressures to assimilate remains a sticking point today. Subtle as well as overt messages to conform, to adopt heteronormative values and outward appearances, come from many directions (Warner, 1999) including LGBT+ national organizations themselves as well as popular media, family influences and workplace policies.

Attention to language

As we have seen with identity markers, words in queer theory can take on multiple meanings. For example *queer* – used as a verb, i.e., *queering*, is a way of questioning norms around the status quo. *Queer* used as a noun, an identity marker, suggests a social role and capacity added to other subjective identities. Binaries, such as *straight/gay*, *normal/abnormal*, *male/female*, and *strong/weak* are challenged in queer theory. Considered fixed categories, binaries are thought to create false divisions and hierarchies of privilege (Fuss, 1991). Butler (1999) writing in *Gender Trouble*, argues that gender is "not a noun" but rather something we do (p. 33), that is, socially constructed through language and behavior/performance.

Butler and Foucault draw on post-structuralist theory of language in rejecting fixed meaning and explaining how language unconsciously frames thought. Words, in no small act, create a reality. This understanding about how language works furthers its importance. If language defines who we are, then as we interrogate cultural conditions and change the ways we speak about them, we change ourselves. Through language, and especially the back and forth of discourse, we can explore the intimate connection between personal subjectivity and social and political processes.

To be sure, we all are constricted by language and our social scripts, as they limit us in ways of thinking and behaving. According to Butler, however, language offers us a way to change the status quo by repeatedly challenging and refiguring social constructions of gender and sexuality (*Gender Trouble*). For example, "…the invention of the homosexual person not only made stronger negative social controls possible, but also opened up the possibility of the gay rights movement" (Barker & Scheele, 2016, p.72). For both Butler (1999) and Foucault (1980), the potential for agency and disruption is always present through language. It is through language that change takes place. This is why language merits our attention.

RELEVANT RESEARCH

In addition to queer theory influences, this study built upon the findings of multi-national research into lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender teachers workplace experiences in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland (Ferfolja, 2010; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Gray, 2013; Hardie, 2012; Rudoe, 2018, 2010, 2014; Neary, Gray, & O'Sullivan, 2018). A similarly focused book-length study of LGBT+ teachers in California and Texas by American sociologist Catherine Connell (2014) provided perspective. These studies confront many of the unique issues faced by LGBT+ teachers in their efforts to manage the complexities of workplace experiences related to sexual identity. Together, this multi-national body of research suggests LGBT+ teacher experiences, while shaped by local, individual situations, share similar themes as part of a larger, international LGBT+ awakening.

Hardie (2012) examined her experiences as a lesbian role model to students in her school and the resulting personal and professional implications. She explores the ambiguous and idealized expectations she faced and asks, "What role exactly is a lesbian teacher

modelling?" (279). Further complicating the student/mentor relationship is the assumption that lesbians are a homogenous group and that students have a stable sexual identity. Gray (2013) analyzed lesbian, gay, and bisexual teachers' discursive practices in professional and personal workplace conversations. Both researchers found the process of self-representation in heteronormative (i.e. "hostile") environments complex and ongoing. As Ferfolia and Hopkins (2012) confirm in their study, even when participants report workplace acceptance and support, there continues to be, in differing degrees, implicit and explicit control of their sexualities visa vi heteronormative institutional practices. Similarly, Rudoe (2010) found that while direct attacks on lesbian teachers was not reported by participants in her study, schools were not a place "...where lesbian and gay sexuality may be named without fear" (23).

While these studies focused on workplace conditions, there is limited information on what unique contributions lesbians bring as teachers in a swiftly changing world and as promoters of safe and inclusive environments overall.

While LGBT+ research studies in school settings have been valuable, they have focused on the experiences of gay males mostly. Not as much is known about lesbian teachers specifically, especially in the United States where the number of such studies in general falls short compared to Western countries. Statistics are not readily available on the number of LGBT+ teachers in the U.S. public schools. According to interpretive data of the Schools and Staffing Survey, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, females comprise an estimated 77 % of the four million elementary and secondary teachers, a 30-year trend that is likely to continue (Ingersoll et al, 2018). Teaching is a female dominated profession, which suggests a larger proportion of lesbians to gay male teachers. However, previous studies on the experiences of lesbian and gay teachers in the U.S., while well intentioned, have consistently foregrounded the perspectives of gay men (see Smith et al. 2008; Haddad, 2013; and Hooker, 2018). In Smith's et al. quantitative study, for example, only 17% of study participants (88 of 515) self-identified as lesbian. Hooker's qualitative study yielded similar proportions: 20% of participants, or two out of 10, identifying as lesbian. In these studies, bisexual and transgender teachers are represented in even lower percentages than lesbians. Yet, study findings often claim to speak for LGBT+ educators when, in fact, they are informed primarily by gay male experiences and perspectives. These are experiences that, according to Butler and Foucault, are lived differently according to their higher status as males. We would, indeed, expect them to differ from lesbian experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This research focuses on lesbian teachers' experiences with and negotiations around sexual difference in their public school workplaces. Interviews were conducted with a sample of lesbian teachers. The intent of the study was to determine in what ways personal and professional experiences as a teacher influence, and are influenced by, their lesbian status. Specific research questions addressed 1) the development of teaching identity, 2) the perceptions of teaching and the profession, 3) the optimizing of learning environments, 4) the mechanisms through which personal freedom and professional restraints are managed and at what cost, and 5) insights regarding teacher retention and professional development.

Procedures

The university institutional review board approved the study. The researcher looked for currently employed K-12 public school teachers who identified themselves as lesbian and cisgender, i.e., their gender identity corresponds with the sex assigned at birth. The term 'lesbian' is used in the everyday vernacular of the targeted region – Southern New Jersey. The author/investigator recognizes the complexity and fluid nature of the word as well as the sexual category it represents. The participants similarly understood the term 'lesbian' as an identity marker, not a coherent category. When referring to broader gendered and sexually diverse communities beyond the scope of this study, 'LGBT+' is used.

A written request for participation was distributed throughout Southern New Jersey. Publicizing the study included dissemination through statewide LGBT+ organizations such as Garden State Equality; affiliated groups of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG); Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Networks (GLSEN); and university channels. Other recruiting tools included direct emails, social media and website postings, word-of-mouth, and personal and professional referrals. I identified myself as lesbian in all recruitment efforts.

Sample

A purposive sample of K-12 public school teachers who identified as lesbian, cisgender, teaching in Southern New Jersey was used to select study participants. Further, maximum variation in the sample (e.g., age, school setting, race) was sought. In purposive sampling, participants who exhibit characteristics of central importance to the purpose of the study are selected. This type of sampling results in "information rich cases" (Patton, 2002, p. 230) which help to define and clarify the questions under study. As the study progressed, snowball sampling was used by asking participants to recommend other lesbian teachers to interview.

Twelve public school teachers took part in the study, granted informed consent, and gave permission to record in-depth interviews. Of the twelve participants, two were in early career with less than five years of teaching experience; nine had between eight and 17 years of teaching experience; and one had been a substitute teacher for three years after retiring from a related professional position in the field of education. The substitute teacher taught at six different campuses primarily at the elementary level within a single school district. The remaining participants represented five elementary schools, two middle schools, and four high schools. A total of twelve suburban school districts were represented. Subject areas included the humanities, special education, health, science, and math. All participants were employed as public school teachers at the time of the study. All are Anglo-American. Ages ranged from 34 to 66 years. Populations of the schools ranged from middle class to working middle class with less than 30% minority students in attendance.

To protect the anonymity of the participants, no names of the teachers or their schools are used. Narrative and participant continuity is avoided throughout this article to maintain confidentiality (Ferfolja, 2010). When directly quoting the participants, certain textual features were used. To enhance readability and in some cases to ensure confidentiality, the author used ellipses to indicate selective omissions. Brackets were used to include information that helped clarify participant intentions. "Uhs, ums," and interjections such as "you know" were omitted along with removing repetitions.

Data Collection & Analysis

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants in a setting of their choosing – via Skype, telephone, or face-to-face in the investigator's office. Interviews took place during a three-month period and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted 50-120 minutes. The investigator sought to elicit information about ways the participants' lesbian status affected personal and professional experiences as a teacher in the public school system. Guiding questions were used to encourage participants' discussion of their workplace experiences. Examples of questions included: 1) How would you characterize your relationships with colleagues, students, administrators, and parents? 2) Describe yourself as a teacher. 3) Is LGBT+ content included in your curriculum? 4) Can you describe a time you felt challenged at school because of your sexual identity? 5) Do you hear homophobic language or observe bullying based on perceived sexual identity? 6) In terms of your professional life, what does being lesbian allow you to do or prevent you from doing? During each interview, participants were asked if there was anything they did not get an opportunity to talk about but would like to discuss or emphasize. Follow-up telephone calls were used as needed to obtain clarification of transcribed interview content.

As the interviews progressed, insights about evolving themes were shared with participants and responses were invited. When no new themes were identified in the final three interviews, data saturation was considered to have been reached.

Qualitative content analysis was used to discover patterns, categories, and themes in the data (Patton, 2014). In qualitative content analysis, language is closely examined for the purpose of classifying large amounts of text into categories that represent similar meanings (Weber, 1990). Thus, the first step in data analysis was a line-by-line critical reading of each transcript following the completion of each interview. During this process, codes – a keyword or short phrase – were given by the researcher to specific portions of the interview transcript. These codes assigned a specific attribute or characteristic to this portion of the text (Saldana, 2009). Subsequent readings of the transcript enabled the researcher to sort, integrate, and organize data in ways that led to the identification of the most frequent and significant codes. In the final step, codes were organized around themes that seemed to best reflect the meaning of the text within and across narratives. Codes that were similar and relevant to the study's purpose were clustered into central themes that captured and unified the codes into a group of "repeating ideas" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 38). For example, the codes pedagogy, social justice, and critical thinking were collapsed into the central theme queer teachable moments as illustrated here:

- pedagogy "They're 14 years old, but they are able to sit in small circles and have pretty mature conversations about real life issues. Those are the days I feel most proud as a teacher because they are learning from each other and hearing about other people's experiences and opinions."
- social justice "He [a colleague] told me, 'Because of my religion, I just don't see that gay marriages should be allowed.' And I said, 'Okay but you do understand it [same-sex marriage] is legal right now?
- critical thinking "Teachers will ask 'Do you really think third graders should be talking about gay people or meeting them?' I tell them, 'If they're allowed to say 'You're so gay' to each other, then they need to understand something about what that is."

Themes led to further interpretations of data in relation to the study's purpose and existing literature including theoretical underpinnings.

To enhance validity, preliminary findings were shared with participants via email. Participant feedback, including questions, clarification, and additional information was invited. All participants reported their agreement with the findings. Although no new data were obtained, two participants identified the findings related to curriculum matters as especially relevant. Seven participants remarked that they were surprised to see others shared their experiences.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to better understand how the daily work lives of lesbian public school teachers are affected in the midst of today's political, social, and cultural climate, and in turn, how lesbian teachers shape their workplace. Findings clustered around the following interrelated and overlapping themes: 1) queer teachable moments; 2) being 'that' teacher; 3) self-disclosure; and 4) "it's not over yet." A commonality among all themes was the frequency and depth with which each theme was discussed and the fact that the issues raised were directly related to their lesbian status. After the confirmation of themes, a second literature review was conducted to provide additional insight. Information gained through this process is reflected in the following sections.

Queer Teachable Moments

What all teachers know to be true about teaching and learning is rooted, in part, in their life experiences. As women and as lesbians, study participants describe life that, at times, is out of sync with social norms. In and out of the classroom, these identities on the margins enhance their capacity for empathy and critical insight and move them toward social action. Teachers in this study describe their safe and supportive classrooms, the open and honest conversations they have with their students, and their proactive response to insensitive hall talk. Perspectives informed by their identities and related life experiences enabled study participants to be tuned into what Alexander Doty describes as "queer moments," opportunities that arise to read situations or texts differently, to offer different interpretations and to bring critical understanding to everyday situations (1993). For teachers who have grown into adulthood with a queer identity, it is a lens used to explore and explain social norms. All participants related a heightened awareness, an empathy and connection, with their students and especially students who were different, students who did not fit into the 'normal' category. Drawing from their own sense of difference as lesbians, some of whom were bullied, these teachers fulfill an important role. Class discussions, informal conversations and lessons reflect an intrinsically queer way of knowing. This knowing challenges all students to examine the logic on which oppression is based, and helps them to unpack and disrupt understandings of power, normativity, privilege, and reinforcement of gender binaries. According to one elementary education participant:

> [identifying as lesbian] gives me more empathy. I got into special education to work with children who don't always have a voice and specifically kids who were ostracized because of their behavior or their background. Gay people can be ostracized too, and feel that their voice is not able to be presented. Those two things tie in together."

A high school teacher had similar thoughts:

> Kids realize you have a variety of experiences that are different from other teachers and being because I am a minority [lesbian] I think I can relate better to kids who have different backgrounds and just be able to talk more about being open and respecting all differences which is important in any classroom.

Another high school teacher illustrates an opportunity she took to confront societal assumptions and address rigid thinking about gender. A student used the term 'snowflake' in class. When the teacher asks him to explain, he struggles. To offer help, another student tells the class that their football coach sometimes tosses tampons at them and calls them the 'pussy.' Teammates who spoke out against the coach's actions were called 'snowflakes' for being overly sensitive. At this juncture, the class is divided. According to the teacher, one group agrees with the idea that the country is being victimized by overly sensitive people; there is a second cluster of students who think tossing tampons at football players is out of line; and a third group of girls is feeling disrespected by classmates and the coach who happens to be a popular authority figure. To move their thinking along, the teacher asks the class what it means when someone says, 'you are acting like a girl.' Because the female students remained mostly silent in the discussion so far, the teacher said she offered one perspective: "You're using a 1950s version of femininity and that's why you think it is okay. Calling a guy a 'pussy' when he needed to step up may have seemed normal then, but it is not okay now." According to this study participant, the shift in what was considered normal then compared to now led students to question how outdated expectations for boys to act masculine might lead them to disrespect girls today.

Although the tenor was intense, students remained mostly courteous. The next day, the teacher said she praised the students for talking through a difficult subject respectfully. That the students knew this classroom would be the right place to unpack the sensitive and perplexing situation signals their recognition of a queer space and its value. While teachers do not have to be queer in order to 'read' culturally loaded terms and symbols (in this example; snowflake, tampons, pussy), the skill with which this teacher facilitated the discussion suggests she understands the role of social critique in living the examined life. Students respond by showing up, opening up, and talking through topics they may not have been able to discuss at home or in other classes.

Students here and in other participants' examples used the 'no judgement zone' as a space to question normal ways of thinking and being. One study participant remarked: "My students know they can ask any question and we will discuss it." Another study participant spoke about an incident in an honors history class when a white male student suggested that acclaimed American poet, Phillis Wheatley, spelled the word 'colored' with a 'u' (coloured) because she was black and did not know any better. In the interview, the teacher explained:

> It's my ability to have those hard conversations with kids that doesn't scare me away. When a student makes an ignorant comment I say, 'no, let's stop teaching and start educating right now.' I had to. I saw two black students drop their heads when he made the remark; we had to address it. If I wasn't a member of the LGBT+ community, I might not see the importance of using these moments to create a culture of respect.

A majority of the study participants echoed the claim that "most students really don't care anymore about who is or isn't gay." However, in times when students challenged LGBT+ people based on religious or ideological reasons, the teachers reported they felt prepared and

willing to have those conversations; this, in turn, seemed to strengthen their relationships with all students.

Study participants reported they share personal aspects of themselves in certain one-on-one situations, for example, to challenge hate speech. One participant reported telling a student who claimed to hate gays, "I'm gay. Do you hate me?" Another teacher shared photos of her two adopted children with a student stating, "These are my two trans kids. Do you hate them?" Personalizing an anti-LGBT+ position seemed to make students not only more aware of what they were saying but, also in most cases, apologetic.

The teachers in this study valued their relationships with students over any other workplace relationship. By validating students feelings and experiences, and by challenging them to think beyond the obvious, teachers felt validated and seen for who they are. Through this social reciprocity teachers found personal meaning and professional satisfaction. As one elementary level participant stated: "I don't think I'd do anything else but teach. I feel pretty lucky to be able to make a difference in my kids' lives. Exposing them to different perspectives or supporting my LGBT+ kids – I feel pretty lucky."

Lesbian teachers in this study are sensitive to the ways students talk to each other. They know what it is like to be bullied, to be afraid, and to feel threatened. As one participant stated: "In the hallway I'll hear, 'fucking faggot!' and I'll go out immediately to address the situation. A few of the other [heterosexual] teachers do that, but most don't. There's a big gap between what I find acceptable hallway speech and what other teachers do."

All twelve study participants said they were working to help students think through their language use and to consider why their words may be hurtful and wrong. As one participant expressed, "It's important for the climate of the school that we don't have kids thinking it's okay." When a gay student called another gay student 'fag' one study participant stepped in and explained the negative implications. "He thought it was okay because of his sexuality and I had to explain the other side of it to him." Or as another participant put it: "It's not just a slap on the wrist, it's a conversation with deeper understanding."

The satisfaction that study participants gained by standing up for the dignity of all students and fighting to change oppressive social norms could, however, lead to a feeling of isolation. As one participant stated:

> You just can't let me do it all. When a gay teacher gets on a straight student about language it's not as powerful as if a straight teacher were telling a straight student, 'Hey, don't do this.' Students might respect it more coming from a straight teacher, unfortunately because they think, 'Oh there's that gay teacher getting on us again.' It's lonely and frustrating.

A middle school teacher related an incident from ten years prior that she continues to struggle with:

> Chris, an 8th grader, showed me his leather jacket during lunch. The word "fag" was written across the back in white shoe polish. Chris's face was blotchy and wet. He appeared to be crying and sweating at the same time. He knew the guys who did it. They had been after him for a while. But his biggest concern was his parents finding out. After gathering himself, he took the jacket to the assistant principal's office. The administrator scrubbed off the polish - although you could still see the white paint in the creases. It ended there. Not one student was called in.

In the follow-up interview, the researcher asked her to explain the significance of this experience and why she still thinks about it. She replied: "Chris came to me first. I understood his fears of being called out as gay, of having to explain the ruined jacket, and mostly the fear of his parents' reaction. But, I thought the boys should be made to face what they did. Instead, the administrator literally erased the crime and erased Chris. I guess I felt erased too."

In another example, a study participant felt disregarded: "We had a student who just came out as a transgender male and he wanted to be called by his chosen name. I had teachers who said, 'Well, I'm just not going to do that.' I said, 'You have to. It is detrimental to the student not to.'" Calling students by their preferred name is a New Jersey state law that, in this instance, is supported by that school's administration but blatantly disregarded by some teachers.

Being 'that' teacher

As stated in the introduction, approximately 8% of all high school students in America report being lesbian, gay, or bisexual (U.S. Centers for Disease Control, 2016). As an increasing number of students identify as LGBT+, their arrival on school campuses requires a coordinated and informed response from school districts to ensure, at a minimum, a safe environment. Districts need to see to it that individual student academic and emotional needs are met and to comply with state and federal protections and enforce school policies. A number of participants in this study perceived a burden of representation as their school relied on them to address the aforementioned issues. According to participants, lesbian teachers are being asked to take on roles beyond their job qualifications and expertise in response to these growing needs. Lesbian teachers report they are being called upon to perform the functions of school counselors and administrators, and are even pulled from class to respond to LGBT+ related crises. Based on their sexual orientation, lesbian teachers in this study say they have also become the de facto experts on legal and psychological matters related to LGBT+ students. One study participant teaching at a large high school (2,000+ students) explains: "Anytime the nurse or counselor has a student who is questioning this or that, they automatically bring them to me. And, while I'm happy to be of help, at the same time, they [professional staff] should be trained."

Participants in this study report their presence on diversity committees. They advise LGBT+ student clubs, provide orientations for newly enrolled LGBT+ students, as well as run faculty workshops on LGBT+ awareness, diversity, and inclusion. These activities are well within the definition of service yet, when the one or two lesbian teachers targeted for involvement also have other responsibilities, they can become quickly overwhelmed.

Related to the commitment of time is the nature of the involvement. A line is crossed when teachers are asked to share personal advice and/or legal knowledge, be included in sensitive emails regarding unfamiliar students, or are too often called in to counsel students in crisis. These expectations come with a responsibility that is not always acknowledged. As one participant explained, "I am not a counselor. My only qualification is that I am gay."

Possibly as a result of lack of training and insensitivity, teachers are being carelessly outed by school personnel when they are called in to speak to parents or when students are directed to, "Go talk to Ms. ___ about your questions." One participant accepts the role and responsibility but takes exception to the way things are handled. "It's frustrating because I'm out in my building but I have to tell the counselors - 'let <u>me</u> tell the student, not you. It's not proper to go around outing people."

Being represented as a lesbian role model is accepted by some study participants while others feel it is out of their comfort zone. As one participant explains: "I don't self-disclose with students. The sexuality talk? I don't know that even heterosexuals should discuss that. I just keep my boundaries on that one." Nonetheless, being asked to assume a mentoring role seems to be common and can cause some teachers discomfort. As Hardie explains, the presuppositions behind being a lesbian role model remain unexamined (2012). A participant in this study, responding to staff assumptions that she should be more involved because she is lesbian, refused to be what she called "*…that* teacher." "I don't want to be a gay role model. I don't want that job. It is not who I am." Beyond the presumed expertise that this lesbian teacher was thought to embody, the notion of being a role model may well bring other expectations based on stereotypes, and ideals, and serve to entrench a fixed or/and false identity.

Self-Disclosure

Related to, yet different from being "that teacher"," participants agreed their negotiation of self-disclosure with students, parents, and colleagues is complicated and carefully constructed. A nuanced understanding articulated in these interviews supports and expands previous research on the subject of private and professional identities (see, for example, Hardie, 2012; Gray, 2012).

In education research, teacher self-disclosure-- the purposeful sharing of personal information with students-- is a communicative strategy that has long been shown to enhance the learning process (Lannutti & Strauman, 2006).While studies found self-disclosure was most effective in the higher grades when used to illustrate abstract concepts, positive outcomes for all grade levels included students' increased motivation to learn and enhanced positive feelings about classroom climate (Cayanus & Martin, 2008; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2017).

Research on self-disclosure supports the common practices of biographical teacher webpages, spousal photos on teachers' desks, and the sharing of family experiences, professional sport team affiliations, and personal hobbies by teachers. These practices are also an accepted, and often expected, part of Southern New Jersey classroom culture, especially at the elementary level. Lesbian teachers in this study, however, identify constraints to self-disclosure with students that serve to invalidate personal aspects of themselves in professional contexts. For example, few participants in the study followed the standard heteronormative practice of featuring a spousal photo in their classroom. Participants' teacher pages, linked from the schools' homepage, similarly contained a lack of personal detail compared to heterosexual teacher pages. One elementary teacher, realizing the rhetorical twists and turns involved in the presentation of a false self to her students and by extension their parents, simply gave up. "I don't fit into the teacher norm so that's a little tough for me. I haven't set up my teacher page and won't."

Compartmentalizing the personal from the professional, known as ***splitting,*** is a strategy identified in several qualitative studies of LGBT+ teachers (Ferfolja, 2010; Connell, 2015). According to Connell, 'splitters' are teachers whose sexuality, they feel, cannot be reconciled in the workplace setting and must be hidden (2015). A participant offers her approach to splitting: "I'm not open about my sexuality with students. I don't lie to them but I don't bring it up. My beginning of the year PowerPoint doesn't include a coming out slide.'" One elementary teacher expressed regret for having to present a false self: "I totally avoid the whole scene. It's just awful...I don't talk about my personal life with the students at all. The kids think I'm just a

lonely person with cats." This approach was echoed by the substitute teacher participant who rarely shared personal information with teachers, leading to uncomfortable small talk using indefinite pronouns when discussing weekend plans. An indication of the overall unsafe environment for lesbian teachers navigating self-disclosure with students is articulated by a participant who stated that lesbian teachers have to be: "…super careful how you come across to kids because, even though they [administrators] can't fire us, they can, and do, move us."

The erasure or negation of self, of lesbian identity, is a classroom discourse practice for most study participants. Yet, the decision to keep professional and personal aspects separate may suggest agency on the part of some lesbian teachers. One participant explains the benefit of maintaining a physical distance between work and home: "I live far from where I teach. I never have to run into my students or parents. I see them where I expect to see them - at school." On balance, the absence or invisibility of personal information more often points to institutional mechanisms in place that leave study participants feeling vulnerable. As one participant, a high school level teacher, stated, "Administration has made the blanket statement before about not talking about your personal life. But if they ever get on me, my first question would be 'Are you going to say that to all of the straight teachers who talk about their wives and husbands?'" This comment suggests a double standard in play between straight and lesbian teachers in what can and cannot be shared publicly. It also may signal administrator fears that lesbian teachers are spreading their 'homosexual agendas' whenever they speak about personal matters.

One study participant felt that because she did not hide her lesbian identity at work, she believed herself to be an object of fascination for her school community and thus experienced less personal privacy: "I'm still very closeted when it comes to my personal life outside of school because I'm afraid that I'm going to be on Snapchat - very fast." Because this teacher maintained a level of openness at school, she believed her recent divorce and subsequent dating activities would be judged more harshly and even considered immoral because of her lesbian identity.

Another participant realized the unhealthy aspects associated with masking her lesbian identity and hoped to reconcile the two parts of herself:

> I don't think I keep my personal life separate by choice. It's a learned behavior intended to keep people away…and I don't think it's very healthy either. I find that I disassociate in other parts of my personal life as well. Lately, I feel like I am becoming more of who I really am at school with students and teachers, but it's been baby steps.

A high school teacher explained the dissonance she experienced this way:

> The teachers who I thought were good friends were telling me I shouldn't be out to my students [...] when they have pictures of their husbands on their desks and they talk about their personal lives - it's all over the classroom - that was a struggle for me because I had a kid tell me at the end of one year that he was thinking of killing himself but he changed his mind - that me outing myself in class saved him.

As illustrated in the above quote, study participants reported taking calculated risks to benefit students and others. One participant explains: "When I talk to people I feel good because I don't hold back about my family and I hope that could give others the courage to talk about their lives if they wanted to come out in any capacity."

A high school health teacher who says she is her authentic self in the classroom expressed the extent to which her personal life is linked to teaching the unique content of her

personal health and wellness course: “Every single part of my teaching self is influenced by my experiences as a lesbian. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think about my own experiences and try to bring that into the conversation.” Later in the interview she explains the double bind for lesbian teachers - as human beings and as members of a stereotyped group. She explained:

> Unfortunately, in the climate that we are in, it’s not just being gay but it’s first being a human being who feels a bit like she’s walking on eggshells…watching what I say. We have to be careful with anything that’s perceived as political or divisive. The other reality is there might be people in my class that come from a background or a family where being gay is not accepted…I want to be out and open and honest about who I am, but you never know.

It’s not over yet

The 2015 federal Marriage Equality Act has been perceived by many as a sea change, leading to a profoundly positive social transformation for LGBT+ Americans. The marriage law, however significant, is only a law and as such did not instantly change harmful social practices and policies born of prejudice. Similarly, the 2020 Bostock V. Clayton County Supreme Court ruling that prohibits employment discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, while clearly an encouraging landmark ruling, will not in itself ensure that schools become affirming and inclusive settings for teachers. Indeed, the visibility and legal support of LGBT+ rights has in some instances created a backlash. For example, the Human Rights Campaign has reported an uptick in anti-LGBT+ bias since the 2016 presidential election, including bullying and harassment (2017). Lesbian public school teachers are on the front lines of this social change.

One participant who often cites the law when standing up for trans students’ rights in her school offered this exchange as typical discourse: “I’ll say, ‘That's the law, dude. It's time to follow the law.’ Sometimes teachers just blow me to the side and tell me, ‘So gay marriage is fine. It's the law. We are done! We're done with that. Everything's fine. You don't have to be like that, it's over.” Based on the 12 interviews in this study, it is apparent the struggle for equality is not over. In fact, legal actions are just the beginning of real change.

> One high school teacher shared this post-marriage equality work experience:
> Last year [2018] I had a parent attack me for ‘spreading my gay agenda in class.’ That was really devastating because my boss did not defend me during the attack. She [the parent] was mad because her son got a B on a paper and called for a conference. During the meeting she just attacked me (...) saying I was a horrible person. How could I be a teacher? And my boss just let it happen. I stopped the meeting and said, ‘I'm leaving because you're attacking me personally.’ I really struggled with that [incident] because teaching is such a big part of who I am. I'm a pretty decent teacher and it was very heartbreaking to have to deal with. Then one of my colleagues said ‘well that's why you shouldn't have outed yourself in class.’ And I said ‘thanks for your support’ [laughs].

Not only was she unsupported during the parent conference, her right to be who she is was invalidated by another teacher.

Another indication that work remains pertains to the functioning of the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), an organization in which several participants play prominent roles while others

feel excluded. One participant points to the irony of such exclusion: "They don't say it, but I think my administration would not want me to be a part of our GSA if I wanted to because I'm actually gay (laughs)...if that makes any sense to you." An organization intended to "...create alliances that increase awareness, decrease prejudices, and create a safe school atmosphere for all" (ACLU) yet, limits lesbian teacher participation makes sense as seen through Foucault's theory of oppression which posits that those in authority use their power to limit access and knowledge in social institutions to maintain social control (1980).

GSAs have met resistance from parents, teachers, and administrators. However, that resistance has been countered with creative strategies, as illustrated in these participant examples:

> [In the past] the GSA was hidden, the announcements were in code. It [the alliance] was four lesbians sitting in a room. I think the turning point was when we moved the meetings from after-school to the middle of the day during our group lunch. Because students couldn't tell their parents that they had stayed after school for the Gay-Straight Alliance meeting, we held it during lunch time, and that's made a big difference.

> We [the district] just got a GSA last year. (...) They invite middle school students grades 6 through 8. We did have some backlash from parents, even some teachers. There are some teachers who won't allow the posters up in their hallway, which I'm not quite sure how they're getting away with that. I've had to have coffee with a few of them to explain what trans people are, what gay people are. I've had to address people with very different religious backgrounds. It's all very new in our district which is tough.

Some teachers specifically identified transgender students as part of their community that "often gets lost and doesn't have a voice." When transgender student issues arise, participants noted that administrators need to step up. "There are a lot of students who identify as transgender and the principal is not so great with all of this. He doesn't care if I conduct an in-service but he is not going to start anything." Another participant echoed the need for proactive responses:

> Before the lawsuit [regarding transgender student rights] became public knowledge, I was wondering why we had the Mazzoni Center[4] come in and do workshops. And then, a month later, Garden State Equality came in and I started wondering 'why are we having all these workshops?' It's because they [the school district] had been sued.

Religious opposition to LGBT+ matters was present in the work setting. One participant noted she had a talk with a teacher because he posted anti-transgender propaganda. This teacher believed that he had this right because of his religious beliefs. She explained to him that the poster he had placed on his classroom wall was discriminatory to the school's transgender students and that these students have protections under New Jersey State law:

I said, I know the law and you are breaking the law. If I wanted to take action I could. I told him that and he said, 'Look, I don't want to be rude about this but I feel like right now I'm not worried about the law.'"

This participant stated that she has "...had to talk to people [about LGBT+ issues] with very different religious backgrounds. I've been battling a lot of this stuff on my own." Another

[4] The Mazzoni Center, located in Philadelphia, PA, provides health and wellness services to the LGBTQ+ community.

participant stated, "I have students who are very religious and they always have problems with me being gay, not with me specifically, but problems with me being a gay teacher." For many participants in this study, religion presents a unique conundrum. Their colleagues' use of religion to defend their illegal, homophobic workplace practices goes unchecked while participants' constitutionally inscribed freedom of religion, goes unenforced.

DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The development of teaching identity

All but one of the study participants felt their lesbian identity positively influenced their teaching identity. This majority of participants believed their outsider status helped them to be more aware, and more empathetic, made them better critical thinkers, and gave them the courage to stand up for students - especially those who were being marginalized themselves.

Perceptions of teaching and the profession

While their relationships with administrators were reported to range from "phenomenal," "excellent," "good" or at least "good enough," participants in the study uniformly responded positively to questions about teaching and the profession citing their relationships with students as central to these perceptions. However, they also all described burdens of representation as lesbian teachers. Dodging stereotypes added an additional layer of stress to an already stressful professional role. Queer theory suggests the outsider status of study participants enabled these teachers to have new perspectives, to innovate, create and thus experience more excitement about teaching and the impact they were having on students.

Optimizing learning environments

In line with participants' views of their teaching identities, they reported a preference for learning formats that encouraged students to ask questions and openly discuss complex issues that supported critical thinking and allowed for multiple responses. Most participants reported using LGBT+ content as appropriate within the subject matter. Study participants described a type of "win-win" situation in which students were engaged in learning and teachers felt personally and professionally validated.

Mechanisms through which personal freedom and professional restraints are managed and at what cost

Participants were in a position of having to manage their lesbian identities to different degrees. Negotiation of personal and professional identities was not on par with participants' heteronormative colleagues. Some study participants who did opt to share personal information were called out by their straight colleagues and/or accused of "spreading their gay agenda." A range of strategies for managing personal freedom and professional restraints were reported that included sharing personal information only with certain colleagues, declining to set up teacher biographical pages, forgoing social media, spending more time with family than peers, and

choosing to live outside the school district. As discussed previously, the way in which some participants designed the classroom learning environment allowed for more agreement between personal and professional identities. One participant stated that leaving teaching was an option if she could not reconcile her personal and professional self.

Insights regarding teacher retention and professional development

Despite the increases in the number of LGBT+ students, parents, and teachers in public schools, this study suggested that progress toward more inclusive school environments is slow and uneven. Participant narratives confirmed that the need for increased awareness of and compliance with existing antidiscrimination laws, curriculum mandates addressing the inclusion of LGBT+ persons and their contributions to society, and district/school policies regarding LGBT+ students remains. According to study participants, this need is even greater for students who identify as transgender. As pointed out by participants, opportunities for professional development in these areas need to be addressed.

Limitations & recommendations for future research

The challenges in recruiting LGBT+ participants for research studies is difficult because it relies on self-identification (McCormack, 2014; Meyer, I.H. & Wilson, P.A., 2009). The variables of LGBT+ individuals – personal and professional vulnerabilities and invisibility - may come with negative consequences and require a level of risk. Multiple identities on the margin seem to create a tipping point as potential candidates decide whether or not to have their perspectives included. No women of color could be recruited for this study despite targeted efforts. The racial divide may have left women of color feeling vulnerable and less likely to participate. A history of information used to further marginalize racial groups may have also contributed to the absence of women of color. The white women in this study identified with 'lesbian' as an aspect of their identity. What does it mean for lesbian teachers of color to perhaps dis-identify with this marginalized identifier (Muñoz, 1999)? What are researchers missing that leads to this lack of inclusion?

"The complexities of finding participants in an often-invisible population" (Siegel, 2018, 125) were greatly diminished by the researcher partnering with organizations such as GLSEN, PFLAG, and New Jersey's Garden State Equality. These professional networks, along with university contacts active in K-12 professional development, expedited the work of identifying and selecting 12 participants in a localized region of the state. As noted earlier in this paper, lesbians in general are underrepresented in LGBT+ teacher studies. Professional organizations helped identify subjects. Perhaps the existence of LGBT+ teachers of color organizations would similarly encourage participation in research studies by lesbian women of color.

In the United States, academic articles on LGBT+ issues are limited. The comparative lack of published studies in general education journals is apparent. Journals that perhaps do not presently include LGBT+ content would benefit the field of education by featuring special issues on LGBT+ topics or by including individual studies.

Study findings revealed that lesbian teachers often feel unsupported in their efforts to engage students about language and other homophobic performances thereby making campuses less safe for LGBT+ people and teaching environments more stressful for lesbian teachers. On campuses where there are clear and effective protocols in place to respond to racialized

language and bullying, participants report that their colleagues seem reluctant to similarly address homophobic language. Heterosexual teachers need to be more involved. Like sexism, homophobia is not caused by one individual. It is a collective effort. And similar to sexism where men need to call out the negative actions by men directed against women, heterosexuals need to call out bad behavior of heterosexuals. All teachers must do what they can.

Just as teachers of color are not solely responsible for the success of students of color, lesbian teachers should not be placed in situations that make them "that teacher." Assuming the responsibilities of ad hoc counselors, administrators, or stepping in for other teachers is problematic. Everyone should have the skills and knowledge necessary to do their jobs.

Of the 12 teachers in this study, one reported a successful and complete integration of her multiple identities. Yes, she said she encounters difficulties at times, however, the experience of choosing visibility in the workplace over many years provides a sense of comfort as well as personal and professional satisfaction. She believes her ability to draw from her whole self provides the tools she needs as a teacher and coach. This participant identifies several factors helping her realize her authentic self as a teacher: A proactive school administration; an extended family that accepts her; a large and meaningful circle of friends; a loving and supportive spouse; and her volunteer work and hobbies. This network, combined with her own efforts to investigate and be her true self in every aspect of her life, gives her confidence, clarity and strength. Further investigation into understanding factors leading to successful, well integrated teaching experiences needs attention.

CONCLUSION

The teachers in this study are in no small measure transcending today's cultural contradictions. Their stories reveal an expanded sense of themselves as teachers and also as people navigating the ambiguities inherent in our times. They are finding innovative ways to teach with relevance and to reach out to those in need. Work of this nature merits validation and support. Partly because of who they are and because of the students they teach, they have internalized the advantages of living in a community accepting of all diversity. Only in such environments are we all free to realize our full capacity.

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