

LGBTIQ+ Teachers' Experiences: Story and Research

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I had finished my BA and was working as an inclusion mentor and teaching assistant at a large secondary school in inner city Birmingham in the early 2000's. The headteacher, who had been knighted for his efforts in transforming the school, was trying to convince me to scrap my plans for further study and to undertake a Graduate Teaching Programme. I explained to him that the decision wasn't just mine as my partner, a primary school teacher, was looking to relocate and that she would be a factor in my decision. I didn't know how heavy those words would be for him to hear, and as he rambled on about me being a 'born teacher', I suddenly saw something flicker across his face. He stopped, and asked, "Did you just say *she*?" I was then advised to keep this information to myself and told not to tell the students as "they have enough problems".

This was one of many experiences I had in schools of the silencing of LGBTIQ+ voices, and whilst I haven't worked in schools for almost 15 years (the experience above having galvanised me to take a Master's and a PhD), I have spent a large chunk of that time researching the experiences of LGBTIQ+ teachers. This research has been located within the UK and Australia, where I now live, and has connected me to like-minded colleagues in Canada, the USA, Sweden, Norway, Ireland and helped me to become familiar with the state of play for LGBTIQ+ teachers in many places across the globe. What is striking is the similarities in experience across contexts and how little the stories LGBTIQ+ teachers tell have changed during those 15 years.

There are a number of key issues that continue to appear across the literature over time and across contexts and that shape the experiences of LGBTIQ+ teachers. My UK-based research, published in 2013, illustrated how coming out as a lesbian, gay or bisexual teacher involves complex negotiations between private and professional worlds, considerations that remain exclusive to LGBTIQ+ teachers. This work was shaped by the impact of the repeal of Section 28 in 2000, Every Child Matters and the Civil Partnership Act of 2005. These legislative shifts meant that to varying extents, lesbian gay and bisexual teachers felt legally visible, though institutionally their experiences varied. Research evidence from countries with legislation in place to protect LGBTIQ+ people such as gender recognition and same sex marriage shows us that these protections do not necessarily filter down to the classroom, where children and young people are positioned as vulnerable and in need of protection from the corrupting influence of LGBTIQ+ people. In Australia, this played out within the Murdoch-owned press and politically around Safe Schools, a programme designed to make schools more welcoming places for LGBTIQ+ students. Safe Schools became the focus of the ire of conservatives, viewed not as a step towards inclusion but as a programme of social engineering that aimed to 'destroy civilisation'. To illustrate the corrosive power of the Safe Schools backlash, within days of being elected the current Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison Tweeted, 'We do not need "gender whisperers" in our schools. Let kids be kids'. Controversies around Safe Schools and other such programmes for example No Outsiders in the UK and Norm Critical Pedagogy in Sweden, largely focus upon children and young people in schools – teachers are not part of the mix, even though LGBTIQ+ teachers are

deeply affected by them. Research I carried out in Australia in 2014 with colleagues Anne Harris and Tiffany Jones showed that LGBTIQ+ teachers exist within 'spaces of exclusion' because schools steadfastly reproduce norms around gender and sexuality. This research also highlighted the stark differences between lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers and trans* and gender diverse colleagues, for whom coming out has a different set of implications and risks and for whom safety and wellbeing at work remain precarious.

At times this work can feel hard. Earlier this year I co-edited a Special Issue on the topic of LGBTIQ+ teachers with my Canadian colleague, Jen Gilbert. In many ways this was a retrospective of key researchers in the field internationally. Again, I was struck by the similarities in stories to those I first heard during my PhD research, and before that to the experiences I had as a lesbian educator. One key difference is the growing number of trans* and gender diverse voices within our field who show us how far we have to come to ensure trans* justice within education.

In the end, we need to remember that our collective experiences, our persistence and our tenacity make us not only stronger, but valuable assets for education and to the struggle for equity and justice within education. This struggle is not only important for children and young people who study in our schools, but also is a workplace safety issue for LGBTIQ+ teachers, many of whom continue to be denied dignity at work. Jen Gilbert writes about welcome in relation to schools and sexualities, and she and I speculated on what it might mean for LGBTIQ+ teachers to welcome and be welcomed *because of* their experiences, positive and negative, to see our experiences as generative interruptions to the normative environments of schools. We can't necessarily change our stories, but we can read them differently.

Texts referred to in the blog:

Gilbert, J. and Gray, E.M. (2020). Unhappy Histories: Welcoming LGBTIQ+ Teachers into the Profession. *Teaching Education*. 31 (1): 1-5.

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Author biography

Originally from Walsall, UK, currently Emily is Senior Lecturer in Education Studies and the Higher Degrees by Research Delegated Authority at RMIT University's School of Education in Melbourne, Australia. Emily's interests within both research and teaching are interdisciplinary and include sociology, cultural studies and education. She is particularly interested in questions of gender and sexuality and with LGBTIQ+ people's professional lives and experiences. Her key research interests therefore lie with questions related to gender, sexuality and wider social justice issues within educational discourse and practice. Emily is co-founder, with Mindy Blaise (ECU) and Linda Knight (RMIT) of Feminist Educators Against Sexism #FEAS, an international feminist collective committed to developing arts-based interventions into sexism in the academy.