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"Because I live it.": LGB teacher identities, as professional, personal, and political

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Whilst protected by equality laws, lesbian gay and bisexual (LGB) teachers have varying experiences within United Kingdom schools. Schools are predominantly heteronormative, moreover LGB has been positioned as in conflict with discourses of childhood innocence. However, recently there is more expectation of inclusion of diverse gender and sexualities. Although how this is enacted is inconsistent within and between schools. By drawing on interview data conducted in 2020, this research analyses the experiences of LGB teachers. Moreover, it brings together two bodies of literature that do not often speak to each other—research that explores teacher identity and research that centers LGB teacher identity. Findings suggest there are commonalities between these bodies of research, for instance around the importance of 'being yourself' and of teachers' past experiences. However, there is special significance for LGB teachers whose identities have historically been denied in schools, because of their sexual identity. In addition, there is the expectation under neoliberalism of individuals actioning inclusion. As such, the LGB teacher may become a pedagogical resource. None of this is equally available, although marketized notions of diversity place responsibility onto the individual. In their actions, the LGB teacher identity is always professional, personal and political.

KEYWORDS

teacher identity, schools, LGB, professional identity, neoliberalism, authenticity

Introduction

Over the past few decades, a strong body of research has signified the importance of a professional teacher identity (Olsen, 2008; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Izadinia, 2013; Beauchamp, 2019; Zhang and Wang, 2022). This literature comprises of a variety of subtopics including beliefs, emotions, contexts, pedagogies and practices, and professional development (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Pillen et al., 2013; Beauchamp, 2019; Zhang and Wang, 2022). Whilst there are variations in conceptions of identity, research in general has shifted from static notions of identity to exploring the complexities of negotiating identities in contexts (see Akkerman and Meijer, 2011). Moreover, that identities can involve mediating aspects of the personal and the professional (Lipka and Brinthaupt, 1999; Huber et al., 2004; Lasky, 2005; Akkerman and Meijer, 2011; Pillen et al., 2013; Beijaard and Meijer, 2017). Throughout, a strong focus has been on how teachers conceptualize their identities (for example, Nias, 1989; Huber et al., 2004; Alsup, 2006; Olsen, 2008; Rodgers and Scott, 2008; Downey et al., 2014). Specifically, narratives can help teachers "make sense of themselves in relation to others, and to the world at large" (MacLure, 1993, p. 311). Hence, whilst there are invariably different focuses within the professional teacher identity literature, generally there is agreement that exploring identities can

give teachers access to interpreting their profession, in relation to themselves, their pedagogies and their practices.

Concurrently but separately, a corpus of literature has highlighted the disparity between LGB[1] teachers' personal and professional identities. Specifically, that these are not easily coalesced, despite LGB people being protected by United Kingdom (UK) employment laws. Particularly, LGB teachers cannot always easily fit within heteronormative school environments (DePalma and Atkinson 2009; Bragg et al., 2018; Paechter, 2019). Instead, non-normative presentations of gender or sexual identity can be deemed unprofessional or even a risk (Connell, 2015). In addition, the categories LGB and childhood can be discursively positioned as in conflict, with sexual diversity being framed as a threat to childhood innocence (Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Ferfolja, 2007, 2014; DePalma, 2010; Monk, 2011; Connell, 2015; Llewellyn, 2022a). Rather than innate social and physical vulnerabilities of children, childhood innocence here is a "moral rhetoric" (Meyer, 2007)—a method of legitimizing "anything without actually having to explain it" (98). Moreover, it refers to the category childhood rather than the experiences of individual children. This reductive and discursive framing is found in coordinated global protests against LGBT inclusion (Nash and Browne, 2021; Francis and McEwan, 2022; Kitching, 2022), but is also present in everyday narratives—sexuality being one aspect of maturation that can be deemed problematic (Monk, 2009).

Most infamously in the UK, this harmful rhetoric was present in Section 28 the 1988 Local Government Act which stated, 'a local authority shall not … promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality' (Department of Education and Science. (DES), 1998). After active campaigning, and alongside wider political and societal changes for LGB people in the UK, this act was repealed in Scotland in 2000, and England and Wales in 2003. However, to this day, it maintains a spectral and consequential presence in UK schools. For example, Lee (2019) found that LGB teachers who taught under Section 28 are less likely to intervene in homophobic bullying.

Within this context, and over the past few decades, there has been a movement in UK schools from sexual and gender diversities being silenced to some LGBT inclusion. More specifically, post Equality Act 2010 the UK government introduced homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic anti-bullying strategies and policies into schools. Whilst this may be deemed a protective step for LGBT people, it can also be critiqued for limiting LGBT to a 'victim' narrative (Rudoe, 2010; Monk, 2011; Formby, 2015). Most recently LGBT has been written into national curriculums. In England, it is an aspect of the new Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum, whilst in Scotland LGBT is included more broadly across the curriculum. Beyond this, there are several charities that facilitate schools in providing broader LGBT inclusion in terms of curriculum and culture. The extent this is enacted is inconsistent both within and between UK schools (Llewellyn and Reynolds, 2021).

1 Like Neary (2013) I use LGB as it is the most representative framing of the sample, and the paper, which is primarily about sexual identities and heteronormativity. I use LGBT when discussing policy, and at other times such as referring to school inclusion. Leaving out the T is thus descriptive and not a political decision.

Hence, within these environments, LGB schoolteachers have often felt their schools were unsafe places to 'be' their identities. Being LGB is not always written on the body, it is a structural identity that usually requires 'coming out' publicly multiple times. Moreover, this can be a political act or a psychological need (Gray, 2013). However, decades of research suggest teachers have often employed identity management strategies (Griffin, 1991; Woods and Harbeck, 1992; Rudoe, 2010; Landi, 2018) to conceal or navigate their LGB status. More recent research argues that some LGB teachers can navigate their identities, but this is not equally available (Rudoe, 2018; Llewellyn and Reynolds, 2021). Alongside this, and with the changes in UK frameworks around LGBT inclusion, for many, there is an increased expectation that they engage in LGBT inclusion in schools (Llewellyn and Reynolds, 2021).

This article brings together these bodies of literature, concerning teacher identities and LGB teacher identities, to explore how LGB teachers frame their professional identities within the contemporary neoliberal environment. The secondary question is how these relate to the 'general' teacher professional identities literature. Accordingly, the intention is to not only merge research literature that to my knowledge exists in separate silos but to supplement the canon of teacher identity literature, where discussions of structural categories of identity are not foregrounded. The overall aim is to provide a more nuanced understanding of teachers of diverse sexualities professional identities within schools, in order to facilitate discussion around equitable school environments.

Teacher identity

Identity is an organizing element (du Gay, 2007), that allows teachers to make sense of themselves in relation to their profession (MacLure, 1993; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009). Hence, whilst there is inevitable variation in the literature about what a professional teacher identity is, there is general agreement that a teacher's sense of identity is central in shaping what is possible for teachers within schools (Izadinia, 2013). Teacher identity can be viewed as both a product and a process (Olsen, 2008), that is actively shaped within the places in which it is produced (Flores and Day, 2006; Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). For Zembylas and Chubbuck (2018) teacher identity is discursively shaped within these contexts, thus what it means to be a professional teacher is related to how it is ascribed and enacted. Within this, a teacher's professional identity is, to some extent, fluid (Zembylas, 2003; Akkerman and Meijer, 2011)—identity being a "constant becoming" (Danielsson and Warwick, 2016, p. 73) that is (re)produced within contexts and over time. It is an "evolving yet coherent being, that consciously and unconsciously constructs and is constructed, reconstructs and is reconstructed" (Rodgers and Scott, 2008, p. 739). Teachers, therefore, interpret these identities within the discursive frameworks that are available, in order to form a relatively coherent, yet embryonic, teacher self.

This identity construction can involve storytelling, and reflection on past as well as present experiences (Conle, 1996; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Smith, 2007). For a teacher, these reflections and experiences may relate to the classroom, their personal histories, or the values and standpoints they have concerning education and pedagogies (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). Moreover, teaching itself is a profession where reflection on practice is encouraged and is part of the professional standards (Department for Education (DfE), 2013). As such, teachers

can be impacted by their reflective selves, as well as broader elements such as relations to colleagues and students, or structures and systems. Hence, there is a process of active navigation (MacLure, 1993; Lasky, 2005) through the information and experiences, including negotiating any perceived tensions (Olsen, 2008; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Beijaard and Meijer, 2017).

Tensions may include contradictions between the personal and professional, which Beijaard and Meijer (2017) explain as "what is personally found relevant by the … teacher from inside and what is professionally seen as relevant to the profession by others from outside" (4). Within much of the literature, the personal is often framed around beliefs concerning pedagogies and practices. For instance, Olsen (2008) explains how a new teacher had different learning and teaching preferences to their university. However, wider literature (such as Akkerman and Meijer, 2011) suggests professional identities involve a more holistic view of teaching. As such, another tension concerns the emotional investment of teachers. This may come from both investments in students (Day et al., 2006; Flores and Day, 2006), as well as teachers' own biographies (Zembylas and Chubbuck, 2018). Within this, Akkerman and Meijer (2011) assert that the "personal and the professional context become indistinct" (316). Other research, however, is more guarded towards these boundaries, and instead talks of balancing the professional and the personal (Lipka and Brinthaupt, 1999).

There is a small amount of research that considers how teachers' professional identities relate to the personal in terms of structural identity categories. Zembylas and Chubbuck (2018) note that "sub-identities, such as race, class, gender, and personal experiences, exist, and interact within a professional teacher identity" (184). For instance, in the United States Villegas and Irvine (2010) consider the potentially positive impact of teachers of color, although Jackson (2018) explains that the assumption that all teachers of color have an awareness of social justice is misguided. Within this, research is often aware of the historical legacy of racial segregation (Jackson, 2018), as well as recent concerns over recruitment and attrition (Ahmad and Boser, 2014). Moreover, the research approach is often both critical and political, as it can adopt a standpoint epistemology to examine the histories and social structures in which racial injustice is produced (Zembylas and Chubbuck, 2018). As such a teacher's professional identity does not sit within narrow confines of functionality, it is formed within "the intersection of personal, pedagogical, and political participation" (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008, p. 153).

One of the earlier and more influential works on teacher identity is by Nias (1989), who conducted narrative interviews with primary school teachers in England. Nias found that there were several core stable aspects to being a teacher. She states, "to be a teacher … is to work in a historically determined context that encourages individualism, isolation, a belief in one's own autonomy and the investment of personal resources" (13). In addition, that teaching was an investment in the personal—in relation to both being yourself and being in connected relationships with students. However, the context of education over the last 30 years has changed considerably. Nias, who wrote primarily about primary schools, was researching at a time outside of overt political control, whilst contemporary education in the UK, and much of the wider world, is bounded by direct political governance. Later work, such as MacLure's (1993) study acknowledges the introduction of such constraints—she suggests that teacher identities are more precarious. More recently Downey et al. (2014) are concerned that "the "personal" seems to be largely absent from the more overt "professional knowledge landscapes" (15) of education.

In this regard and in other regards, the profession of teaching is no longer primarily bounded by Nias's (1999) "culture of care" (66), where working extra hours was less commonplace, and teaching was largely framed as a feminized profession (Acker 1989; Coffey and Delamont, 2002). Narratives of the present UK teacher are more heavily framed by managerial discourses of neoliberalism. "The most basic feature of neoliberalism is the systematic use of state power to impose (financial) market imperatives," (Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005, p. 3). As such, it is the market that drives educational policies and reform (Ball, 1993; Whitty et al., 1998; Ozga, 2009). Within this, discourses of the teacher become primarily centered around accountability, efficiency, and economy, rather than Nias's caring profession. Although, to read this as an oppositional binary is too simplistic. Instead, it is possible discourses of the neoliberal managerial teacher, and the feminized caring teacher are both navigated within teacher identities. For instance, whilst Lasky (2005), notes the conflicts experienced by teachers from managerial reforms, they emphasize teachers' agency and suggest that teachers are "reform mediators" rather than adapters. Similarly, Ball (2003) argues that some teachers 'perform' to neoliberal reforms, whilst others find ways to navigate or resist. Thus, teachers have agency, but it is constrained around the systems and structures in which they operate (Foucault, 2003a). Within neoliberalism, however, there is the illusion of autonomy, and emphasis is on the individual to take responsibility for their own self-improvement. Furthermore, it is this, that can give meaning to their lives and help individuals make sense of themselves (Rose, 1999).

Lesbian gay and bisexual teacher identity

In a large proportion of the mainstream research on teacher identity discussed above, the professional teacher identity incorporates aspects of the personal. The majority of research on LGB teacher identities similarly acknowledges that personal and professional identities are important. In contrast to mainstream research, however, the framing of personal here is primarily connected to being LGB rather than being focused upon pedagogies, practices, and professional development. As discussed above, there is a small amount of research that acknowledges structural identities that sit inside the professional teacher identity literature, although rarely is sexuality an acknowledged focus. Alsup (2006), who explores the role of social class in relation to teacher identity, is one author who does acknowledge the role of sexuality–specifically, that the ideal presentation of the teacher is both heterosexual and middle class. Alsup, however, does not explore the lived experiences of lesbian, gay or bisexual teachers.

Being LGB is a material structural identity category that requires special consideration in schools. It is acknowledged in both LGB specific and wider literature that schools are predominantly heteronormative, and that "the archetype of the ideal teacher is determined by heteronormativity: he or she should act, dress, speak, and self-present according to normative gender and sexual expectations" (Connell, 2015, p. 65). However, within the LGB teacher identify literature it is also understood that LGB teachers can be discursively constructed in opposition to childhood innocence, therefore LGB teachers can be deemed unprofessional or even a threat

(Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Ferfolja, 2007, 2014; DePalma, 2010; Monk, 2011; Connell, 2015; Llewellyn, 2022a). LGB teachers, therefore, navigate a problematic, and at times, hostile space, whether or not they choose to confirm their sexual identity. Moreover, personal and professional identities are not only disconnected but can cause conflict (Neary, 2013; Connell, 2015).

Thus, the normative professional teacher who merges the material personal identity into their professional identity may be a "heterosexual privilege" (Connell, 2015). Instead, a range of research (Griffin, 1991; Woods and Harbeck, 1992; Rudoe, 2010; Landi, 2018) over time has highlighted the identity management strategies that many LGB teachers adopt in schools to navigate their status. Many studies have found the process of identity formation and disclosure in schools to be complex (Rudoe, 2010; Gray, 2013; Neary, 2013; Landi, 2018; Msibi, 2019; Llewellyn and Reynolds, 2021). Within this, a key theme of internal conflict runs through the literature, with teachers often struggling at various stages of identity formation, disclosure, and management. More specifically, Jackson (2007), Rudoe (2010), and Msibi (2019) all describe an extreme professionalism—where acute diligence and competence are adopted to potentially mitigate any negative effects of the teachers' LGB identity. More broadly Neary (2013) notes that some teachers can find spaces to be 'out' but this is not without struggle and navigation. Recent research by Rudoe (2018) furthers these ideas by acknowledging that many lesbian and gay teachers have become more comfortable being open with their colleagues about their sexual identity, but not with their students.

The neoliberal context of UK schools complicates this further. For example, Ferfolja (2014) argues that the neoliberal teacher uses discourses of professionalism to remove the need to disclose their LGB status. However, more recently, there is an increased expectation of LGB diversity and inclusion within schools, although this kind of government mandated inclusion can be read as de-politicized state governance (Monro and Richardson, 2014). Nonetheless, complexities arise as LGB teachers have to navigate their identity, within a heteronormative environment that demands some aspect of inclusion. With neoliberal performance expectations, some LGB teachers who are not out and proud and actively working towards inclusion can feel guilt or shame (Llewellyn and Reynolds, 2021), with many LGB teachers believing they need to be visible role models for LGB for young people (Jackson, 2007; Neary, 2013). Narratives of shame are already attached to being in 'the closet' (Seidman, 2013), moreover, the idea that both pride and shame can co-exist is not often recognized (Monk, 2011). Thus, not being out, could also be read as an act of resistance against normative identities and expectations of the LGB teacher (Ferfolja, 2014). Hence, for the LGB teacher the personal and political take on specific meanings in relation to the professional.

As such, this research considers how a professional LGB identity is enacted within contemporary neoliberal classrooms, where there may be some expectation of LGB inclusion. It draws on the perspective that teacher identity is to some extent fluid (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Akkerman and Meijer, 2011; Beauchamp, 2019), whilst simultaneously recognizing the usefulness of defined structural identities for marginalized communities (Gamson, 1995). Furthermore, it acknowledges that identity is an organizing category, through its discursive construction (du Gay, 2007). For LGB teachers, this means, it can impact how they are organized into, or out of, the category of the professional teacher.

Methods and methodologies

This interpretative discursive study borrows from feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004) where personal "experiences are the starting point in the production of knowledge about the structures that perpetuate privilege" (Neary, 2013, 587). The work also aligns with Zembylas and Chubbuck (2018) who foreground teacher identities as "discursively constituted" (185). This applies to discourses of the teacher, as well as wider discourses of LGB within society and schools. Discourse also has a relationship to power in that power produces what is possible and what is acceptable in schools (Foucault, 2003b). In this instance, the teacher should be heterosexual and heteronormative. This research is also political work in that "a political approach towards teacher identity historicizes identity categories and identity claims by situating the construct of teacher identity within certain historical, cultural, and political contexts" (Zembylas and Chubbuck, 2018, p. 189). For instance, it draws not just from the present but from past discursive constructions of LGB teachers. Moreover, the work is concerned with social justice. As such, the project is purposefully, political, critical and interpretative.

The data collection tool used was semi-structured interviews, this aligns with notions of identity such that the importance is placed on how teachers construct themselves (MacLure, 1993); Lasky (2005) also notes that "professional identity is how teachers define themselves to themselves and to others" (901). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allowed for participants' voices to be centered, as well as deviations from set questions. Thus, this method, to some extent, disrupts the power relations evident in the asymmetrical interview (Fontana and Frey, 2005). Arguably these relations are further probed, by the use of online video conferencing software with participants having control over their space and technology (Llewellyn, 2022b). These are important considerations for working with a marginalized community.

Recruitment occurred through advertising in social media and thus procedures were a mixture of targeted and snow-ball sampling, which is common in social justice orientated LGB research (Bell, 1997). The interviews took place in July and August 2020 and were conducted mostly by the author, with a small number via a second researcher. Both researchers identify as different strands of the LGB community, with the author also having experience working in schools. This 'insider' aspect meant there was a deliberate reflexivity to all processes, including data collection (Coffey and Delamont, 2002); the interview itself being "a form of action" (Atkinson and Delamont, 2005, p. 835).

All the interviews were conducted online, which increased the geographical scope and further supported connections with a 'hard-to reach' community (Wilkerson et al., 2014). Intended topic areas were based around the following themes: participants' roles and contexts; being out or not; culture and inclusion (schools, staff, and students); policy; curriculums and change. Whilst areas arising from participants included: Section 28; leadership; parenting, and intersectionality. The interviews lasted between 27 min and 1 h 54 min, with the average being 61 min. The interviews were transcribed intelligent verbatim, by both members of the team.

A total of 48 LGB participants were recruited for semi-structured interviews. The age, experience, type of school, role in the school, and gender of the participants varied. The majority of the participants also

identified as gay or lesbian, with a small number as bisexual, or queer[2]. Furthermore, it was evident from the interviews that the participants could be read as largely homonormative (Duggan, 2002). There was largely homogeneity around race and ethnicity, with the vast majority of participants being white British or Irish. During the interview process, other structural identity groups arose, related to religion and disability.

I conducted analysis through immersion in the data via multiple readings and a process of coding. The analysis involved both inductive and deductive phases of coding and included both semantic and latent interpretations of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Again, reflexivity, and a further level of analysis, were applied to the process, in terms of the researchers' positionality. Here the researchers' roles are interrupted, but not removed, as they are part of the production of research (Paechter, 2001). NVivo was used to support the coding process. Although I was cognizant to work both within and between codes, to avoid fragmentation of the data and meaning (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). There is also an awareness that the data is situational and audience specific, and thus not to be generalized (Gorman-Murray et al., 2016).

The project was approved by the author's university ethics committee. Moreover, an ethic of care (Christians, 2000) was adhered to throughout the research. In the findings, quotations from participants are presented under pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity.

Findings and discussion

In the following section I have organized the findings into three key areas of the professional LGB teacher identity, which I argue are present but not equally available to all participants: being yourself; correcting the past and improving the future; and the self as a pedagogical resource. These themes are developed from a mixture of merging and developing codes and working reflexively with the data in relation to theory and literature. Whilst these ideas are presented linearly, they are not discrete and thus there is fluidity between each theme. Some of these findings are present in the general teacher identity literature. For example, being yourself and positive relationships with students are found in Nias's (1989) classic work. Moreover, several researchers (Conle, 1996; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Smith, 2007) note how reflections on past experiences contribute to teachers' professional identities. Most of the general teacher identity literature, however, is framed around past experiences of pedagogical practice. Instead, I argue these themes take on special significance for LGB teachers, where the personal is related to a structural category of identity, that has a particular positioning within schools.

Being yourself

In Nias's (1989) study many teachers articulated the need to be themselves, specifically that this enabled a connection between the personal and the professional. This largely corroborates with more recent research by Plust et al. (2021a) which is centered around the importance of authenticity in teacher identities, however, Plust et al. suggest spaces for authenticity in schools have declined under neoliberal educational reforms and overt managerialism. For LGB teachers, the premise of being able to be yourself takes on specifical significance, as sexuality is tied to notions of authenticity (Foucault, 1978/1998), a connection made by many of the participants. As such, it is possible that a hierarchical opposition is created around 'being out' and 'in the closet'. Moreover, there are further consequences related to recruitment and retention, wellbeing, and relationships with students; these are explored below.

Several LGB teachers mentioned, "some teachers have left the profession because they just feel they want to be authentically themselves" (Linda, secondary school teacher). Moving schools was a decision made by secondary school teacher Sandra, "I was like I have to get out of this system [school]. I cannot be myself, I cannot be my true, authentic self"—which is consistent with the wider literature specific to LGB teachers (Wardle, 2009). Whilst more general research suggests authenticity could be related to job satisfaction (Plust et al., 2021a,b). For many participants in this study, however, authenticity is tied to sexual identity and becomes prominent by both its discursive construction and its deliberate silencing within schools.

Despite protective equality laws in the UK, several participants were explicitly told they were not to mention their sexual identity. Emma, a secondary school teacher, had a recent direct experience of being excluded for being herself.

> So, it came out in a lesson that I obviously had a female partner. 'The kids were like, 'oh, wow, wow,' you know, and then I'll be honest with you like a lot of the kids kind of turned it against me … I would get comments like 'fuck off, you lesbian' … so I went in there [to the headteacher] and I basically told her what happened and all she said to me was, 'have you told them you're gay' and I looked at her and I went, 'does that matter' and she said, 'if you're gonna broadcast that, then obviously you're going to have to expect that'.

Supportive leadership is known to have an impact on LGB inclusion (Cibyl, 2021). In this case, Emma's school had been given accreditation for their LGBT inclusion work and was an LGBT Diversity Champion. Hence, demonstrating that a school's versions of LGBT inclusion may be largely about state governance (Monro and Richardson, 2014) and "doing the document" (Ahmed, 2007). Another explanation is that diversity protection is not as yet fully extended to teachers. This lack of protection, and the positioning of Emma's LGB status as the problem, was the main reason she left that school. Hence, this supports general data that authenticity can support teacher satisfaction and retention (Plust et al., 2021a,b). However, for LGB teachers, there is an added precarity and emotional labor, which is arguably more personal and thus heightened than the emotional work experienced by teachers in general.

In contrast to Emma's experience, many participants expressed that there had been a shift in the silencing of sexual identities within their schools. For Oliver, a primary school teacher in his 30s, his sexuality was his biggest concern entering teaching—"who wants to not be who they are within their workplace." He was thus relieved to be told by a senior member of staff, "you just go into the classroom, and you are yourself. I mean you do not give everything away to the kids, but you just are honest about who you are, and actually it was quite refreshing." As in Emma's case, this demonstrates how the authority of school leadership can create norms and expectations.

2 Exact numbers are not given, as not all structural identity data was provided. Specific identity categories are only stated where relevant to the discussion.

More specifically, how leadership can influence LGB practices in schools (Cibyl, 2021).

In addition, Oliver's narrative not only signals the importance of being able to 'be yourself', but, in this instance, that there is a disconnect between Oliver's expectations and his experiences. Similarly, Dan, a 23-year-old secondary school teacher—who had been out about his sexual identity since he was 20, stated that he "put heterosexual on my application form," as he was "worried about Biphobia." Thus, demonstrating the pernicious power of discourses of sexuality and schooling – moreover, it is possible that bisexuality may have a more precarious status than homosexuality. Luke, a secondary school teacher, further explains that there is a "fear of the reactions of other people … even though they know they have got a right to be their authentic selves." Once more, the framing of LGB is around authenticity. Moreover, it is clear that it is precarious, and that the professional LGB teacher identity cannot easily be separated from the personal.

A few LGB teachers also mentioned that "it's difficult to go back in the closet once you have been out" (Hari, secondary school teacher)—hence demonstrating the continued navigation of many LGB teachers, and that being out in schools is a technique of power (Llewellyn and Reynolds, 2021). More specifically, being out can be a psychological need, "because being honest about who I am makes me happy and makes me more confident" (Olivia, primary school teacher), but it can also be a political act (Gray, 2013). Thus, whilst it can be liberating, it may also reproduce narratives of negativity attached to 'the closet' (Seidman, 2013), as Sandra, a secondary school teacher, explains:

> I just feel you're not being yourself, and you know, if you can't just relax and, and I think there's a couple of other ones in the closet as well that are not sort of coming out, but in this day and age, you're just like oh my God, I couldn't be bothered.

Whilst many LGB teachers highlighted the importance of a safe space and that "everybody has the right to their own journey" (Gareth, primary school teacher), some LGB teachers also stated there was a duty for all LGB teachers "to stand up and say this is who I am" (Ben, primary school teacher). Gareth similarly states that he is "on the camp that says we should be visible … the difference you can make is massive if you are able to be yourself in front of those students." Thus, drawing on the discursive construction of LGB teachers as potential role models.

Several participants explicitly stated that "being open, you know, it gives a good role model" (Olivia, primary school teacher), which is consistent with wider LGB teacher identity literature (Jackson, 2007; Neary, 2013). Although, it is not clear if teachers are role models to their students (Bricheno and Thornton, 2007).

Stephen frames being out around courage: "People being brave enough to kind of put themselves out there and just to stand up. I think it's really important that we have visibility"—thus positioning LGB as agentic, and resistant to mainstream narratives of sexuality and gender in schools. This is a notable contrast to 'victim' narratives (Rudoe, 2010; Formby, 2015) most often found in educational policy. This finding also contrasts to the findings of Ferfolja (2014) who found that queer teachers were able to use professionalism to resist being out in schools.

For people who navigate intersectional LGB identities, there may be further levels of importance attached to their public status. Hari explains:

> I feel it's even more important because I'm Indian and gay and so for me to shy away from that would be detrimental to the overall kind of growth of people in school who identify with me on either of those things

Evelyn makes similar comments about intersectionality and visibility—and connects this to both representation and relationships with students.

> if a staff member feels comfortable to be themselves and not to be embarrassed by the fact that they are gay, neurodiverse or whatever it happens to be, then obviously that has a positive effect on the children. If we can't be ourselves, what are we saying to the kids—you can't be yourself?

The general teaching identity literature associates being yourself with building relationships with students (Nias, 1989; Lasky, 2005), which was evident in the LGB teachers' accounts, however, for several participants being out is constructed as an integral part of this (Wardle, 2009).

Several secondary school teachers were concerned their lack of openness with students could be a barrier to building relationships. For Catherine, "I always feel that there is something, a barrier between me and the kids … and then I feel guilty for any kids who are gay or LGBTQ." Many of the LGB teachers were aware of the "heterosexual privilege" (Connell, 2015, p. 69) afforded to their colleagues in discussing their personal lives without question, and thus more easily blending the personal into the professional teacher identity.

These extracts demonstrate how being yourself takes on special significance for LGB teachers when in Western society authenticity is framed around sexuality (Foucault, 1978/1998). It can add to narratives of shame around 'the closet' and reify the authentic teacher as a better teacher—several participants, like secondary school teacher Linda, stated that "great teachers are authentic." Not 'being yourself' can also have material consequences, around recruitment and retention, wellbeing, and perceptions of relationships with students.

Correcting the past and improving the future

Many of the participants stated the most important driver for inclusion was the impact on their students—several stated it was the primary reason for entering the profession. In the previous section I related this to being role models for students and developing relationships with students, however in this section, I highlight this through teachers' relationships to their past experiences of school, and their future hopes for students.

Identity formation in general is often seen as having a relationship to time (du Gay, 2007). For teachers specifically, schools operate at the nexus of the past, present, and future. They are situated within the present, yet teacher identities have a connection to their own past experiences of school (Conle, 1996; Feiman-Nemser, 2001) and to the

futurity of childhood and youth. This is similar to notions of childhood, which are in "an almost untenable position of being reminders of the past, yet holders of the future" (Llewellyn, 2018, p. 38). Indeed, discourses of youth are almost always bounded by notions of futurity (Lesko and Talburt, 2012). This is heightened in education (Llewellyn, 2018), which is inseparable from notions of progress (Popkewitz, 2012). In education, progress is an "anchoring narrative" (Mendick, 2011, p. 50), and thus the manner in which schools are governed, through policies and procedures and the self (Llewellyn, 2018).

For Justin, a secondary school teacher, "the whole reason I went into teaching in the first place was to make big changes to kids' lives, to give the students something that I never had." Whilst this may be indicative of many professional teacher identities, this is heightened for LGB teachers whose identities in schools have often been framed negatively. As Luke states—"the majority of LGBT young people having negative experience of school, I think it's almost as if you grow up wanting to be an LGBT teacher."

Hence, many of the participants advocate for change, particularly for young people and for the future, as Susan, a primary school teacher, explains, "You hopefully think that the future is looking brighter for young people … I think there's been massive strides made by people in so many areas." This is reflective of the 'It gets better' narrative, prominent in the US, launched in 2010 and popularized in online videos from the public and celebrities (West et al., 2013). The tagline and these videos share similarities to discourses within schools, in that they rely heavily on the notion of time and an inevitable progress, that is assumed in projects of neoliberalism (Puar, 2012). Although, the participants tended to hope, rather than definitively assert 'it will get better'. Luke, for instance, states:

> I also have to believe that if I'm not in the classroom then there's some LGBT kids that aren't seeing an out teacher and therefore, they're missing out on the fact that they know there is a place for them in society and there's nothing wrong and you will be fine and everything will get better.

He has "to believe" things will get better, and that his role in this is important, perhaps demonstrating the investment LGB people make in themselves. Although the hope is for the system, progress is often framed around students – "maybe it will be different for younger kids, 'cause they have had a more positive, more open experience, you know, coming through school," states Coleen, a secondary school teacher. Thus, as mentioned, teachers do not start from a blank slate, instead they have memories of their own schooling (Smith, 2007) which for LGB teachers is often negative. As Noah, a secondary school teacher states: "you do not realize how much your past impacts you, particularly when it comes to LGBT."

These reflections can be about the mistreatment and violence participants endured at school. This included verbal insults—"So, I suffered with quite a lot of homophobic bullying at school. Nothing physical, it was mainly just emotional taunts and comment and things, and that was hard for me" (Justin, 27-year-old secondary school teacher), as well as physical violence. Stephen, an older secondary school teacher, shares his experiences:

> I was at that point in an inner-city school, and we got beaten up with scaffolding poles … And the kids that did it were back in school before we were out of hospital. And when my mum went in to complain about that, she was told that I brought it on myself because of the way I was.

In the above reflection, it is the lack of support from the school that is jarring for the present-day LGB professional teacher. Lisa who is around 20 years younger than Stephen explains that she was bullied by other students at school and was told "well what do you expect if you go around kissing girls." She further states she would "do anything to stop the kids that I taught from having the same experiences as I did at school." She is clear about how the connection and the framing of LGB have "impacted her confidence as a teacher, it's really affected me."

A more recent example is from Noah, who is in his early twenties. He was 15 when he was accused of grooming a 13-year-old student (through shared text messages). Noah was excluded for a fixed period and asked not to return—the case was dismissed by police, but not by the school.

> It was deemed that I was grooming and was told that I was sexualizing this young person. The police completely dismissed it… but I was excluded … it's why I never want anyone to go through that experience because as teachers you hold a lot of power to sort of make a change.

These stories of inaction—or negative action—by schools are from teachers of various ages, hence, demonstrating the continued narrative of diverse sexual identities in schools as problematic. In this case, how LGB people are treated differently than if they had been heterosexual. This not only drives these teachers' decisions to make things better for others, but Stephen, Lisa, and Noah recognize how their authority can legitimate or castigate LGB identities—specifically, how the discursive construction of LGB people in schools is important.

In the previous section, Emma explained how she was blamed for students verbally abusing her—in all these examples, the LGB person is similarly positioned as at fault, through their structural identity. Again, this elucidates that the authentic LGB professional identity in schools is not guaranteed and that the individualized framing of neoliberal autonomy, is to some extent, an illusion.

If there are no memories of direct aggression, many participants had memories of absence, in that "it just wasn't a thing" (Dylan, primary school teacher, non-binary lesbian). Multiple participants spoke of the difficulties in moving into a space where LGB has been erased and thus delegitimized—Dylan continues: "There's still a lot of LGBT people who are my age [20's] who still went to school and we were told 'yeah, you do not talk about that.'" Several LGB teachers mentioned the desire for increased visibility and presence around schools—again this was from teachers of all ages. Stephen expands—"the teachers that are in school now are the ones that experienced it from a student's point of view. Which also brings an issue in that they are used to silence in school." Here, it is the absence, rather than the presence creating the discursive construction of LGB people in schools.

Hence, many LGB teachers shared reflections that they hoped students would have better experiences than they had as students, if

only they had role models, LGB groups, or more visibility. Luke explains, "I did not have any openly gay teachers and I do think that it would have made my life a lot more easier." Vanessa, a secondary school teacher, expands, "when I was growing up, I would have loved to have some kind of group like that where I could feel accepted for my identity." The use of accept is important in demonstrating the negotiation many LGB people undertake with regards to their identity.

Jake who "started secondary school in 1988" cautiously notes that this may have impacted him today.

> Maybe the reason I don't talk, you know I've only told five or six people in my entire life because I've got used to repressing it because I didn't see a book in the library or a flag on a flagpole or something like that when I was at school, I don't know.

Jake is the one teacher in this study, who stated he did not want to be open about his sexuality in school. Jake is a singular voice in this research; however this may be more a reflection on the self-selecting sample of participants, who usually volunteer as they are interested in the research topic (Jackson, 2018). Thus, not being apparent about your sexual identity may be more common that this data suggests.

Several participants, however, did consider if schools had been more LGB inclusive, then they "may have been able to accept myself a bit sooner" (Sarah, secondary school teacher). Gareth adds that "there's also a little bit of jealousy is the wrong word, but I suppose regret—why wasn't that like that for us?." Hence, many teachers not only talked about their students but suggested that things could have been different for them, which has specific significance for LGB teachers. For some, this negativity becomes a driver for change—Luke states he has to "draw on the positive experience of that [bullying]." This arguably draws on discourses of neoliberalism, such that the autonomous self chooses to reframe this negativity around self-improvement—the LGB teacher 'freely' accepts this responsibility. Neoliberalism being premised on the promise of governance masquerading as freedom (Rose, 1999).

The self as a pedagogical resource

The final area I highlight is how, for LGB teachers, the self becomes a pedagogical resource. This has already been shown in the previous sections, in that past biographies influence the professional identity of the teacher, which is also reflected in general wider literature (Smith, 2007). Additionally, it is demonstrated through being a role model—"being a role model and a point of contact for those students who are struggling to come out is probably the biggest positive" states (Robin, a secondary school teacher). Broader than this, several participants expressed that they were "able to provide an authenticity to my support" (Sarah). Thus, there is a legitimization of the LGB teacher identity. Aaron, a secondary school teacher, explicitly states that "It needs to be lived role models or real experiences that people try to understand what the reality is. I think most people think there's no problems for LGBT people in 2020 that's the big problem." Thus, the LGB teacher is seen as having legitimate (pedagogical) knowledge, which has been absent from schools, as reiterated by secondary school teacher, Nora:

> And I think that they don't understand what the historical part of why pride started, and so I'm hoping I can use my own experiences to kind of, get them in and understand a little bit more… Cause the people that understand it are the people like me, because I live it.

The LGB teacher becomes a resource for teacher inclusion and acceptance. Several teachers discuss how they are able to educate teachers and/or young people, through sharing and explaining their identity. For some, this may be reacting to a moment. For instance, Victoria, a secondary school teacher, states how the students "just kind of figured it out." She explains how she, as an LGB person, was able to educate a particular student:

> I like to think that he probably wasn't super on-board with gay people, he got to know me as a bit of a weird teacher but kind of a nice kind of person, he found out later and I hope that that made a positive impact on him rather than someone being like, "Oh it's okay to be gay." Him just seeing someone who turned out much later on [to be gay], once he'd kind of built up a relationship with me, before realizing it didn't make me that weird at all.

Victoria explains that knowing her as a person should come before her being LGB. For others, it can be a much more deliberate political act. Several teachers mentioned they chose to make LGB inclusive displays in their classrooms, even if they were not involved in broader inclusion, or their schools were not supportive. Stephen who states his current school is "in opposition at the moment" to LGB inclusion, enacts his LGB identity both within the classroom and on his body.

> I make a big point of it in my classroom. I've got my big 'diversify your reading' board with a massive pride flag above it. And I wear the pride badge in school or the progress pride badge now. And all of those things just to make a point of saying actually, I'm gay, and I'm a teacher, and everything is fine.

As such, the LGB teacher becomes a resource and a symbol around the school and within the classroom. Whilst Stephen's example could be read as a "discourse of accommodation" (Omercajic and Martino, 2020) that does not wholly disrupt the system, both Victoria and Stephen are working in ways that are possible.

Within the classroom, becoming a pedagogical resource can link to pedagogies and curriculum. For LGB primary school teachers this was framed around the family; for example, Olivia, who works with four- and five-year-olds states: "we talk a lot about who's in our house, in our family, and I'll always say, you know, well, this is Nicola … and they do not question it." Similarly in secondary schools, when discussing a relevant topic or text where sexual identity may arise Henry states: "I'm not going to not mention it. You know, I'm not going to avoid that conversation. So, for me, I've never wanted to be in the closet at school. That's so important." This is reflective of the wider literature on teacher authenticity, where Plust et al. (2021a) argue that freedom to "be herself" (733) is linked to pedagogical choices. In general, most teacher identity literature frames the personal through the pedagogical (for example in Olsen, 2008). Although, for LGB teachers, pedagogy has different connotations as it can be linked to sexual identity.

However, being a pedagogical resource can come with emotional labor, even if it is framed around positivity. Gareth talks about a "good to be me" lesson in his primary school, where members of the class

used diagrams, symbols, and words, to express key parts of their identity. He included a rainbow flag. "I cried afterwards with my colleague and when we sent the kids away to lunch, I remember, even now I feel a bit emotional remembering."

David, one of the secondary school participants, used the larger public space of a school assembly—he states it was the "tiniest mention" in an assembly about milestones.

> I put some pictures up and I just said, 'here is me when I was about 16 when I worked out that I was gay' and then moved straight onto like University and this, that and the other. And that was it, it was a 10 second line and then the cat was out bag.

He further states his relief—"I felt almost like a 1,000 pounds of weight had been lifted off my shoulder." When David started doing LGBT training in schools, he was not 'out' "There was lots of rumors about me in the staff room, but no one would ask." He states this may have led to the deliberate act in assembly, where he was able to reclaim his agency. Hence, the LGB teacher can also be a resource to educate colleagues—this again may be planned or unplanned.

For many of the teachers who did LGBT inclusion, most used their personal experience to give (pedagogical) knowledge and legitimacy. Peter explains:

> I did a session on diversifying, so I called it, queering the curriculum and then gave them examples … And because it came from me, who gave quite a personal new perspective, I think that probably helped as well.

This is not uncommon for diversity educators (Miller et al., 2018). Although, being a pedagogical resource may lead to "inclusivity labour" (Newman et al., 2021)—turmoil experienced by people who have to advocate for LGBT services to which they are entitled. This is arguably more personal and thus more heightened than the general emotional work experienced by teachers, "who may be "smiling on the outside whilst feeling anything but happy on the inside" (Flores and Day, 2006, 221). As Day (2018) states "teaching is not by definition emotional labor, but it is undoubtedly emotional work" (65)—for LGB teachers this is not always the case.

This labor can take a strain on LGB teachers, although this can be presented as a normal neoliberal professional expectation. Peter reflects on how this not only improves the school for students but for himself—although some guilt is attached to this, when schools should put students first. A staff member approached him and stated "this is just about you. You're living vicariously through the kids' and at first that really, really offended me." Peter goes onto justify his personal gains though the acceptable discourse of improvement for students:

> You know the number of kids that have sort of said, you know 'my school life has been so much better. You know you stopped me from killing myself'. The number of those kids outweighs any sort of thought that actually this was all about me.

However, being an LGB pedagogical resource can be even more problematic when the LGB professional identity jars with the school landscape. Megan mentions how a student was not being supported at home or school and this was difficult to accept, also in relation to her own experience. Again, demonstrating how personal biographies of LGB teachers can be important.

> It was upsetting because my experience wasn't the same as his. You know, it was just hugely hugely upsetting and just made me think, you know, it's not fair that students are not getting support at home, and the school also isn't providing support either.

As Hannah explains "fighting for that visibility is really draining … discussing the best way to support the LGBT community is not conceptual for people who are in it." Hence, the LGB professional identity and its position as a professional resource is not without personal emotional labor.

In its more extreme, this labor can be perilous. John, a secondary school teacher, wants to be a role model and to introduce LGBT inclusion in his school. Although he is not able to currently achieve this. The following extract explains how John is bullied by multiple students at his schools, and how he is held responsible for deciding their punishment. John spoke at length about his situation.

> I was encircled by a gang of lads once on a corridor and they were mimicking my voice … So, the lads were put out of school for a couple of days and then we did restorative justice with them. And the school have always said to me, 'it's got to be your decision. You have to decide whether you want them back in school' … the thing is anyone on that corridor who might've been LGBTQ will have gone home and thought, "oh my word. That's my fate. That's my future."

John is aware he is a role model in school, and a representation of LGB. He is aware he is potentially a pedagogical resource. He is frustrated by his positioning within his school, where he is bullied and the students responsible are sanctioned within a neoliberal framework. This is an endless cycle, and he considers leaving teaching—"I have decided that I can no longer be a secondary school teacher because I'm gay there is some harassment every day."

The extent of John's troubles is largely an outlier in this research project, although it may be that the people who volunteered for this type of study are already active in social justice work, and possibly have negotiated these tensions. Although wider criticisms of LGB research are that sampling bias results in more stories of victimhood than is illustrative of the general population (McCormack, 2014). It is, therefore, not clear how representative John's experiences are of LGB people in schools. However, his story is vitally important in demonstrating the complexities and dangers of the LGB professional teacher identity—particularly with regards to being yourself, the expectations of progress, and being a pedagogical resource. Moreover, it is clear that whilst LGB teachers strive for authenticity to enable their professional teacher identity, there is a precarity to their status. As much as they know they take on the role of the neoliberal entrepreneurial self—LGB teachers are not without gatekeepers and are not outside the impact of the historical, cultural, and social contexts of sexual identities in schools—both discursive and material. This critiques discourses of neoliberal equalities, which are premised on a collective social conscience, framed through individualism (Llewellyn, 2018).

Conclusion

Overall, discursive constructions of identity are complex and dynamic organizing systems that help establish whether an LGB professional identity is possible and what this looks like. From this data and analysis, I suggest for many LGB teachers, their professional identity does include their LGB status. This identity is framed around several areas that share commonalities with the wider literature on teacher identity. However, these aspects of identity take on special significance for LGB teachers, where schools are heteronormative and sexual diversities have often been presented as problematic through tensions with discourses of childhood innocence. Furthermore, this LGB professional identity is more pertinent under neoliberalism where there is both increased expectation of the performance of diversity, and increased expectation of the autonomous self.

More specifically, the LGB professional teacher identity shares commonalities with Nias's (1989) classic work, where being a teacher was connected to being yourself, or more recently where authenticity is framed as a central aspect of a professional teacher identity (Plust et al., 2021a,b). Like Nias (1989), I suggest, therefore, that the LGB teachers in this research adopt a mixture of professional and personal discourses to enact a contemporary professional LGB teacher identity. However, in contrast to much of the professional teacher identity literature, the personal is framed around the structural identity of being LGB. In addition, and similarly to Hoffman-Kipp (2008), these teacher identities sit at "the intersection of personal, pedagogical, and political participation" (153). Although, for LGB teachers this takes on more importance and becomes a political act where being yourself has previously been denied.

The second point concerns reflections upon the past and projecting hopeful futures. Whilst is it common for teachers to build identities through personal reflections and their biographies (Conle, 1996; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Smith, 2007), this again has more significance for LGB teachers, as they are often correcting harmful pasts. Furthermore, these teachers are not only caught up in discourses of hopeful youth (Lesko and Talburt, 2012), but of narratives of LGB progress, where "it gets better" is framed as a linear expectation. Notions of unproblematic progress also fit narratives of education and neoliberalism (Puar, 2012).

Finally, I argue that LGB teachers themselves become a pedagogical resource, who can offer authentic support through their lived experience and legitimized knowledge. Whilst this is welcomed by many, it often contains struggle or emotional labor, which is more heightened than the general emotional work already experienced by teachers. Crucially, becoming a pedagogical resource is not something that is equally available. Thus, demonstrating the illusion of the neoliberal notion of equality as marketized opportunity (Littler, 2013). Although the participants in this data agentically navigated their boundaries, to a certain extent, they were subject to various gatekeepers and conditions within their social systems. Moreover, there was a precarity to their positions as they navigated heteronomativity, whilst demonstrating LGB.

Overall, these LGB teachers' identities are possible and compatible as they fit into neoliberal narratives of improvement of the self and the school whilst satisfying the politics of LGB. This article thus suggests there could be more consideration around structural identities within the professional identity teacher literature, particularly where that identity has a problematic relationship to schools. The special significance of LGB teachers and their professional identities cannot be underestimated. Particularly in a neoliberal system that positions systematic failings as the responsibility of the individual (Littler, 2013). As such, the LGB teacher identity is bounded by the professional, personal, and the political.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the author, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by School of Education, Durham. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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