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Teachers

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LGBTQ+ teachers across the globe feel the weight of cis-heteronormativity as they navigate everyday school life, reporting experiences ranging from overt homophobia and harassment to micro-aggressions and subtle assumptions. Acutely aware of the cis-heteronormative fabric of their school communities, most LGBTQ+ teachers tread carefully as they negotiate the personal/professional binary in schools (Neary, 2013), continuously making calculated estimations about how open or visible they can be. This work is always ongoing and requires significant emotional labour. Given the complex and often subtle workings of cis-heteronormativity, LGBTQ+ teachers' everyday negotiations are a messy conglomerate of reproducing normativity and transgressing boundaries (Neary, 2017; Harris and Gray, 2014; Gilbert & Gray, 2020). Some teachers downplay their LGBTQ+ identities and strategically seek out routes to maintain their sense of security and professional legitimacy. For instance, many teachers work hard to maintain the 'super teacher' persona, attempting to protect themselves against the unpredictability and uncertainty associated with their LGBTQ+ identities. Others strategically employ their assumed-to-be cisgender, heterosexual masculine authority to practice anti-homophobic pedagogies (Brockenborough, 2012). For some teachers, the weight of watchfulness and expectation is too much, and they resort to leaving the teaching profession altogether.

Across primary and second-level schools, all of this everyday labour around the politics of visibility is made more intense and precarious for certain people in particularly vulnerable circumstances. For instance, non-permanent, temporary LGBTQ+ teachers are forced to be extra careful about how they perform their identities at school. One might think that pre-service or trainee teachers have less to fear in university contexts that typically enable a greater looseness around the politics of LGBTQ+ visibility. However, they too navigate the nexus between university and school life, and describe a similar watchfulness of cis-heteronormative professional/personal boundaries once they cross the thresholds of schools (Russell, 2021). LGBTQ+ teachers who get engaged, married or enter into civil partnerships experience a heightened version of the politics of visibility (Neary, 2017). Those LGBTQ+ teachers who

decide to be open about getting married suddenly expose themselves to the explicit reactions of others, thereby shunting the normally latent cis-heteronormative power dynamics at work in schools into view. LGBTQ+ teacher reports of gratefulness for positive reactions is further revealing of the power dynamics always at play and the workings of emotional economies to collectively (re)orientate towards cis-heteronormativity. In such moments, teachers find themselves having a variety of experiences and feelings that range from delight in affirmation to feeling like the cis-heteronormative rituals of marriage are a bad fit.

Many teachers — pre-service and in-service — feel an acute sense of responsibility to be a role model for their students and/or enact transformative pedagogies, calling on their own experiences and identities (Neary, 2017). Some scholars have highlighted how the work that teachers do in this regard constitutes a refusal of victimhood and has transformative potential. Others have cautioned against these politics of responsibilization, pointing out its individualizing, essentializing and normalizing effects of such efforts. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there appear to be more examples of teachers doing pedagogical work to interrupt cis-heteronormativity in second-level schools and legislative changes, such as 'Marriage Equality' and gender identity recognition legislation in some contexts have given a legitimizing frame through which this kind of equality work can be done. However, the emotional work of fore-fronting their own identities in their teaching, coupled with the risk associated with their work being read as furthering a personal agenda at school, cannot be ignored. Ultimately, the work of being a LGBTQ+ role model reveals itself as complex and arduous for all teachers.

Indeed, most LGBTQ+ teachers maintain an acute cognisance of their relations with students and parents because of the unpredictability of student and parent attitudes and beliefs regarding LGBTQ+ identities (Neary, 2017). Many teachers heavily police professional/personal boundaries and enact guarded dispositions while others frequently utilize disciplinary frameworks to ward off the potential of these boundaries being breached by students. This has an adverse effect on pastoral relationships with students for those teachers who engage in such surveillances. Key factors in these relations are the continuously circulating, silently cis-heteronormative discourses of childhood innocence and age-appropriateness (Neary, 2017). Such discourses potently shape the everyday lives of LGBTQ+ primary school teachers who are always wary of parental attitudes and beliefs related to LGBTQ+ identities. LGBTQ+ lives are particularly invisible in primary schools and very often only visibilized within negative or punitive anti-bullying frameworks. Teachers at this level describe reluctances around what is appropriate for discussion at what age. Furthermore, in

most contexts, heavily cis-heteronormative, biological approaches to relationships and sexuality education contributes to and reproduces uncertainties and confusion around what is suitable for discussion in primary schools. All this has knock-on, constraining effects for LGBTQ+ teachers who are acutely aware of these dynamics. Gay men primary school teachers appear to have an extra threatening layer because of reductive ideas and misinformation around gay men's sexuality.

While there has been much research over the years concerning the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer teachers, there continues to be a dearth of research with trans and gender diverse teachers. There are some exceptions. For instance, Harris and Jones (2014) tell the story of Ned, a trans-male teacher, whose accounts of everyday life at school underscore the strain of being unintelligible and invisible amongst colleagues and students. Ullman's (2020) research with trans and gender diverse teachers uncovers high levels of harassment and discrimination, including verbal, physical, psychological and employment-related discrimination perpetrated by colleagues, management, parents and students. Misgendering is extremely common and many trans and gender diverse teachers do not feel safe in the facilities they used. Such experiences mirror the intensity of negative public discourse around gender, demonstrating that this permeates the everyday worlds of schools and are lived adversely by trans and gender diverse teachers.

Several structural factors have a significant impact on the everyday lives of LGBTQ+ teachers. When anti-discrimination legislative protection has been introduced, LGBTQ+ teachers feel a greater sense of safety and security and experience a climate of support following 'coming out'. Some LGBTQ+ teachers also observe how school leaders can use anti-discrimination/equality legislation as a legitimizing framework to foster LGBTQ+ inclusive schools. Of course, equality legislation is not a panacea, and is no guarantor that LGBTQ+ teachers are more likely to disclose or feel secure on a daily basis (Lee, 2019). Furthermore, legislation alone does little to combat the more covert or subtle workings of cis-heteronormativity, homophobia, biphobia or transphobia. Nevertheless, legislation is a very significant over-arching component of how teachers navigate their everyday lives, and much attention is given in the literature to how legislative deficiencies and exemptions have a significant chill factor for LGBTQ+ teachers across jurisdictions. For instance, religious exemptions in equality law have given great power and weight to the arbitrary concept of 'ethos' and its reach in schools, enabling the reproduction of cis-heteronormativity. It has also resulted in a kind of 'holy homophobia' (Callaghan, 2015) and even the dismissal of LGBTQ+

teachers on ethos grounds in some contexts. These exemptions have had particularly acute effects in places where schooling has a distinctly religious or denominational character. Again, such legislative deficiencies increase the precariousness of non-permanent or non-tenured LGBTQ+ teachers. Furthermore, even when legislative amendments have been made, the legacy of legislative threat has a deeply entrenched legacy that lives on for generations.

Another theme discussed in research related to religious exemptions highlights the complexities of teachers' own relationships with religious faith and spirituality. Religious exemptions (re)produce feelings of shame, guilt and unease for teachers who are religious or have embodied memories of religious teachings. Neary et al. (2018) found that some LGBTQ+ teachers share an ambivalent mix of delight in the belonging and meaning that religious faith offers them and lived experiences of hurt and exclusion as a result of religious teachings. This came particularly to the fore as LGBTQ+ teachers entered into and created celebratory occasions for their civil partnerships/marriages. Such complex attachments to faith and faith practices underline how secularism does not provide a catch-all solution that will address these complexities.

Other structural factors, such as policy and leadership play a crucial role too. Strong, explicit and carefully constructed policy that avoids victimizing narratives is also suggested to be transformative for LGBTQ+ teachers (Ferfolja and Stavrou, 2015). But, mirroring the question of legislation, there are limits to the reach and impact of policy alone. Even in contexts where policy is explicitly inclusive, LGBTQ+ issues are still being addressed in problematic, reactive ways that can have reductive effects, demonstrating once again how policy and everyday lived realities can sometimes remain impossibly disconnected. In this vein, much research has underlined the need to attend to how equality policy is enacted in practice, alongside a comprehensive evaluation of school staff education needs (Ferfolja and Stavrou, 2015) and adequate attention to the workings of school culture. Indeed, explicitly inclusive policy, combined with committed inclusive leadership principals and colleagues who are proactive and open in fostering queer-positive schools has a very positive impact for LGBTQ+ teachers.

A synthesis of research across time and context reveals the continued complexity and arduous work involved in LGBTQ+ teachers' everyday lives as they negotiate the myriad of ways that cis-heteronormativity is maintained in schooling systems. Equality legislation changes in many contexts has promised a solution, and yet such changes have had varied and limited effects, underscoring the caution against neat or simplistic solutions, despite their

allure. What has remained consistent across the literature over time is the capacity and commitment of many LGBTQ+ teachers to forge resistances to cis-heteronormativity in their everyday worlds, carving out avenues for pedagogical impacts for their students and making inroads in altering the cis-heteronormative fabric of schools. All of this work is very often risky and takes its toll. It is also an ambivalent mix of inculcating and resisting norms. But this is the nature of change with regard to cis-heteronormativity— an arduous, hopeful and messy process of simultaneous conformity, constraint, transgression and transformation.

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