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The experiences of lesbian and queer female teachers in Canadian schools

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Education

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Abstract

This study examines the work experiences of lesbian/ queer female teachers in Canada and how they manage their identities in face of homophobia and heteronormativity in school. I employ a case study involving semi-structured interviews with 4 participants in 3 Canadian provinces – Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario. The chief finding of this research is that homophobia and heteronormativity prevalent in school not only prevents lesbian and queer female teachers from coming out to everyone in school but also limits their access to the resources and support at work. This study makes a contribution given that very little existing research focuses specially on the experiences of lesbian/ queer female teachers in Canadian schools. This research seeks to provide further insights into the impact of homophobia and heteronormativity in schools, particularly considering the current conditions of anti-LGBT rhetoric motivated by far-right extremism. Hopefully, this research can help people understand the extent to which homophobia and heteronormativity is impacting the lives of lesbian/ queer female teachers and the urgency to support them at work.

Keywords

lesbian/ queer female teachers; homophobia and heteronormativity; sexuality; professional identities.

Summary for Lay Audience

This study aims to understand how the discrimination towards lesbian and queer female women and societal pressures surrounding heterosexual marriage on their career advancement. Four lesbian/queer female teachers in three Canadian provinces – Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario – were invited to talk about their experiences and why they hesitate talking about their personal lives at work. The analysis found that lesbian/queer female women are still having to encounter significant workplace discrimination based on their sexuality and sometimes feel the need to hide their sexuality to keep their jobs. This research is one of the few studies that focuses on the work experiences of lesbian and queer female teachers in Canada. It is of great importance given the ongoing challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community amid the rise of far-right movements. This research is conducted in the hope of encouraging more attention to the work experiences of lesbian and queer female teachers and how schools can support them so that they can feel safe and valued.

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

In today's society and mediascape it has become increasingly challenging for individuals to overlook the prevalence of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric. In the United States, a governor who introduced the Don't-say-gay law is running for president (Lavietes, 2022). In Toronto, a city taking pride in its inclusivity and diversity, one of the Catholic District School Boards did not even allow the presence of the Progress Pride flag to be flown during Pride Month (Cheese, 2023). While some may dismiss these incidents as mere politics, their impact can be life-altering for those directly affected. Queer students and teachers are vital members of both educational institutions and society at large. They deserve equal care, respect, and inclusion in schools and homes. Therefore, the rapidly growing hate towards queer community deserves much more attention, especially given the fact that support for gender and sexual diversity in schools is clearly being targeted by far-right extremists and white supremacists (Balgord, 2023; Talati, 2023). Given the present context of intensified anti-LGBT hate it is of utmost importance to identify and analyze the deeply ingrained causes of homophobia and heteronormativity to ensure that equity policies in schools go beyond performative gestures and genuinely foster an inclusive environment for all.

This study centers on exploring the professional identity of four self-identifying lesbian teachers in Canada. It provides a more in-depth understanding of these teachers' experiences in their specific schools and provincial context. In this sense the research is not intended to

generalize across an entire population or indeed to consider the participants as representative but rather to generate particularized insight into lived experiences of lesbian teachers' knowledge of systemic homophobia and heteronormativity in the school system. It draws upon queer studies and specifically queer phenomenology, as well as feminist standpoint theory as foundational frameworks to investigate the intersectionality of gender and sexuality and its impact on teachers' professional identities. The research is guided by three core research questions: 1) How do gender and sexuality impact lesbian teachers' lives as teachers in schools? 2) To what extent do homophobia and heteronormativity impact their lives in schools? 3) How do they navigate their professional identities as lesbian female teachers in schools?

Theoretical Framework

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the professional identities of lesbian teachers, it is essential to approach research from the perspectives of their experiences both as women and as queer. Therefore, this study is firmly rooted in both queer theory and feminist theory, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of their narratives. Specifically, this research concentrated on employing queer phenomenology and feminist standpoint theory as frameworks to examine and analyze the experiences of lesbian teachers in schools.

Queer Theory

Based on poststructuralism and specifically Derrida's notion of deconstruction, queer theory is concerned to challenge the binary constructs surrounding sex, gender, and sexuality,

including men vs. women, masculine vs. feminine, and straight vs. gay. “Binaries are like the black holes of knowledge: Nothing ever gets out” (Wilchins, 2004, p. 49). Moreover, heterosexuality is deemed natural and ‘homosexuality’ unnatural. When sex, gender, and sexuality mismatch, people become queer. However, as Foucault (1990) claims, the discourse-power-knowledge relationship makes people think about sex and sexuality in a way that normalizes heterosexuality. Butler (1990) further develops the theory by including gender in what she identifies as the “heterosexual matrix”, a term which is used:

... to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized. I am drawing from Monique Wittig’s notion of the “heterosexual contract” and, to a lesser extent, on Adrienne Rich’s notion of “compulsory heterosexuality” to characterise a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (p. 151)

The ways in which gender, sexuality and sex are linked in extricable ways within this normalizing system is reflected well by Tedway (2013, p. 169) in the following Table:

Table 1: Judith Butler's heterosexual matrix

Sexuality →		
Gender ↘		
Sex ↓	Masculine	Feminine
Male	Heterosexual	Homosexual
Female	Homosexual	Heterosexual

Discourse, Power, and Knowledge

Foucault (1990) provides a foundational theory of (hetero)sexuality which is a foundational basis for queer theory. He shows through his genealogical account that the rise of the bourgeoisie in the Victorian era brought more than the flow of money and commodities. Foucault (1990) illustrates how talk about sex retreated from public spaces to the private bedroom inhabited only by husband and wife. The implications were twofold: first, silence became the rule everyone had to follow when it came to sex; second, heterosexuality became the only legitimate sexual relationship understood in its reproductive capacity. Therefore, the discourse on sexuality was confined to marriage. At that time, the only places where people could talk about sex and sexuality were brothels and hospitals, and prostitutes and psychiatrists became the “Other Victorians” (Foucault, 1990, p. 4). There were some attempts made by psychiatrists like Freud to have more open and frank discussions about sex. However, these discourses were purely theoretical. Foucault (1990) problematized the fact that people were more

obsessed with why they could not talk about sex than how to enjoy sex. He termed the discourse the “repressive hypothesis” (p. 10). However, Foucault provides a critique of this discourse of repression - i.e. the whole idea of that sexuality can be primarily understood as repressed - and raises important questions about power in the production of knowledge about sexuality, which is illustrated as follows:

Do the workings of power, and in particular those mechanisms that are brought into play in societies such as ours, really belong primarily to the category of repression? Are prohibition, censorship, and denial truly the forms through which power is exercised in a general way, if not in every society, most certainly in our own? (p.10)

It is in this sense that the *repressive hypothesis* shows the relationship between discursive production, power, and knowledge. According to Foucault (1990), power relations produce dominant discourses, which in turn shape people’s views towards sexual practices and identities:

The doubts I would like to oppose to the repressive hypothesis are aimed less at showing it to be mistaken than at putting it back within a general economy of discourses on sex in modern societies since the seventeenth century. Why has sexuality been so widely discussed, and what has been said about it? What were the effects of power generated by what was said? What are the links between these discourses, these effects of power, and the pleasures that were invested by them? What knowledge (*savoir*) was formed as a result of this linkage?

Foucault discusses how discourses about sexuality became part of “regime of power knowledge-pleasure” which was about social regulation:

The central issue, then (at least in the first instance), is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the over-all “discursive fact,” the way in which sex is “put into discourse.” Hence, too, my main concern will be to locate the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates in order to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behavior, the paths that give it access to the rare or scarcely perceivable forms of desire, how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasure—all this entailing effects that may be those of refusal, blockage, and invalidation, but also incitement and intensification: in short, the “polymorphous techniques of power.” (p. 11)

As a social construct, sexuality is stigmatized and marginalized in different social and historical contexts. For Foucault, binary oppositions were created between what is normal and what is abnormal under the influence of power and knowledge. Heterosexuality is seen as normal or the default, while non-heterosexuality is demonized as abnormal. Instead of accepting the repressive hypothesis as a given, Foucault rather shows how in the 19th century there was indeed an incitement to a discourse about sex and sexuality:

Toward the beginning of the eighteenth century, there emerged a political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex. And not so much in the form of a general theory of sexuality as in the form of analysis, stocktaking, classification, and specification, of

quantitative or causal studies. This need to take sex “into account,” to pronounce a discourse on sex that would not derive from morality alone but from rationality as well, was sufficiently new that at first it wondered at itself and sought apologies for its own existence....One had to speak of sex; one had to speak publicly and in a manner that was not determined by the division between licit and illicit, even if the speaker maintained the distinction for himself(which is what these solemn and preliminary declarations were intended to show): one had to speak of it as of a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum. Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered (pp. 22-23)

However, Foucault (1990) argues that over the last three centuries, discourses on sex have taken an interesting turn and that there has been great institutional excitement to speak about it which is inspired by “a cluster of power relations” (p. 30). The influence, according to Foucault, has a dual nature. First, a new regime of discourses emerges. There is no longer binary division between what should be said and what should not be said about sex. Instead, he claims that there was a deliberate and conscious effort on the part of authorities to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse in either case:

Rather, it was a new regime of discourses. Not any less was said about it; on the contrary. But things were said in a different way; it was different people who said them, from different points of view, and in order to obtain different results....There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to

determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses (p. 27).

Consequently, Foucault (1990) explains that both children and adults have lost the ability to engage in certain conversations about sex, conforming to this new discursive regime given that they were not authorized to speak about it. However, a critical examination of these new discourses reveals that “we are dealing less with a discourse on sex than with a multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole of mechanisms operating in different institutions” (p. 33):

But it was also a network of pleasures and powers linked together at multiple points and according to transformable relationships. The separation of grown-ups and children, the polarity established between the parents' bedroom and that of the children (it became routine in the course of the century when working-class housing construction was undertaken), the relative segregation of boys and girls, the strict instructions as to the care of nursing infants (maternal breast-feeding, hygiene), the attention focused on infantile sexuality, the supposed dangers of masturbation, the importance attached to puberty, the methods of surveillance suggested to parents, the exhortations, secrets, and fears, the presence—both valued and feared—of servants: all this made the family, even when brought down to its smallest dimensions, a complicated network, saturated with multiple, fragmentary, and mobile sexualities. To reduce them to the conjugal relationship, and then to project the latter, in the form of a forbidden desire, onto the children, cannot account for this apparatus which, in relation to these sexualities, was less

a principle of inhibition than an inciting and multiplying mechanism. Educational or psychiatric institutions, with their large populations, their hierarchies, their spatial arrangements, their surveillance systems, constituted, alongside the family, another way of distributing the interplay of powers and pleasures; but they too delineated areas of extreme sexual saturation, with privileged spaces or rituals such as the classroom, the dormitory, the visit, and the consultation. The forms of a nonconjugal, nonmonogamous sexuality were drawn there and established. (p. 46)

Second, as reflected in the above quote, discourses are a reflection of power relations which serve as a means for authorities to generate and legitimate new knowledge about sexuality in spaces such as schools and clinics. For example, Foucault (1990) demonstrates that:

Through the various discourses, legal sanctions against minor perversions were multiplied; sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness; from childhood to old age, a norm of sexual development was defined, and all the possible deviations were carefully described; pedagogical controls and medical treatments were organized; around the least fantasies, moralists, but especially doctors, brandished the whole emphatic vocabulary of abomination (p. 36).

Rather than viewing homosexuality as “against the law,” it was more frequently condemned as “contrary to nature” (p. 38). However, the “nature” is still a manifestation of the “law.” Foucault (1990) further highlights how the category of homosexual was produced as a specific perversion - that same sex relations became transposed into a sort of perverted category of person:

This new persecution of the peripheral sexualities entailed an incorporation of perversions and a new specification of individuals. As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized ... less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (p. 43)

This critical insight is the foundational basis for queer theory which is grounded in a critique of gay and lesbian identities and indeed all identity categories as socially constructed with the capacity and potential to regulate and set limits to a more expansive understanding of same-sex desire. In other words, identity categories can become reductive and can lead to normalizing understandings about what it means to be 'gay' or 'lesbian'. As Butler (1993) argues:

... identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression. This is not to say that I will not appear political under the sign of lesbian, but I would like to have it permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies (p. 308).

Yet, the consequences of the changes in discourse with regards to the designation of sexual identity that Foucault highlights continue to be significant in influencing our thinking about the power relations that are implicated in the privileging and normalization of heterosexuality that continue to this day in settings such as schools and clinics. According to Foucault, these ‘new’ discourses have become “new rules for the game of powers and pleasures” defined by the authorities in the West (p. 48). However, as the quote from Butler (1993) above highlights, this kind of discursive power with its implications for establishing identity categories does not operate entirely from “the top down” but from “the bottom up.” It is not central but diffuse and more like a capillary. “It is not held by authorities and institutions; rather, it is held by no one, but exercised by practically everyone.” (Wilchins, 2004, p. 76).

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler offers her critique of the binary oppositions forming the contemporary discourses on sex and sexuality raised by Foucault. Different from some feminists who believe that sex is biological and gender is socially constructed, Butler (1990) argues that both sex and gender are social constructs:

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense,

one does one's body. What is produced in this way is a naturalized and intelligible concept of sex, understood as a causal result of prior biological reality (p. 33).

This ontological advantage attributed to sex forms a foundation upon which ideas of gender are naturalized, perpetuating a *heterosexual matrix* due to the attraction between different sexes and genders.

Moreover, for Butler (1990), it does not mean people's gender identities can be formed through a single process. It is the repetitive acts and performances of subjects that decide their gender identities, meaning people's gender, and sexuality are performative instead of stable identities. Just as Butler claims, we construct our genders through our bodily expressions:

Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (p. 185)

Both Butler (1990) and Foucault (1990) provide a framework for conceptualizing the normalization and hegemonic influence of heterosexuality as a regulatory system. It is in this sense that queer theory provides analytic concepts such as *heteronormativity* and *compulsory heterosexuality* which afford a more in-depth understanding of power relations that extends beyond a narrow focus on homophobia. Warner (1991) for example, highlights the significance of a "queer politics that, no longer content to carve out a buffer zone for a minoritized and

protected subculture, has begun to challenge the pervasive and often invisible heteronormativity of modern societies” (p. 3). He argues for a critical focus on the systemic impact of heteronormativity and claims that:

“Preference for “queer” rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” The insistence on “queer”-a term defined against “normal” has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence. Its brilliance as a naming strategy lies in combining resistance on the broad social terrain of the normal with more specific resistance on the terrains of phobia and queer-bashing, on one hand, or of pleasure on the other. “Queer” therefore also suggests the difficulty in defining the population whose interests are at stake in queer politics (p. 16).

Ultimately, Warner (1991) argues: “The task of queer social theory ...[is] to confront the default heteronormativity of modern culture with its worst nightmare, a queer planet” (p. 16).

Such theories inform my understanding of the need to investigate the impact of normalization of heterosexuality and institutionalization of heteronormativity - as opposed to a narrow focus just on homophobia - in the lives of lesbian and queer female teachers in schools.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Queer theory rooted in the philosophical thought of Michel Foucault and expanded upon by Judith Butler shows that gender and sexuality are socially constructed and is implicated in a network of power relations and discourses. The attempt to normalize heterosexuality and the exclusion of sex and gender leads to the silence of the voices of women, especially those of lesbian and queer women. Rich (2003), for example, coined the term “compulsory heterosexuality” to reflect the problem of the normalization of sexual relationships between men and women. She argues, from a feminist standpoint, that compulsory heterosexuality is indeed enforced and imposed by a patriarchal system of male domination that impacts in very specific ways on lesbian women. For example, Rich (2003) refers to “the institution of heterosexuality itself as a beachhead of male dominance” (p.13). She asserts that “male power is inextricable tied to enforcing heterosexuality on women in that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable” (p.20):

The assumption that “most women are innately heterosexual” stands as a theoretical and political stumbling block for feminism. It remains a tenable assumption partly because lesbian existence has been written out of history or catalogued under disease, partly because it has been treated as exceptional rather than intrinsic, partly because to acknowledge that for women heterosexuality may not be a “preference” at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and “innately” heterosexual. Yet the failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism or the caste system of racism

is maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness.... Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of naysaying to patriarchy, an act of resistance. (p. 27)

In the field of education, queer studies scholars such as Ferfolja (2007) argue that heteronormativity has become institutionalized through both explicit and subtle practices of invisibility and silencing, encompassing teaching methods, curricula, and educational environments. In the face of systemic homophobia and heteronormativity, authorities often resort to the “condemnation” of anti-‘homosexual’ discrimination which is positioned within “discourses of derision”, overlooking the fact that prejudice and discrimination are still prevalent (p. 148). Indeed, Ferfolja highlights “how heteronormative and heterosexist discourses are pervasive, reinforced through both overt and covert practices of invisibility and silencing” and that such discourses result in “normalizing and constituting heterosexuality as the dominant and only legitimate sexuality” (p. 147).

To reveal and change the systemic nature of discrimination based on sex, gender, and sexuality, it is of great importance to address how research can generate further knowledge into lives of sexual minority teachers in schools and particularly the particular experiences of lesbian teachers as women, given the experience of sexism and misogyny that impact on all women in a patriarchal society (Ortner, 2022). Several prominent feminist standpoint theorists, such as Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, and Hilary Rose, argue that feminist standpoint theory holds the potential to make significant contributions towards this goal. They build upon the premise

that “a culture’s best beliefs - what it considers knowledge - are socially situated” (Harding, 1991), forming a foundation for their perspective.

Harding (1991) highlights the long-standing marginalization and neglect of women’s lives. Besides, their voices have often been overlooked as the foundation of research. However, it is crucial to recognize that the gender differences between women and other genders are simply differences and not indicative of inferiority. Women possess unique perspectives that can enrich our understanding of the world. According to Harding (1991), “the experience of lives of marginalized peoples, as they understand them, provide particularly significant problems to be explained or research agendas” (443). Therefore, to understand the systemic discrimination against women, one has to “set out a rigorous ‘logic of discovery’ intended to maximize the objectivity of the results of research, and thereby to produce knowledge that can be *for* marginalized people (and those who would know what they can know) rather than *for* the use of dominant groups in their projects of administering and managing the lives of marginalized people” (pp. 444-445).

What separates standpoint theory from feminist empiricism and objectivism lies in how strong objectivity is employed, which can be summarized as follows:

Strong objectivity requires that the subject of knowledge be placed on the same critical, casual plane as the objects of knowledge. Thus, strong objectivity requires what we can think of as “strong objectivity.” This is because culture-wide (or near culture-wide) beliefs function as evidence at every stage in scientific inquiry: in the selection of problems, the formation of hypotheses, the design of research (including the organization of research communities), the collection of data, the interpretation and sorting of data, decisions

about when to stop research, the way results of research are reported, etc. (Harding, p. 446).

According to Harding (1991), to ensure feminist research obtains ‘strong objectivity’, it is crucial for women’s lives and identities to be the foundational elements guiding each stage of research “for a position to count as a standpoint – rather than as a claim” (p. 123). In this way, strong objectivity can produce “less partial and less distorted beliefs” (Harding, 1991, p. 438), and opens up the possibility of recognizing the partiality and situatedness of knowledge and challenging dominant and oppressive systems of power (Haraway, 1988).

Sara Ahmed and Queer Phenomenology

Queer theory and feminist standpoint theory demonstrate the need to privilege the voices of lesbian women. In addition to these perspectives, Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology can be used to explain how the intersectionality of gender and sexuality impacts the lived experiences of queer people. By incorporating Ahmed’s framework, one can gain a deeper understanding of how the intricate interplay between gender and sexuality influences the everyday realities of queer people. Based on the epistemological framework of phenomenology, Sara Ahmed expands the subjects of queer theory in reflecting on orientation, bodies, and the relationship between bodies and the spaces they inhabit. Ahmed (2006a) summarizes the importance of phenomenology to queer studies as follows:

Phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experiences, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of

nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds (p. 2).

She provides an overview of the thinking of three phenomenologists, namely Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, in her book *Queer Phenomenology* to illustrate how their thinking opens up the possibility of a queer phenomenology.

First, as a philosophical ideology, phenomenology is centred on orientation and people's lived experiences. According to Husserl (1969), by examining our subjective experiences, we can arrive at a more fundamental understanding of the world and ourselves. However, there is always a divide between the perceptions of humans and the world as it is. Husserl (1969) believes that we need to suspend or set aside our preconceptions or judgments about the world to focus on the pure experience of the phenomenon itself. This "bracketing" is the key to understanding Husserl's phenomenology. He used the "table" as an example to show that our experience of the table includes our perceptions and feelings about it. To fully understand the table, we need to bracket our conceptions and focus only on the features of the table that appear to us in our immediate experience. However, for Ahmed, there are two problems with the bracketing of our conceptions of the table and the interactions and relations involving it. First, when Husserl (1969) tried to focus on the table where he did his writing, other objects are relegated and can be perceptible only in relation to the table. For example, Ahmed (2006a) makes the point that the domestic work which kept the table clean and children away from the table was "bracketed" by Husserl (1969). Some female philosophers at that time, in comparison, did not enjoy this privilege. They need to attend to their children while trying to write. Second, Husserl (1969) claims that the writing table remains the same while all other things are

constantly changing. However, when we look at an object, it is impossible to know what it is since we cannot see it from all points of view at once. As a result, if phenomenologists were simply to “look at” the object that they face, they would be erasing the “signs” of its history (Ahmed, 2006a). It demonstrates the necessity to attend to the back of the object – its history and what is backgrounded. Therefore, Ahmed’s critique of Husserl demonstrates the value of starting from a neglected perspective in examining systemic issues.

When the system is set up in favor of certain groups of people, it can exert constant influence on people whose bodies occupy the space differently from others. Unlike simple objects such as tables, our bodies represent a system of possible actions. That is why Ahmed (2006a) turns to Merleau-Ponty to look at how our bodies are oriented or disoriented in spaces:

Bodies are submerged, such that they become the space they inhabit; in taking up space, bodies move through space and are affected by the “where” of that movement. It is through this movement that the surface of spaces as well as bodies takes shape (p. 54).

When we first arrive at a space, our position decides our reachability, which draws a contour and determines our bodily horizons. Therefore, as various bodies navigate the space, “the surfaces of bodies are shaped by what is reachable,” which brings different consequences influencing their living experiences (p. 55). According to Foucault (1990) and Harding (1991), knowledge produced by dominant discourses and power is transformed to societal norms and expectations. When we deviate from societal norms and expectations, a sense of disorientation arises, leading to a feeling of imbalance within our bodies. The consequences are two-fold. First, for Ahmed (2006a) orientation involves a two-way contact:

Bodies are shaped by contact with objects and with others, with “what” is near enough to be reached. Bodies may even take shape through such contact or take the shape of that contact. What gets near is both shaped by what bodies do, which in turn affects what bodies can do (p. 54).

The ability of bodies to access particular environments and the way in which they engage with them significantly influence the actions undertaken and the capacity to bring about changes in the environment. Furthermore, as Sara Ahmed (2006a) asserts, our actions shape our possibilities – “what we ‘do do’ directly affects what we ‘can do’” (p. 59). “Gender becomes naturalized as a property of bodies, objects, and spaces partly through the ‘loop’ of this repetition, which leads bodies in some directions more than others as if that direction came from within the body and explains which way it turns” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 58). When gender and sexuality shape what we “do do” and what we “can do,” gender and sexuality become bodily directions determining our bodily actions over time, which is how heteronormativity influences us.

Before delving into heteronormativity, it is important to establish Ahmed’s perspective on heterosexuality. For her, heterosexuality needs to be understood in terms of a space “that gives ground to, or even grounds, heterosexual action through the renunciation of what it is not, and also by the production of what it is” and it “would be an effect of how objects gather to clear a ground, of how objects are arranged to create a background” (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 16). In other words, heterosexuality is formed while through the exclusion of non-heterosexual possibilities and works on the condition that heterosexuality is deemed normative. This is why Ahmed (2006b) believes that, by being orientated toward embracing heterosexuality and staying away

from the objects of desire that keep us away from a heterosexual life, “people become straight” (p. 554):

The temporality of orientation reminds us that orientations are effects of what we tend toward, where the “toward” marks a space and time that is almost, but not quite, available in the present. In the case of sexual orientation, it is not then simply that we have it. To become straight means not only that we have to turn toward the objects given to us by heterosexual culture but also that we must turn away from objects that take us off this line. The queer subject within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant. What is present to us in the present is not casual: as I have suggested, we do not just acquire our orientations because we find things here or there. Rather, certain objects are available to us because of lines that we have already taken: our life courses follow a certain sequence, which is also a matter of following a direction or of being directed in a certain way (birth, childhood, adolescence, marriage, reproduction, death), (p. 554).

However, Ahmed (2006a) argues that queer moments do happen (p. 65). In these instances, Ahmed (2006b) asserts that “heteronormativity acts as a mechanism to straighten and erase the slant of lesbian desire,” for example, by mislabeling lesbians as “sisters” (p. 562). Its impact is widespread. According to Ahmed (2006b), it affects what we can do, where we can go, how we are perceived, and so on:

In other words, for things to line up, queer or wonky moments are corrected. We could describe heteronormativity as a straightening device, which rereads the “slant” of queer desire. (p. 562)

This disorientation, however, can provide valuable insights into the ways in which the spaces we inhabit fail to accommodate diverse bodies. By recognizing and understanding these disoriented feelings, we gain a deeper understanding of the challenges individuals face when their bodies do not align with heteronormative societal standards, allowing us to identify and address the shortcomings of the environment in supporting bodily diversity. Such phenomenological perspectives inform the way I conceptualize lesbian teachers as being oriented in heteronormative spaces of schools. How do they navigate such straightening mechanisms or orientations and disrupt them in terms of how they embody their gender and sexuality as lesbian women?

Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the theories underlying this research. To analyze the work experiences of lesbian/ queer female teachers, homophobia and heteronormativity need to be acknowledged and understood through a theoretical lens. The works of Foucault and Butler have been used to inform my understanding of queer as disrupting the institutionalization of heterosexuality in schools (Ferfolja, 2007) as sites where heteronormativity is reproduced. Ahmed's (2006a, 2006b) queer phenomenology has been used to provide a phenomenological perspective to look at the experiences of lesbian/queer female teachers. When people's bodies and positions are not in line with the societal norms that privilege heterosexuality, they feel disoriented and lose access to many resources. The feminist standpoint theory has further highlighted the importance of including the standpoint of women's perspective in educational research.

Chapter 2:

Literature Review

In this chapter I provide a review of relevant literature that focuses specifically on the experiences of lesbian and more broadly queer teachers in schools. This literature is important because reveals the reasons why queer teachers choose certain identity management strategies and the consequences of doing so. By investigating the experiences of queer teachers, a deeper understanding of the impact and effects of homophobia and heteronormativity in schools can be gained. I focus attention specifically on the existing literature that focuses specially on the unique experiences of and challenges faced by lesbian teachers and identify the significant and relevance of my own research in light of this knowledge.

Homophobia and Schools

Rudoes (2010) and Jackson (2006) found that in most Western countries, the experiences of LG (lesbian and gay) ¹teachers in schools can be characterized by explicit homophobia, including name-calling and false accusations of child molestation and recruitment. Despite the greater social acceptance of LGBTQ+ issues, there is slow progress in schools due to the common assumption that sexuality should be restricted to the private domain while education remains in the public (Rudoes, 2010). Røthing (2008, as cited in Llewellyn and Reynolds, 2020)

¹ “LG (lesbian and gay)” instead of “queer” is used here, as it aligns with the terminology selected by the authors of the literature reviewed.

argues that, though the rights of LG teachers and students are increasingly protected in education policies, inclusion work in school is more “homotolerant” instead of truly liberating (p. 14). As a result, existing research in the field reveals that LGBTQ+ people are further marginalized as the Other, with schools remaining sites that reproduce heteronormativity which obscure the true identity of LG teachers and in this sense, they are subjected to a form of implicit and explicit control (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Rudoe, 2010). This critical focus on homophobia is especially relevant and important given the intensification and resurgent of anti-LGBTQ+ hate at this time with the weaponization of homophobia and transphobia by far-right extremist groups.

The Influence of Gender and Sexuality on Lesbian Teachers in Schools

By conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews of eight lesbian teachers in the United Kingdom, Rodeo (2010) discovered that, in the face of increasing homophobia and heteronormativity in schools, some LG (Lesbian and Gay) teachers were forced to separate their personal and public lives. Similar to Rudoe, Griffin (1991)’s study, which involved interviewing thirteen LG teachers, found how the separation between public and private lives can lead to LG teachers resorting to strategies such as ‘passing’ and ‘covering’. For example, Griffin found that when LG teachers choose to pass as heterosexual, they actively tried to hide their sexuality from other people or chose to leave the assumption that they are heterosexual unchallenged. In comparison, lesbian teachers using covering “were not trying to be perceived as heterosexual but were attempting to hide their lesbian or gay identities” (p. 195). In this way, LG teachers choosing this strategy would omit any disclosure of their personal lives at work. However, their

intention is not to lead others to believe they are heterosexual. In her research, Griffin (1991) also found that when lesbian and gay teachers choose different strategies to manage their identities, they can face drastically different challenges and obstacles. For example, when they are passing or covering, they have to pay attention to the smallest details. They cannot be seen holding hands with their partners and need to consciously regulate their gender expression.

Significant research in the field has identified that there are different reasons why LG teachers feel reluctant to come out in school (Griffin, 1991; Jackson, 2006; Simons et al., 2021). For example, Jackson (2006) conducted semi-structured interviews with nine K-12 lesbian and gay teachers and identified five major domains that can influence how gay and lesbian teachers construct their identities, including personal characteristics, family status, gender conformity, professional experiences, and community atmosphere. Among all the domains, the biggest challenge faced by queer teachers was the incompatibility between the desire of authenticity as queer individuals and the expectations of professionalism (Rudoe, 2010; Simons, et al., 2021; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021). Llewellyn and Reynolds (2021) interviewed four LG teachers in the United Kingdom and according to their research findings, some LG teachers are forced to demonstrate hyper-professionalism, “where extreme competence was utilized as a strategy to mitigate the potentially negative effects of an LGB identity becoming public” (p.15). How school administrators, colleagues, and parents react to LG teachers’ decision to come out can also exert great influence on the identity management strategies they employ. Stebbins (2008) found that some schools may choose not to address the issue of homophobia and/or acknowledge the sexual minority status of their staff. Colleagues can also make the environment more hostile by willfully neglecting LG teachers’ visibility or being reluctant to speak out against homophobic comments (Lineback et al., 2016). The common assumption that parents have the

right to question teachers' sexuality can make it extremely difficult for LG teachers to come out given the prevalence of homophobia in society (Stebbins, 2008; Lineback, 2016).

Other than covering their sexualities or passing as heterosexual, Griffin (1991) contends that many LG teachers tended to be more open about their sexualities in school by choosing to be implicitly or explicitly out. According to Griffin (1991), being implicitly out means that when others assume the sexualities of LG teachers, they would leave the assumptions unchallenged. This identity management strategy can be a double-edged sword. LG teachers can choose to go back to pass or cover and maintain some degree of safety if they believe the environment becomes too hostile. However, it can also be more difficult for others to provide support to LG teachers. In comparison, being explicitly out requires LG teachers to directly disclose their identities by using words such as 'gay' or 'lesbian.' However, Griffin points out that this strategy is believed to be high-risk and can put LG teachers in a vulnerable position. However, other researchers such as Jackson (2006) argue that there is no clear-cut difference between being out or not for LG teachers since teachers have to meet new colleagues and students almost every year. Therefore, coming out needs to be understood as an ongoing and multiple act which can make being explicitly out increasingly difficult for LG teachers who are compelled continuously to disclose their sexual identity in schools (Jackson, 2006). According to Rasmussen (2004), "people's ability to continuously negotiate their identity is necessarily mediated by varying circulations of power relating to age, family background, economic position, and race" (p. 147).

The hesitation LG teachers feel while deciding whether to come out in school shows the potential consequences of disclosing their sexualities. In her research, Gary (2013) interviewed four lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) teachers. The first interview was a semi-structured life-

history interview; the second was less structured and based upon the key issues arising of the first interview both in a general and in a personal sense (p. 5). She found that, despite the negative consequences of being out, LGB teachers who can be open about their sexuality experience greater job satisfaction and smoother interconnections between their private and public lives. Moreover, as Lineback et al. (2016) argue, openly-out LG teachers can feel more confident in teaching, which can be positively associated with better outcomes than remaining closeted. However, the researchers failed to mention the differences between the experiences of gay and lesbian teachers. Various research suggests that coming out not only benefits LG teachers, but also means that they can become role models for queer students (Griffin, 1992; Jackson, 2006). Indeed, Jackson (2006) argues that challenging the homophobic and heteronormative environment has the potential of transforming all students and colleagues.

Experiences of Lesbian Teachers in Ontario Schools

Khayatt(1992) conducted one of the first studies on the identities of lesbian teachers working in Ontario, Canada over 30 years ago. She interviewed eighteen teachers working in rural and small urban centers in Ontario. The interviewees ranged in age from late twenties to mid-sixties. Among them, five were married before and three had children. Only two of them were ‘out’ when interviewed and some of the interviewees refused to self-identify as lesbians. Khayatt (1992) argues that the fear of coming out in school and refusing the label ‘lesbian’ showed the influence of homophobia and heteronormativity and the impact on lesbian teachers. Her research revealed the difficulty lesbian teachers feel while trying to balance their public and private lives. Some interviewees had to keep silent about their private lives, which negatively

influenced their relationships with colleagues, students, and school administrators. Khyatt's research highlighted how lesbian teachers' gender-nonconforming appearances and behavior may be picked up by students and colleagues, leading to explicit or implicit antagonism. Moreover, Khayatt stressed the importance of exploring the identity of lesbian teachers instead of seeing them as part of the LG teacher identity. Though often categorized as the same group, lesbian teachers can face drastically different experiences from gay male teachers due to the intersectionality of gender and sexuality. They had to face explicit gendered sexual harassment and homophobic slurs such as 'dykes' when they failed to conform to normalized gender expressions as women. As Khayatt (1992) explains:

Both as a woman and as a lesbian, a female teacher embodies the past and present struggles of women to be accepted as equal in salaries and opportunities in the profession, as well as the recent gains made by feminist and gay movements and the discourses that accompanied them and were later informed by them, especially with regard to analyzing and making visible the prevailing and hegemonic effects of a capitalist patriarchal social and economic structure (p. 243).

Though the Ontario Human Rights Code was introduced in 1962, most of the lesbian teachers interviewed did not feel safer in school as a result. Besides, they believed that the personal connection with students bears more weight than job security which is provided by the Ontario Human Rights Code. Therefore, Khyatt highlights that the policy did not necessarily translate into improving the situation of lesbian teachers. However, no matter what kinds of identity management strategies were used by the interviewees, Khayatt found that these teachers did not enjoy being forced to live in the closet and keep separate their private from their public

lives. Without the school taking the action to fight against homophobia, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, lesbian teachers had no choice but to carry the burden of keeping their sexual identity confined to their private lives.

Sixteen years later, Stebbins (2008) conducted similar research and interviewed five lesbian teachers in south-western Ontario. Similar to Khayatt's research, Stebbins's study focused on queer female voice due to the intersectionality of gender and sexuality and its influence on their identities. The biggest difference between their studies is that only two interviewees in Khayatt's study were 'out' to the staff and students, while all five interviewees in Stebbins's research were "out" to some extent and four of them were "explicitly out" (see Griffin, 1991). However, though most of the interviewees were 'out', Stebbins found that, despite more public access to knowledge to anti-discrimination in Canada pertaining to the legalization of same-sex marriage, homophobia was still prevalent in schools. She also discovered the unique challenges faced by lesbian teachers while working in a both homophobic and patriarchal school environment. They needed to worry about not only potential homophobic behavior from colleagues and students but also sexual harassment from male colleagues.

Stebbins also explored the differences between femme and butch lesbians by comparing the stories of two teachers in a relationship. After coming out, the reactions and responses that the femme and the butch lesbian teachers received differed greatly. When the femme teacher came out, her colleagues questioned her sexuality since her appearance resembled that of heterosexual women. However, people tended not question the sexuality of the butch lesbian due to common stereotypes about lesbians that conflate gender expression and sexual orientation. Their colleagues already had an image in their head which "positions out 'femme' lesbian

teachers as straight while closeted ‘butch’ lesbians are understood to be ‘out.’” (Stebbins, 2006, p. 52) The different experiences of femme and butch teachers call for a more complex investigation of homophobia “since seeing all queer people as experiencing homophobia in common is to miss so much about what mobilizes homophobic hatred” (Stebbins, 2006, p. 111).

A review of the relevant literature in the field has shed light on the lives and identities of lesbian teachers. Khayatt’s and Stebbins’s studies lay a great foundation for future research on the forming and reforming of lesbian teacher identity. Without a deeper understanding of the complexity behind the homophobic hatred towards lesbian teachers and the institutionalization of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, real changes to make them feel safe to come out are unlikely to happen. Indeed, the existing literature reveals that both lesbian and gay teachers experience explicit or implicit homophobia and heteronormativity at work which forces them to manage their identities under pressure. Such research has generated knowledge about the various identity management strategies chosen by LG teachers and how these can lead to different consequences both for LG teachers themselves and others. Khayatt’s and Stebbins’s research specifically reveals the reasons why the identities and experiences of lesbian teachers can be different from those of gay male teachers, given the influence of both patriarchal and sexist positioning of women which results in these teachers experiencing specific forms of gendered homophobia.

Fifteen years have gone by since Stebbins’s study conducted her research on lesbian teachers in Ontario schools and since that time there has been an intensification of overt expressions of homophobia and transphobia fuelled by culture wars and far right extremist ideology. In countries such as the United States and indeed here in Canada, those supporting

LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools are being called ‘groomers’ (NatanSon and Balingit, 2022). As the closest neighbour of the U.S., Canada used to champion itself as the “mecca for the oppressed of the world” (Trakman & Gatién, 1999). However, it is far from the reality. For example, in March 2023, some angry parents attended the York Catholic District School Board (YCDSB) meeting in Aurora to oppose what are known as ‘safe space’ stickers, which are used by some teachers to signal acceptance to LGBTQ+ children and teens, and also to protest against the raising of the Pride Flag during pride month. One of the parents even stated that Catholic schools should not allow transgender and LGBT students to attend (Cheese, 2023). Apparently, LGBTQ+ issues have attracted much attention for various reasons. More research is needed to explore how this changing environment impacts the identities of LGBTQ+ educators and specifically lesbian teachers in k-12 classrooms in Canada.

Conclusion

Despite significant changes to the social environment and educational policies concerning LGBTQ+ issues in Canada, there remains a dearth of research exploring the professional experiences of lesbian teachers. As existing research in the field has found, these educators often resort to employing diverse identity management strategies as a response to the pervasive homophobia and heteronormativity that is prevalent in schools and society (Griffin, 1991). By neglecting to investigate the underlying factors influencing these choices, we fail to unveil the systemic nature of homophobia and heteronormativity. Consequently, it becomes difficult to advocate for and implement more inclusive educational policies. It is imperative to address this research gap in order to foster a more equitable and supportive educational environment. My

study will further explore the extent to which homophobia and heteronormativity continue to impact on lesbian teachers and their experiences as women.

Chapter 3:

Methodology

In this chapter I examine the methodological approach that I adopted and its significance in light of the purpose of my study. The study was concerned to address the research questions which surround the impact of gender and sexuality on the work experiences of lesbian and queer female teachers and how they navigate a homophobic and heteronormative work environment. The purpose was to generate particularized insights into their lived experiences through conducting semi-structured interviews rather than making generalizations about all lesbian and queer women educators in schools (Hesse-Biber, 2011). The terms “lesbian and queer female teachers” instead of “lesbian teachers” are used to include all women who do not identify as heterosexuals. I first discuss my methodological orientation to qualitative inquiry and use of method followed by a discussion of my approach to analysing the data. I then provide details about the participants and recruitment.

Qualitative Research Methodology and Method

I conducted a qualitative research study which focused on exploring the professional identity of lesbian/queer female teachers in Canada. Conducting a qualitative study made the most sense given that, as Patton (2015) explains:

qualitative inquiry is concerned to document the stuff that happens among real people in the real world in their own words, from their own perspectives, and within their own

contexts...qualitative inquiry studies, documents, analyzes, and interprets how human beings construct and attach meanings to their experiences (p. 13).

It was in this sense that qualitative inquiry was best suited to my desire to generate further knowledge that would deepen an understanding of the professional experiences of lesbian/queer female teachers and how they construct what it means to be a sexual minority teacher in school. This is why the research started from the phenomenological standpoint of women's experiences. Only by making women's concrete life experiences the primary focus of our investigations can we succeed in constructing knowledge that accurately reflects and represents their gendered realities in the school system. Feminist researchers explain how paying attention to the specific experiences and situated perspectives of human beings, both researchers and respondents alike, may actually become a tool for knowledge building and rich understanding (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007).

This research employed a phenomenological case study approach since phenomenological studies are used to “describe the meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). As Creswell (2007) points out, phenomenology is particularly adept at deciphering the experiences of participants and their feelings in qualitative research:

Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (e.g., grief is universally experienced). The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence (a “grasp of the very nature of the thing,” van Manen, 1990, p. 177). To this end, qualitative researchers identify a phenomenon (an “object” of human

experience; van Manen, 1990, p. 163). This human experience may be phenomena such as insomnia, being left out, anger, grief, or undergoing coronary artery bypass surgery (Moustakas, 1994). The inquirer then collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon, and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals. This description consists of “what they experienced and “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). (pp. 57-58).

Therefore, using phenomenological case study made sense given that the purpose of my research was to examine lesbian/ queer female teachers’ experiences of homophobia and heteronormativity and the emotional response to these challenges that they faced in schools.

Among all methods of conducting qualitative inquiry, interviews were employed to “yield direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (Patton, 2015, p. 13). I chose the general interview guide approach (semi-structured) to conduct the interviews. During the interviews, the Interview Guide was utilized as a framework (see Appendix). As described by Patton (2015), the questions within the Interview Guide are “aimed at getting an in-depth, individualized, and contextually sensitive understanding of the issue researched” (p. 6). Moreover, the adaptability of the questions allows the researcher to tailor their approach to each interviewee’s unique situation and the specific objectives of the inquiry. However, it also allows for flexibility in that research participants are given the freedom to share their experiences fully since “the goal is to look at a ‘process’ or the ‘meanings’ individuals attribute to their given social situation, not necessarily to make generalization” (Hesse-Biber, 2011, p. 9).

The Interview Guide covered a range of questions designed to gather valuable insights from the participants. These questions encompassed aspects such as the participants' age, sexuality, and teaching experience. Additionally, the guide encouraged participants to reflect on their identity management strategies, including their decisions to come out or not in school settings, as well as the consequences associated with these choices. Furthermore, the questions explored potential challenges faced by lesbians and queer women specifically in educational environments, including instances of sexual harassment or unwanted sexual attention in the workplace. Asking these questions enabled an in-depth investigation into the reasons behind lesbian and queer women's adoption of different identity management strategies, as well as the consequences associated with these choices. It enabled me to gain an understanding of systemic homophobia and heteronormativity that these female teachers experienced in school.

Sampling

Criterion purposeful sampling was utilized. According to Patton (2002), employing criterion purposeful sampling offers several advantages, which include:

Criterion sampling can be used to understand cases that are likely to be information rich because they may reveal major system weaknesses that become targets of opportunity for program or system improvement...The potential research participants will be information-rich cases that can provide much insight into issues of central importance to the purpose of the research. Besides, studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations (p. 238).

He further adds that relatively small samples are “selected purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth” (p. 46). Lesbian and queer female educators were intentionally sought to participate in the study as a basis for “selecting information rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p. 46) – i.e. how lesbian and queer female teachers navigate their professional lives in schools in light of the systemic institutionalization of heteronormativity and heterosexism in the school system (Ferfolja, 2007).

Participants were recruited through the supervisor’s professional contacts and networks as well as through social media such as Facebook and X (formally known as Twitter). I met one of the participants through a friend. In the end, four educators who identify as lesbians agreed to participate in the research. All four participants chose to be interviewed online via Zoom which lasted for 45-50 minutes, and the interviews were audio-taped. After collecting the data, I transcribed all recorded interviews, and participants’ direct identities were removed from the transcribed data and replaced with pseudonyms.

Participants

Table 2 summarizes the participants’ respective location, ethnicity, age, experience, and sexuality. Names that appear are pseudonyms. Though being cisgender/ transgender is not the focus of this research, the intersectionality of sex, gender, and sexuality has to be taken into consideration since it can exert a huge influence on the work experiences of an educator. Therefore, it is worth noting that one of the participants is a transgender lesbian teacher.

However, she requested that her transgender identity not be mentioned anywhere to maintain anonymity, particularly with her school board, to ensure job security.

Table 2: Summary of Participants

	Amanda	Olivia	Mary	Fiona
Location	Manitoba	Alberta	Alberta	Ontario
Ethnicity	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian
Age	31	40	29	52
Experience	4	13	7	26
Sexuality (Self-Identification)	Lesbian	Lesbian	Lesbian	Lesbian

Amanda teaches grade six all subjects except music and PE with previous experience teaching high school English in a small town in Manitoba. Fiona holds a prominent position in upper management within an Ontario school board. Mary spent six years English language art, social studies and drama in a Catholic school in one of the biggest cities in Alberta. She recently left the Catholic school board and joined a public school in the same city. Olivia teaches English and Japanese at junior high and high school level.

In all data collection, I abided by the ethical review requirements of the University of Western Ontario. A letter of information and consent was sent to all participants and consent was gathered before interviews. All interviewees were notified of their right to delete any content in the interview transcripts and leave the research at any time before the paper is published. Two of them decided to remove information that they deem private and may help people figure out their real names despite being told the only information about them to be disclosed in the paper is the province they are in.

Data Analysis

Multiple case studies were utilized to generate findings from the interviews of information-rich participants. According to (Creswell, 2007), “case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a *case*) or multiple bounded system (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving *multiple sources of information* (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case *description* and case-based themes” (p. 73). Case studies are useful for analyzing data of a group of participants with similar identities and experiences since it provides “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit” (Sharon, 2009). To explore the similarities and differences between the experiences of all participants, multiple case studies were conducted. According to Sharan (2009), a multiple case study is consisted of two steps:

In multiple case study, there are two stages of analysis – the within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis. For the within-case analysis, each case is first treated as a comprehensive case in and of itself. Data are gathered so the researcher can learn as much about the contextual variables as possible that might have a bearing on the case. Once the analysis of each case is completed, cross-case analysis begins (p. 204).

After transcribing all the interviews, I read over all the transcripts several times and then conducted the within-case analysis first. In each case, I was looking for the unique challenges faced by the participant, what policies succeeded or failed to support them, and the consequences of those challenges. During the cross-case analysis, I compared the experiences of all participants and explored the challenges shared by some and reasons for their struggles at work.

After case studies were finished, I moved to thematic analysis for further data analysis. Content analysis is used as a “qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, 452). Based on the findings generated from cross-case analysis, I looked for the similarities and differences among the narratives of different participants and especially the reasons behind them. Eventually, I was able to locate themes such as “identity management strategies,” self-policing, and intersectionality between sex, gender, and sexuality (see Griffin, 1991).

Researcher Positionality and the Role of Theory

Patton (2015) asserts that, as the instrument of inquiry, researchers in qualitative inquiry can approach the questions and data from a unique perspective since the positionality of the researcher is a part of qualitative methodology. Given that my research draws on feminist standpoint theory, my positionality greatly influences how I understand the issue, and how I collect and analyze the data. As Haraway (1988) asserts:

The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing the relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility. Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see (p. 583).

As an individual who identifies as a racialized lesbian and brings forth my personal experience as a former teacher with over four years of classroom experience, I conceived of this qualitative study as an opportunity to gain insight into the professional lives of lesbian teachers in Canada through data collection and analysis. Besides, during my time as a teacher, I found myself consistently choosing a strategy of passing as a means of managing my identity (see Griffin, 1991). This decision was largely influenced by the prevalent homophobia within the workplace. As a result of my choice of hiding my sexuality and avoiding questions about my personal life all the time, I found myself unable to form a genuine relationship with students and colleagues. Moreover, I considered quitting my job while feeling afraid and lonely at work.

To savor “the fruit of qualitative inquiry,” theory must lay the foundation for locating the themes and patterns and gaining understandings and insights from research (Patton, 2015, p. 36).

Critical theory also played an important part in orientating me to making sense of the data. According to Anyon (2008), theory, especially critical theory, plays a critical role in research in “direct[ing] us to appropriate empirical research strategies, and to extend the analytical, critical—and sometimes emancipatory—power of our data gathering and interpretation as we study urban schools, communities, and social change” (p. 2). Anyon (2009) refers to this practice as “theoretically informed empiricism” which she explains as follows:

And our point is to engage research and the data it yields in constant conversation with a theoretical arsenal of powerful concepts. Neither data nor theory alone are adequate to the task of social explanation. Our view is that they imbricate and instantiate one another, forming and informing each other as the inquiry process unfolds (p. 2).

Therefore, theory, especially queer theory, feminist standpoint theory and queer phenomenology were a useful resource in analyzing the data. For starters, feminist standpoint theory was used to make sure that the collected data would be analyzed from the perspective of women, aiming for “strong objectivity” (Harding, 1991). The analysis focused on identifying themes and patterns that demonstrate how knowledge surrounding the experiences of lesbian teachers is produced in light of the broader systemic influence of social and political factors. Moreover, queer theory was used to inform and orient my analysis of the binaries between adults and children, straight and queer, and religion and secular and their impact on how lesbian teachers are navigating and negotiating their professional identities in schools especially in light of the resurgence of anti-LGBTQ hate. Queer phenomenology helped me to examine how

lesbian/queer female teachers orient themselves and are compelled to do so in heteronormative institutions such as schools in ways that affect lived experiences (Ahmed, 2006). Specifically, queer phenomenology helped me to illuminate how the bodily orientations of lesbian/queer female teachers influence their experiences and the identity formation process and how heteronormativity acts as a “straightening device” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 562).

Limitations of the Research

Despite the efforts to locate racialized educators who identify as lesbians or queer women, all four participants are Caucasian. Both Amanda and Fiona mentioned that being a Caucasian serves as a protective force when they work on their relationship with others in school. Besides, as the research done by Stebbins (2008) shows, the experiences between butch and femme lesbians can be drastically different, which can have a big impact on how they manage their identity at work. However, all participants realized their privilege of being able to pass as heterosexuals in a heteronormative environment.

Conclusion

This research was designed to hear the voices of lesbian and queer female teachers and generate findings that enabled me to identify the systemic problems plaguing the current education system in Canada with respect to amplifying the institutionalization of heteronormativity and its effects at the micro-level of lived experience in schools (Ferfolja,

2007). Given the current conditions of escalating anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric which has intensified both LGBTQ+ teacher and student vulnerability in schools (Banfield, 2023), the participant recruitment turned out to be one of the hardest processes of this research. It is unfortunate and indeed troubling that the four interviewees who were brave enough to participate in the research were exposed to and had to contend with such horrific homophobia and heteronormativity in response to anti- LGBTQ+ backlash and protests that were taking place at the time of the research. I tried to tell their stories accurately and ethically and to shed light on the challenges and barriers embedded in the system. Chapter 4 explore the experiences of the participants in detail.

Chapter 4:

Data Analysis

In this chapter I provide an analysis of the interview data and insight into the experiences of lesbian/queer female teachers in school. The analysis is organized around the following key themes: Homophobia and heteronormativity in school; Reasons for participants choosing various “Identity management strategies”; Consequences of selecting different ways to manage identities; Self-policing and self-regulation; Intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and race; Impact of anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric; Reflections on the promise of a more inclusive future.

During data analysis, I color coded every theme and idea presented by each participant and cross referenced all transcripts and ideas, which informed the comparative analysis that I provide in this chapter.

Identity Management Strategies

Griffin’s (1991) research and analytic approach clearly influenced my engagement with the data and was useful as a hermeneutic resource. Table 2 is taken from her work and shows the “identity management strategies” used by lesbian and gay teachers. Griffin (1991) found that driven by fear in a homophobic and heteronormativity environment, queer educators are forced to make a decision about how they present themselves in school. She points out that when queer teachers feel more afraid of the consequences of coming out in school, they tend to choose

identity management strategies of “passing” or “covering” while being “implicitly out” or “explicitly out” means a better integration of their personal and professional lives (p. 189).

Table 3: Continuum of identity management strategies used by lesbian and gay educators

Totally Closeted	Passing	Covering	Implicitly Out	Explicitly Out	Publicly Out
OUT TO NO ONE AT SCHOOL	Lying	Censoring	Telling Truths w/o Gay/Lesbian Labels	Affirming Lesbian/Gay Identity	OUT TO SCHOOL COMMUNITY
	I assume you don't know	I assume you don't know	I assume you know, but I'm not sure.	I know you know. You know I know you know.	
	See me as Heterosexual	Don't see me Lesbian/gay	You can see me as Lesbian/Gay if you want to	See me as Lesbian/Gay	



Separation

Personal/Professional Self

Integration

(Taken from Griffin, 1991, p. 194)

Other than Fiona, no participant is explicitly out to everyone in the school community. The data revealed that the identity management strategies deployed are constantly changing and depend on both the audience and different stages of where the educators are at in their careers. For example, all of the teachers chose to be open about their sexuality in front of queer students since they want to provide support for queer youth which was derived from an understanding that being visibly queer was a way by which to affirm their non-heterosexual students. However, they found it almost impossible to come/be out in front of the whole student population. Despite choosing similar identity management strategies, their internal struggles vary greatly.

Amanda finds it difficult to make a decision to talk openly about her personal life in front of all students. She just evaded the chance to come out every time her students asked her “do you have a boyfriend?” “Fear” is the word that Amanda used when describing her hesitation about talking about her sexuality in class since she lives and works in a rural community. According to Griffin (1991), “deciding how to manage one’s identity is a complex and on-going decision-making process requiring the balancing of intense feelings of fear with the need for self-integrity and integration” (p. 200). Where she is situated plays a huge part in her decision to choose not to come out to all students.

In comparison, Olivia argues that there should be a clear line between teachers’ professional and personal lives. Therefore, she believes that queer teachers should not be forced to come out to students. Different from Amanda and Olivia, Mary made the decision of hiding her sexuality since she worked at a Catholic school for most of her career. She believes that working at Catholic schools can be extremely challenging for queer educators:

“I was concerned about the fallout of that in the Catholic school setting. I taught there for six years and never was able to come out to students because of potential repercussions with work. There’s just kind of some inherent dangers in the current Catholic school system in Alberta, in regard to being a queer teacher.”

According to Foucault (1990), sexuality is stigmatized and marginalized in various social and historical contexts, and homosexuality is more frequently condemned as “contrary to nature” (p. 38). The anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments are exacerbated in Catholic schools. The most-used Christian expression “love the sinner, hate the sin” means that it is acceptable to be LGBTQ+ but it is not to do LGBTQ+, which “underlies curricular and policy decisions regarding gender and sexual diversity in Canadian Catholic schools” (Callaghan, 2019, pp. 9-10). According to Callaghan (2019), despite the progress made in protecting queer students in many Catholic schools across Canada, “the same kind of progress has not been made for the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ teachers in Canadian Catholic schools” (p. 10). Besides, the narratives surrounding “parental rights” further compel Marty to be more cautious about mentioning her sexuality in front of children. Advocates of “parental rights” try to “limit discussions of gender and sexuality in schools under the auspices of both protecting children and protecting parents’ rights to raise children as they see fit” (Benchetrit, 2023). As a result, she is only comfortable with disclosing her sexuality in front of queer students instead of the whole student population. For similar reasons, the feelings of interviewees like Amanda towards whether to come out to their colleagues are hugely different from how they interact with students. As the only teacher in her school who has a giant flag on her office wall and who started a GSA, Amanda is “implicitly out” to her colleagues which has brought her challenges at work (Griffin, 1991, p. 196):

It wasn't really until probably the end of the first year that all the staff knew I was gay. Stuff would kind of come up about dating or whatever in the staff room. A couple of people would find out that way, or they saw the pride flag and put it together or whatever. But it did feel like with every kind of new set of colleagues who learned, there seemed to be a slight division. Some folks would just back off. And that was challenging, because again, it goes unspoken, which is hard.

The fact that some of Amanda's colleagues believe that it is acceptable to "back off" after learning that Amanda is queer demonstrates the lack of support for queer teachers in schools, which exerts a negative impact on the working experiences of Amanda. Besides, the lack of basic understanding of LGBTQ+ issue makes Amanda's colleagues unable to realize that some of their narratives or behavior are inappropriate:

And what's interesting is I don't even think some of the people would like to self-identify as homophobic. They just said, 'no, I just don't think this is age appropriate.'

By claiming that gender and sexuality are not "age appropriate," some of Amanda's colleagues were supportive of the "prevailing view in the public arena that sexual orientation – including diverse family patterns – is not an appropriate focus for education, in spite of significant evidence demonstrating continuing disadvantage for non-heterosexual pupils and teachers" (DePalma and Atkinson, 2006, p. 333).

Different from Amanda, Olivia uses the identity management strategy of "covering" in front of her colleagues (Griffin, 1991, p. 194):

With my coworkers, only if it comes up in conversation directly. I try not to be part of any conversations where there's discussions about significant others, because I don't necessarily want to touch on that... I'm never sure if they're part of this kind of fundamentalist group in town or if they're not. I don't volunteer the information. And I'm never certain how anyone is going to kind of react or say anything. So, I kind of wait until I get a clear view about who is a supportive ally or not before I say anything, especially nowadays.

When people chose "covering," they do not hope to be seen as heterosexuals but attempt to hide their sexualities (Griffin, 1991). The uncertainty around how her colleagues will react forces her to hide her sexuality as a self-protective strategy. After the protests broke out in 2023, there is a growing anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment in schools (Baxter, 2023), which makes Olivia more hesitant about coming out in school. However, according to Griffin (1991), "passing" and "covering" can have several consequences that negatively affect work experiences of queer teachers and can lead to a sense of isolation and estrangement (p. 189). Given the fact that Olivia lives in small town where is a dominant presence of religious fundamentalists, she found it extremely challenging to have a genuine relationship with her colleagues. Though living and working in a big city, Mary also faced great challenges in a Catholic school and did not come out to her colleagues until she felt they are supportive in her third year.

All four participants mentioned that the most homophobic narratives and behavior they experienced come from school administrators. Amanda recalled:

My second year here, me and a colleague started a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). And that was when it started becoming quite clear, especially in terms of leadership, that folks

were not very on board, but also very aware that legally, they were obliged to be on board. Then suddenly, there were no spaces available for us to hold the GSA when that was not the case. Or we'd put it on the announcements that GSA was meeting on this day, and everyone's welcome. And that would just not make it to the announcements, or it would just get removed from the list of extracurriculars that gets sent home.

According to the Manitoba Public School Act introduced in 2013, students and teachers have the right to establish a GSA in school and it is the responsibility of the school to provide a safe and inclusive environment for all. However, the way Amanda was treated when she wanted to set up a GSA in school does not make her feel welcome or supportive. Though working in a large city, Mary faced more serious backlash from setting up a GSA in a Catholic school:

I started a GSA for teachers in my Catholic school district when I was working there. And there was a lot of backlashes from that. I had to have meetings with the superintendent and with the school board. They were not happy that the teacher GSA had been started. Because I am queer, I was often accused of having an agenda that I was trying to push.

Callaghan (2014), for example, argues that the idea of a “gay agenda” is simply a fear-based rhetorical strategy on the part of the religious right to undermine the legitimate social justice work undertaken by many anti-homophobia educators and this has a tremendous impact on LGBTQ+ educators and students especially in Catholic schools (p. 223). Any attempts to normalize nonheterosexuality is seen as a challenge to the authority of the religion. It leads to what Callaghan (2015) refers to as “doctrinal disciplining” which uses disciplinary power to set heterosexuals as the only legitimate sexuality in Catholic schools and, consequently, impacts

significantly on teachers' choices of identity management strategies in schools as teachers in my study revealed (p. 11). For example, when the Accepting School Act 2012, widely known as Bill-13 which mandates that all schools should allow students to form a GSA in school, was introduced in Ontario, many publicly funded Catholic schools voiced their opposition towards these policies (Callaghan, 2014). In fact, many Canadian Catholic schools are deliberately ignoring the laws and regulations introduced by the government and taking away the protection for queer youth and teachers. Requests of creating a GSA are often denied.

In the case of Mary in Alberta, students in her school requested to set up a GSA which was approved by the school administrators eventually. If students want to set up a GSA in Alberta, they need to notify the school leadership who will appoint GSA liaisons and the GSA liaisons can be students, staff, principal or school board members (Government of Alberta, 2019). However, though invited by students to be the GSA liaison, Mary was banned from running it by school administrators:

Students request that they run a GSA, which, legally, they have to say yes to in Alberta.

But I was forbidden from being the person who ran it, even though I was willing, and the students had asked me for the GSA. And it was because I was queer, it was things like that. That would come up pretty often from a board level.

Moreover, Mary was deliberately excluded from conducting PD sessions on the use of pronouns given that she was queer. The efforts by the school district to silence her did not stop there: "I specifically in one circumstance had the superintendent email my principal and tell them that they had to talk to me and tell me to stop asking questions in public spaces about some of the policies and stuff." Mary was denied the access to policy making and the opportunity to raise

people's awareness of queer issues due to her sexuality. According to Ahmed (2006), what we "do do" directly affects what we "can do" (p. 59):

Bodies are shaped by contact with objects and with others, with "what" is near enough to be reached. Bodies may even take shape through such contact or take the shape of that contact. What gets near is both shaped by what bodies do, which in turn affects what bodies can do (p. 54).

As a result, the negative experiences made Mary hesitate about coming out to the whole student population.

Another reason why Mary felt hesitant about coming out in schools is job security. After witnessing some of her queer colleagues denied of promotions, she did not feel safe at work and had to face the fear of not getting a promotion or even getting fired. At that time, she was afraid of mentioning her sexuality in front of everyone in school because she was on a probationary contract. Since every teacher has to sign the Catholicity clause agreements before working at a Catholic school in all 17 Alberta Catholic boards (French, 2019), the school has the right to fire queer teachers coming out to others in school. Indeed, as Callaghan (2019) points out, "caught between the religious edicts of the Vatican and the secular laws of the state," Catholic schools treat non-heterosexual teachers "in contradictory and inconsistent ways," including firing or other ways of exclusion (pp. 36-37). It was until she finally got a continuous contract that she felt more secure at work. Despite the desire to be more open about their sexuality at work, one of the biggest fears of queer teachers is "being vulnerable and losing the protection of being able to deny that they were gay or lesbian if confronted in a way that threatened their careers" (Griffin, 1991, p. 199).

Among all participants, Amanda is the only one that talked about her negative experiences with parents and students:

Ultimately, they[parents] don't think it's appropriate for you to be their child's educator. But legally, they can't do anything about it. I've never had a parent come to me and say, hey, I don't like that. In social studies, you're teaching about the Charter of Human Rights and the history of marriage laws. I've never had that, yet. But I do hear it through the grapevine of two years after I've had a student, the teacher that they have now says, yeah, their parents were ranting to me about how they didn't like that you did this two years ago. So, I think I've had a lot of experiences like that where parents know that what they're doing is homophobic.... In grade six, where I'm currently at, a lot of it just comes out as discomfort. We did a code breaking activity in math the other day. And the students started talking about the imitation game, that movie about Alan Turing, who created the Enigma machine and was gay. He was chemically castrated afterwards as punishment for his homosexuality. And obviously, they didn't talk about chemical castration. But one or two of them were mentioning, yeah, he was gay. He got in a lot of trouble from the government after stopping World War Two. And I was like, yeah, that's pretty wild, right? Then there were just a lot of giggles, as soon as there's the word gay or homosexual, anything like that. They're 12. Most of them aren't aggressively anti-queer, but they're just so uncomfortable with it.

Knowing some of her students found LGBTQ+ issues funny or uncomfortable further pushes Amanda away from disclosing her sexuality in front of children. Although some parents didn't express direct opposition when she discussed the history of marriage law, their reactions still

haunt her, leaving her concerned about the potential consequences of disclosing her sexuality in front of students and parents. In their research, Lineback et al. (2016) found that the fear of queer educators is often related to negative stereotypes of queer educators. Non-heterosexual identities are constructed as hypersexual, paedophilic, deviant, abnormal, sick, and sexually predatory and much of the international research in the field reports lesbian and gay individuals' fears in relation to the impact and repercussions of being 'read' and positioned within these negative discourses (Ferfolja, 2007, p. 148). In comparison, children are often portrayed as "innocent" (Robinson, 2008, p. 113). Robinson (2008) believes that the concept of "child innocence has been inherently enshrined within traditional theories of human development, which have also constituted understandings of sexuality" (p. 116):

These readings are challenged by a counter-discourse that argues that meanings of childhood have been constituted and defined by adults, for adults, who thus determine how a child should behave, what a child should know and how and when they should come to know it. Thus, the defining boundary between adults and children, and the ultimate signifier of the child—childhood innocence—is a constructed social and moral concept. It is a signifier constituted in historical Christian discourses and Romantic philosophical writings, such as those of Rousseau and Wordsworth (epitomising the 'age of innocence') and reflects an adult state of preoccupation with a longing for something lost and forever unattainable. The notion of childhood innocence has continued unabated to define the child and its place in the world today. Any challenge to the sacrosanct concept of childhood innocence generally leads to a heightened level of concern in society (pp. 115-116).

As a result, the challenges caused by a complex relationship with parents who hold conservative religious beliefs take a toll on Amanda's trust in students since she feels that she is under constant surveillance of parents. She recalled:

But also, it really compromises the quality of relationship you can have with families. And it does make me overall less trustful. When I know I have students who are in the religious communities in our town, and I know that's what their parents are saying at home.

The homophobic gaze of parents lingers on and puts Amanda in a "panopticon," which means that "the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its actions" (Foucault, 1990, p. 201).

Different from other participants, Fiona is the only one who is completely out at work. As a result of her current position as an equity officer at the school board level, she feels more comfortable in disclosing her sexuality. However, while working in schools, she talks about having experienced horrible homophobia and heteronormativity as an administrator and educator in schools. She recalled:

When I first came out, I can remember people telling me that I shouldn't have come out because it would cause other students to become gay, as if being gay was problematic. I had a principal tell me that when I came out that I no longer fit in with the culture of the school and should consider going to a different school. I have not been invited to things because I'm gay or people didn't know how to invite my partner, who is also in education and is a woman, to events.

Fiona also mentions that she has felt that she has been underrepresented throughout her whole career:

So rarely do I see myself reflected in leadership, or there's not a lot of us in education. And rarely, certainly do I see myself reflected in text or examples given education wise. So, there's concrete examples and then the daily microaggressions I think that the education system perpetuates against its staff and students.

According to Ferfolja (2007), the underrepresentation of queer educators demonstrates “how heteronormative and heterosexist discourses are pervasive, reinforced through both overt and covert practices of invisibility and silencing” (p. 147). Before being promoted to a school board administrator, Fiona had contemplated leaving education because of the homophobia she experienced, but her view on this issue has changed drastically since then:

I would say early on, it profoundly impacted my career, not in a good way. I ended up leaving the school and I was strongly considering leaving education. Maybe it's age, or maybe it's just experience - my experience with discrimination or homophobia. I think I see it in different ways, because I'm often advocating. So, I guess there's strength in being an advocate when there's injustice. I'm in a position to advocate on behalf of staff or students. I guess there's privilege in that positionality to be able to try to make some of the changes to the injustices that I see. Whereas, when you're a young teacher or someone very new to the profession, it's hard to be able to speak out.

Fiona's experiences further highlight that being “explicitly out” is considered a “high-risk activity” which queer teachers have to navigate; it requires “much thoughtful preparation”

(Griffin, 1991, pp. 198-199). In her current position as an equity officer and member of the upper management of the school board, Fiona recognizes the privilege of being an out queer employee, a privilege which many queer teachers do not have:

For me, it's living my life as authentically as I can, and I'm within the position that I have, which is the ability to advise. I'm not an administrator in a classroom. I'm advising the board, and that's recognizing the privilege within that position to be able to try to make change on behalf [of LGBT educators]. But it's also knowing when it's safe to do so is another really big piece, because I think the safety and wellness of our community is a really big piece as well.

However, it is clear that the question of "safety" still remains a concern in navigating one's self-disclosure as queer in the education system. When facing the dilemma of whether to come out in school, many queer teachers worry about job security, personal safety, with the risk of being sexualized "rather than seeing them as a whole people or effective teachers" (Griffin, 1991, p. 199). The "sexualization" of queer educators, according to DePalma and Atkinson (2006), can be explained as follows:

Sears argues that we 'routinely equate sexual identities with sexual acts' (1999, p. 5), yet because of the heteronormative construction of heterosexuality as an unmarked category, it is homosexuality that is associated with sexual desire, as the excess and perversion that brackets the normal (Foucault, 1979). In this sense, transgressive sexualities are born of the assumption that normality is possible and that homosexuality is merely the deviant shadow of heterosexuality (Britzman, 1995). For lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, their deviance is always identified with excess (p. 341).

Impact of Increased Anti-LGBTQ+ Rhetoric

In September and October of 2023, protests broke out across Canada. People asserted that education on gender and sexuality is “indoctrination” of “innocent” children and policies such as SOGI 123 (Sexual Orientation Gender Identity)² in British Columbia and Alberta were under severe attack (Carter, 2023; King, 2023). When talking about the protests in Alberta, Amanda expressed great frustration about what happened and the fact that the school or the government did not take any action to address this topic in school:

After that first big protest in September, I just remember going to school for the rest of the week and feeling so lonely. No one mentioned it. No one mentioned it in the staff room. We didn't get an email from our teachers' association. And I remember a friend of mine who is Black, telling me about her experience in 2017 when a series of Black men were murdered by police in the States. She said that she spent a week or two walking around, wondering how we are not all talking about this, and how is this not the first thing everyone's thinking about when they wake up in the morning. That's not to equivocate experiences in any way. But I did feel like, just in some sort of twilight zone where everyone else just kept on rolling through their days, and there was no acknowledgement. I teach grade six, and there are two grade six classrooms in our school. There were two students in the other classroom whose parents had taken them to the anti-queer rally. We had students in our school who were at the anti-queer rally, and it was not acknowledged. We were not invited to speak about it in class and it was not

² SOGI 1 2 3 connects educators to proven tools and resources for aligning schools with provincial policies protecting people of all sexual orientations and gender identities (SOGI) (ARC Foundation, 2019).

brought up at a staff meeting. It was just like a void. And I felt like I walked through that week just with ringing in my ears of like, how is no one else? I can't talk about this, because it's not my labor to educate all of you about it. But again, it's just that thing of people not saying anything. Am I just self-centered? I know there's lots of things going on in the world. But I think this is pretty big and this is about education. We're teachers, and I think this is our wheelhouse. So, it was hard. It was a hard week. I felt really lonely. I'm the only openly-out queer adult in our building. I just felt very sad and very lonely. For that week, I also felt really helpless. I didn't talk to my students about it because I didn't know what to say.

The feeling of loneliness shows how the school and the government are failing to support queer students and teachers and properly address the topic in schools. Though legally responsible of supporting queer students and teachers in school, the school chose not to say anything to condemn the protests. The reason why Amanda connected the protest to the racist incidents against black people means more than the silence towards both groups of people. It shows a system that favors white cisgender-heterosexual people. Though racism and homophobia are unspoken, the silence speaks volumes about how dominant cis white hetero-gendered system is maintained and indeed legitimized. According to DePalma and Atkinson (2006), "heteronormativity, or the 'organizational structures in schools that support heterosexuality as normal and anything else as deviant' (Donelson & Rogers, 2004, p. 128) is maintained not only in terms of what is said and done, but also in terms of what is left out of the official discourse" (p. 334). Another crucial point to note is that the silence towards the protest in Amanda's school is not individual actions, but rather indicative of a pervasive cultural norm, which can be explained by Grozelle (2017)'s cultural heterosexism:

The notion of cultural heterosexism has been defined as being exhibited both in institutions and societal customs, such as the legal system, the education system, media, and religion (Herek, 1990). It is in these institutions that the development of policies and codes occur, reinforcing heterosexist behaviors, attitudes, and values (Babst, Gill, & Pierceson, 2009). Specifically, it is through cultural heterosexism that compulsory heterosexist ideologies and/or heteronormative norms are promoted and imposed (Kates, 2013). As a result, an environment is created in which violence against the LGBTQ community becomes either encouraged or ignored (Sears & Williams, 1997). (p. 394).

Amanda is definitely not the only teacher who feels that she is on a “gay island.” Olivia’s community is one of few places in Alberta where there is no counter-protest. Therefore, she felt extremely lonely and terrified without the support from her colleagues or school administrators. The incidents also completely damaged her relationship with her colleagues and students. As a result, she felt a growing inclination to distance herself from her colleagues, students, and parents. She remembered asking herself some difficult questions in class after the protest:

“I go into class now a lot and I look around and I think, which of these kids does not think I am a human being? Which of these kids wants to murder me? Which of these kids comes from parents who want to run out of town or run out of my job? And it has broken my trust with students.”

The hate towards queer people amplifies Olivia’s fear while interacting with students and parents especially since she knows that some of the parents in her school took their children to the protests. There is no doubt that the increasing anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments lead to growing homophobia and protesters who demonize queer teachers force Olivia to worry about her

personal safety. Apparently, Olivia is not the only one who is worried for safety reasons. Mary also reflected on how her personal safety is under threat due to the protests:

“I know that we have had people trying to infiltrate our meetings at the provincial teacher GSA. Those protesters were trying to sneak in and gather information and in ways that will benefit them when we’re just like gathering to talk about our experiences as queer teachers in Alberta.”

These feelings force her to often question herself whether she “rocks the boat too much” when promoting the rights of LGBTQ+ youth and teachers.

These sorts of struggles are also shared by Fiona. For her, the protests are just the latest iteration of “scare tactics within education,” which will drive some queer educators back into the “closet”. Yet her position at the school district board and years of experience in education make her look at the protests from a positive perspective at the same time. She compared how her school district handled the LGBTQ+ issue when she was an educator/administrator in schools and now:

I think it’s been a double-edged sword, for sure. For me, in this role, it becomes another piece of the work that I do. From becoming a teacher, I went into an equity role way back as a vice principal. When we first started to talk about the legislation around GSAs, we were really working hard to get schools to even want to do that work to support LGBTQ youth. It was like, oh, we need to do this work. If you look at statements coming out from school boards, we’re on the side now of defending the work, which is really interesting. We’re the ones now doubling down and saying, no, we’re going to support queer youth

and families. So, it's a real interesting shift over the years, and not really that much time. That's maybe a 10-15-year span, which is both a lifetime and a short evolutionary time within the whole history of queer rights.

Being White and the "Privilege" to Pass as Straight

Both Amanda and Fiona mentioned that they realize that their work experiences can be much different from those of racialized queer teachers and queer teachers who cannot pass as straight. Amanda felt that, if she were not white, she may not have come out at to anyone at work:

I'm white. So, I hold the privilege of being a white queer person, which means that I'm inherently more palatable, and that certainly influenced not so much my decision to not overtly come out to students, but to be clearly out to staff. It is more just the ways that I am treated are better than if I were a person of color.

Ahmed (2016) points out that when people arrive in the world, they inherit a history and "such an inheritance can be re-thought in terms of orientations" (p. 154):

If history is made 'out of' what is passed down, then history is made out of what is given not only in the sense of that which is 'always already' there before our arrival, but in the active sense of the gift: as a gift, history is what we receive upon arrival....Such an inheritance can be re-thought in terms of orientations: we inherit the reachability of some objects, those that are 'given' to us, or at least made available to us, within the 'what'

that is around. I am not suggesting here that ‘whiteness’ is one such ‘reachable object’, but that whiteness is an orientation that puts certain things within reach. By objects, we would include not just physical objects, but also styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits. Race becomes, in this model, a question of what is within reach, what is available to perceive and to do ‘things’ with (p. 154).

Therefore, our inheritance decides not only our starting point but also our reachability. In this model, race becomes something people inherit and that decide what are reachable. Inheritance leads to reproduction through which whiteness is seen as “a form of positive residence: as if it were a property of persons, cultures and places” (Ahmed, 2016, p. 155). In this sense whiteness is about inheriting a certain degree of self-privilege which here translates into also being able to pass as straight in ways that are not available to racialized subjects who are already othered on the basis of their race. It is in this sense that queer as a white embodied reality or phenomenon is conceived as “the very ‘what’ that coheres as a world (Ahmed, 2016, p. 150) As a result, being white often grants access to privileges that racialized individuals may not have, including the ability to be more open about their sexuality.

Besides being white, the fact that Amanda can “pass as straight” also makes her life easier than those who are read as gay in any space:

I also pass as straight and ‘pass’ is a complicated word to use, but until I disclose that I am queer, nobody clocks me as queer. So, the fact that I can choose to protect myself by not being openly queer to my students is a result of the way I look and move through the world as well. I’m really aware of that. I have friends who are read as gay immediately in any space they move through, and they don’t have a choice of how they are stripped of

that decision. So, I'm aware also that that's a privilege and a degree of decision-making that not every queer person is granted in their professional life.

The "privilege" of being read as straight demonstrates the influence of heteronormativity. As Ferfolja (2007) points out, heteronormativity is institutionalized through teaching methods, curriculum, and is embedded in the educational environment. The influence of heteronormativity leads to the inferiority of people who do not conform to normative gender expressions due to the way sex, gender, and sexuality are interlinked in what Butler calls "heterosexual matrix" which explains the relationship among sex, gender, and sexuality (p. 151):

I am drawing from Monique Wittig's notion of the "heterosexual contract" and, to a lesser extent, on Adrienne Rich's notion of "compulsory heterosexuality" to characterise a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (p. 151).

Trapped in the "heterosexual matrix," bodies have to obey gender norms that lead to certain gender expressions of femininity being equated with heterosexuality. Therefore, participants including Amanda and Fiona believe that it is a "privilege" to be able to "pass" as straight (Griffin, 1991, p. 189). Without the "privilege," the reachability of people who do not conform to normative gender expression has various consequences which greatly influence their lived experiences (Ahmed, 2016). However, Amanda also feels guilty for choosing to "pass" or "cover" her identity (Griffin, 1991, p. 189). According to Griffin (1991), queer teachers who use the identity management strategies such as "passing" or "covering" often believe that they fail to

“do anything to change stereotypes of lesbian and gay people or be good role models for gay and lesbian students” (p. 196). Amanda recalled:

I sometimes feel guilty of taking advantage of the privilege that being read as straight offers me by not being out. Should I be allying myself more with my visibly non-binary, trans and queer friends who don't have a choice by also coming out? Sometimes I worry about whether it's the ethical choice, even if it's just easier for me to move through as being read as straight by most of my students.

Due to her position and her sexuality, Fiona takes seriously her responsibility and ethical commitment as an advocate for queer students and teachers in her school district but expresses her concern about being positional as spokesperson for the entire queer community which belies its diversity:

Certainly, I'm in a role where supporting queer youth and families and staff is part of my role now but that's not always the case. You also are called upon to be the de facto spokesperson for the queer community as if we're a monolithic whole and certainly our identities are all very different and intersectional.

Fiona here is speaking to the diversity that exists in the community and which is eschewed in how she is expected to function in her capacity as an equity officer advocating for queer students, staff and families. In this respect intersectionality is a key element in understanding the experiences of lesbian and queer female teachers. Romero (2018) believes that intersectionality is used to understand how privilege and domination function by creating differences:

Intersectionality is interested in exposing the unearned privileges certain groups receive by simply being socially assigned or identified as white, male, heterosexual, or a citizen, or being non-disabled. Another aim is to begin to examine the institutionalization of privilege and to analyze how it exists as invisible, common-sense, natural, and even as an earned achievement when it is not (p. 189).

As women living in a patriarchal system, lesbian/ queer female teachers have to face sexism which can be overlooked. According to Rich (2003), “male power is inextricable tied to enforcing heterosexuality on women in that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are considered to be inevitable” (p. 20). The discrimination against lesbian and queer female teachers is intertwined with sexism and homophobia. Ferfolja (2007), for example, argues that through silence and invisibility, heterosexuality is imposed as the only legitimate sexuality in a patriarchal system of gender relations. Amanda is the only participant that talked about the influence of gender in her work experience. When communicating with her school administrators about book removal, Amanda felt a sense that they treated her differently since she is a gay woman instead of a gay man. Besides, as a woman, the inability of her school administrators to separate queerness and sex makes her feel extremely “dehumanizing”:

A common error of thinking is that queer education means sex education and it's not straight sex education. And it was made very clear that, for my school administrators, if a book had a trans character, it was automatically not a book suitable for middle school. And when pressed, they would make clear that they thought that was because it was inherently sexual. And that's hard for me because it means if you think queerness is sex and you can't separate those. I'm gay, what do you think about when you look at me?

That means that my very existence is prompting sexual thoughts for you. Every time you think about the fact that I'm queer, that is like a sexual idea. It just felt deeply dehumanizing that they could not conceptualize queer identity as anything other than sex acts. That whole thought process and situation was just so influenced by the fact that I'm a woman.

Sexual identities are routinely equated with sexual acts and heterosexual conditions are privileged (Sears, 1999). When her school administrators were unable to separate queerness from sex, Amanda felt the effects of being sexualized and dehumanized. It showed not just homophobia but also the problems embedded in how the public perceives gay people. According to Joshi (2012), "the public recognition of gay people depends on queer people to "acquire a respectable social identity" and, different from respect which implies acceptance of difference, "respectability connotes acceptance of the norm (pp. 415-416). As a result, respectability embodies the socially accepted norms and serves as the product of a system of hierarchy. As a result, the only way for queer people to achieve public recognition is to engage in "the repetitive performance of social norms based on the behaviors society deems respectable" (Joshi, 2012, p. 419). However, it can only render the situation for queer people more challenging as, according to Joshi (2012), there is always "a disjunct between what a person does and who a person is":

Foucault said that sexuality is "not a problem of fantasy; it's a problem of verbalization" and that discourse on sexuality is the relationship between "what we do, what we are obliged to do, what we are allowed to do, what we are forbidden to do in the field of sexuality and what we are allowed, forbidden, or obliged to say about our sexual behaviour (p. 420).

Self-policing and Imposed Self-regulation

Three interviewees mentioned that they had to change their narratives or actions in front of students or colleagues in school for fear of potential backlash and of saying the “wrong” thing to the “wrong” people at the “wrong” time. What motivates such actions and leads one to believe that it is unacceptable to speak about certain topics in front of children? First, one has to look at the common narratives surrounding LGBTQ+ issues in schools and the binaries embedded within from the perspective of queer theory (Wilchins, 2004). Education policies and curricula, further normalizes the “mainstream” ideologies such as heterosexuality in school. The “institutionalization of heteronormativity” greatly influenced the work experiences of queer educators (Ferfolja, 2007, p. 147). Instead of being a free and comforting place that helps queer teachers tap into their greatest potential, school was experienced in many respects as a “prison,” where teachers felt that they had to self-regulate for fear of reprisal. The mental prison trapping queer educators works perfectly through self-discipline and without the need of a real-time monitor. Foucault (1977) wrote about the birth of prison in *Discipline and Punish* and, more importantly, how the Panopticon and yielding of the sort of power associated with it was used to incite maximum self-discipline:

Bentham’s Panopticon is the architectural figure of this composition. We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the

other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible (p. 200).

In this sense the panopticon “must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning, a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men and may and must be detached from any specific use” (p. 205). The reasons why some interviewees chose to deliberately leave something out of class content even when no one demanded them to do so is they are visible not only under the gaze of their students but also their parents and inevitably school administrators to whom an educator might be reported. The constant exposure to the invisible supervisory gaze of others means that they need to regulate themselves as a matter of ensuring their safety and well-being in a heteronormative and homophobic school context. That is why Foucault (1977) believes the Panopticon is a basis for understanding institutional power beyond the prison industrial complex:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce the intimate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its actions; that that perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power

relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the intimates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (p. 201).

The idea of the “Panopticon”, therefore, can be used to understand the work experiences of some interviewees. For Olivia, it is the changes to the education policy in Alberta that force her to police herself:

We’ve also got a brand-new law in Alberta where they took the discipline abilities away from our association, the ATA. So rather than parents being able to complain to the school board and then to the ATA, they can now just send a letter to the minister directly about anything - if a teacher cuts them off in traffic or if they happen to be a little too gay. What’s happening is there are parents sending letters to the minister and saying my students or my kid’s teacher has rainbow flags in their classroom. And then they’re being investigated by the government. It’s chilled my teaching. As I’m teaching, I have a little voice in the back of my head constantly going, what did you just say? Is that going to be interpreted a certain way? Are you going to get phone calls for this? Are you going to lose your job for this? And so, yeah, in honesty, it’s kind of pushing me to the point where I think I might get out of teaching.

The law that Olivia was referring to took effect on January 1, 2023. Created under the Education (Reforming Teacher Profession Discipline) Amendment Act, the Alberta Teaching Profession Commission oversees disciplinary matters for teachers and the commission has the right to review and investigate the complaints against all Alberta certified teachers and teacher leaders (Government of Alberta, 2022). Olivia refers to this level of policing and surveillance having particular chilling effect on Queer teachers. It is especially true when hate-motivated violence

targeting our community has been on the rise since 2018 and efforts to roll back inclusion in our schools are ramping up (Johnstone, 2023). As a result, she feels she has to change the way she delivers classes:

It kind of bleeds into everything, from resource selection to the things that you say to even the things that we study. I used to explain simple terms like Miss, Ms., and Mrs. I would say, okay, so this goes back to the old British kind of Victorian times where if you were a Miss, you still had property rights, you weren't property, and you'd be called a Miss. People would send you saucy letters and want your attention and, and it would be guys. But I used to say there were lots of Miss that would receive letters from amorous women who would also want to date them. But I've just taken that out entirely. I have one openly lesbian student, and she would say the same. But I don't feel that I can say these things in class anymore.

Olivia felt she is put in a mental prison without the possibility of getting out, fearing not only the potential backlash in class but also the one outside school:

Because there's kids who have gotten better at this and their backlash is not so overt anymore. It's not an immediate response in class like, oh my god. It happens later. It happens on social media, it happens insidiously, and it happens out of sight of the teachers now. It's definitely chilled the whole school. There's been less of a voice.

The hostile environment of the Catholic school makes Mary feel the need to manage her identity as well. She specifically refers to the "panopticon" to describe how she feels at work:

I think what happens is we start getting scared and we're aware that we're being constantly watched. And there's this kind of panopticon situation going on where because we feel like we're constantly being surveyed, we start to police ourselves. And so, we're afraid to express support for our students. We're afraid to speak out, even if we know what is right.

Even after joining a public Charter school, Mary is still worried that she will encounter similar homophobia and heteronormativity as in the Catholic school she used to work in:

It's already had an impact on whether or not I feel comfortable disclosing my sexual orientation because I'm in a new school space. And I don't know for sure that the people that I work with, that my leadership team, that my school board, that my staff are going to have my back." That is why she is hesitant about disclosing her sexuality at her new school. "Because I don't know for certain that I that I have support from my colleagues and from school leadership, it definitely discourages me from disclosing my identity for sure.... Now in my current school that I'm in, I am out to most of the staff, but we're all new to each other. And with some, a select number of students as well who have come out to me, we've had conversations, but definitely not universally open. It depends. It is kind of a situation I feel where I still am very conscious about potential lash back from parents, from students, from staff. And I want to assess whether or not like the staff will be supportive.

Of course, Mary hates having to watch herself all the time but her comments highlight the extent of regulation as a self-protective strategy that stems from the institutionalization of

heteronormativity in the school system overall and the broader society. Just like Amanda said in the interview:

There is also a sense of vigilance. I don't know whether you really believe queer kids are palatable. I don't know if you really truly believe that it's appropriate for me to mention my girlfriend in front of 14-year-olds. I hate that. I hate having to be that vigilant all the time and always having it going in my head. Whether it's with like a current colleague or if I meet a new teacher or especially dealing with my admin because now, I know where they stand. And it's just hard not to be so guarded, which is so at odds with the nature of teaching, who I want to be as a teacher and my kind of professional pedagogy. I'm really working on navigating and having enough vigilance to keep myself safe.

Embracing Hope

Since the New Democratic Party (NDP) won the election in Manitoba in 2023, Amanda felt more hopeful than before given Conservative Party's view on LGBTQ+ issues. However, she expects the NDP to take concrete actions to help queer people instead of being silent. Instead, she hopes that changes in provincial politics can lead to more productive conversations between different groups:

Certainly, NDP getting in was a relief, but I am curious to see what they're just going to do. I think they're just going to say nothing. And that's better than coming out and saying we're going to be all for parental rights and yada yada. But also, I think quietness is the problem in education around this since the only people having robust and consistent

conversations about this are the queer people in education. I realize that's often the case with minority or equity seeking groups who are inherently the most invested in their own issues. But it's also just like a truth of social progress that we need everybody. It's only the queer teachers who are talking about this. I would love for you to ask these same questions to my straight colleague down the hall. And I guarantee it would be the first time they had thought about this stuff whereas I think about this every day. So, that's a huge communication gap. I don't know how education moves across it to get non-queer people to think about and engage with the very real attack on queer educators, students, and families. I need it for my next-door neighbor, more than I need it for me right now. But I don't know how to get it to them."

Amanda's scepticism towards the political changes is not unfounded. Only promising a better future or even remaining silent in face of discrimination against the marginalized can never bring a brighter future. As Lindroth & Sinevaara-Niskanen (2019) point out: "By reaching to the future, a politics of hope is maintaining the status quo while endlessly postponing the materialization of promises, trapping those in need in an 'endurance test' of time" (p. 646). Besides, the politics of hope often masks the inequality among the marginalized. The work experiences of a White queer teacher can be hugely different from a racialized queer teacher. As Lindroth & Sinevaara-Niskanen (2019) suggest, "hope enables the maintenance of inequality through what is, in essence, a fantasy of the future" (p. 647).

Similarly, to create a more equitable environment for queer teachers and students, Fiona believes that there is no easy solution:

“I think it’s a multifaceted approach since our education system is cisgender, heteronormative, colonial, among all those pieces. It’s starting to challenge all the systems and structures - from the textbooks that kids are reading from very early on to looking at our policies and procedures.”

To support a holistic approach to deal with the inequity inside the current education system, everyone matters:

“I think it starts right from the faculties of education. There are opportunities for queer teachers, college candidates, EAs or ECEs to speak up. There is this mentorship piece too. I think, to know that there’s others in the education system. There’s going to be obstacles along the way, and we still need you in education desperately. Every story told is an opportunity to bring more positive changes. How we are looking after ourselves and creating all those avenues for folks to see who we are, who our students are and who our families are present the opportunities to create humanity and connection.”

Theory-informed Analysis

Overall, the data revealed that heterosexuality, as a hegemonic system of power relations, is at the heart of the concerns of fears that all participants expressed during the interviews. They felt compelled to regulate themselves as a self-protected strategy. They felt a heightened sense of vulnerability and they wanted to avert the force of the homophobic gaze of parents and students, which was intensified by broader societal anti-LGBTQ+ backlash. The use of Foucault clarifies the nature and degree of self-regulation especially given his account of the history of sexuality.

Foucault (1990) explains how sex and sexuality was governed by the “laws of matrimony” by power to legitimize heterosexual coupling (p. 40). Those who engage in sexual behaviors and practices outside of such relationship are considered illicit and converse.

Foucault (1990) reveals how a “medico-sexual regime took hold of the family” and resulted in a regulatory system for classifying a “new persecution of peripheral sexualities” that were designated as “perversions” (p. 42). Such a heteronormative system enabled a “new specification of individuals” who lived outside of matrimonial relationships to be open to surveillance and regulation (pp. 42-43). The ‘homosexual’ as sodomite was invented to describe people engaging in ‘aberrant’ and perverted sexual practices and behaviours (p. 44). “Power operated as a mechanism of attraction; it drew out those peculiarities over which it kept watch” (p. 45). Through the “medical examination, the psychiatric investigation, the pedagogical report and family controls,” Foucault (1990) illuminates how the sexuality is regulated (p. 46):

The machinery of power that focused on a whole alien strain did not suppress it, but rather to give an analytical, visible and permanent reality: it was implanted in bodies, slipped in beneath modes of conduct, made into a principle of classification and intelligibility, established as a *raison d'être* and a natural order of disorder. Not the exclusion of these thousand aberrant sexualities, but the specification, the regional solidification of each one of them. The strategy behind this dissemination was to strew reality with them and incorporate them into the individual... The medicalization of the sexually peculiar was both the effect and the instrument of this. Imbedded in bodies, becoming deeply characteristic of individuals, the oddities of sex relied on a technology of health and pathology. And conversely, since sexuality was a medical and medicalizable object, one

had to try and detect it - as a lesion, a dysfunction, or a symptom - in the depths of the organism, or on the surface of the skin, or among all the signs of behavior. The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments (pp. 43-44).

This pathologization and regulation of queer sexuality founded on the normalization of heterosexuality continues to be manifested in the participants' experiences in schools and is helpful in explaining their concerns and fears about being perceived by parents as a threat or as somehow having "an agenda".

Secondly, Ahmed's queer phenomenology about bodies being oriented in institutional and social spaces is also helpful in developing an understanding of the norms governing their identity management strategies as lesbian/ queer female teachers. The discomfort they felt under the heteronormalizing gaze and surveillance of parents, students and others speaks very much to Ahmed (2006)'s conceptualization of the bodies and "what it means to be oriented" (p. 543):

We can reconsider how one becomes straight by reflecting on how an orientation, as a direction (taken) toward objects and others, is made compulsory, recalling Rich's model of "compulsory heterosexuality." Subjects are required to tend toward some objects and not others ... (p. 557)

As I have pointed out, the system of compulsory heterosexuality is helpful in explaining the discomfort and challenges that all the participants had while navigating their daily lives in school. More importantly, the system sheds light on how the participants avoid or mitigate the consequences of refusing to follow the normative lines and being perceived as perverted.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the work experiences of four participants. The identity management strategies they chose vary in front of different people at different stages of their careers. Despite being “explicitly out” to queer youth, three out of four interviewees found it hard to disclose their sexuality in front of all students and talk about their personal lives like their straight colleagues (Griffin, 1991, p. 189). The analysis revealed that explicit or subtle homophobia and heteronormativity lead to difficult choices of different identity management strategies for the participants in each of their specific schools and contexts. As a result, their relationship with students, colleagues and school administrators takes a toll. Other than sexualities, their race, gender and the ability to pass as straight also impacts how they navigate the school environment. Common practices for building more inclusive schools such as equity policies fail to help the interviewees feel safe. Instead, they have to constantly navigate their identities and police themselves at work. However, people should remain critical while hoping for a more inclusive and equitable future for all.

Chapter 5:

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

This thesis explored the lived experiences of four lesbian teachers who teach in three provinces of Canada. The purpose of the study was to provide their perspectives on navigating the work environment while being queer and female. This research is conducted to shed light on the systemic homophobia and heteronormativity in the school system from the standpoint of lesbian teachers.

In this thesis I drew specifically on the works of Foucault (1990) and Ahmed (2006). The use of Foucault (1990) shows how sex and sexuality are regulated by the “laws of matrimony” in various social institutions (p. 40). Heterosexuality is considered the only legitimate sexuality and anyone who engage in sexual behaviors and practices outside of such relationship are considered illicit. The regulation of queer sexuality puts queer people in a “panopticon,” forcing them to regulate and discipline themselves (p. 201). Ahmed’s queer phenomenology was used to understand why bodies in a heteronormative environment feel disoriented and their actions can be greatly restricted. However, when disorientation happens, it can provide valuable insights into how the system fails to accommodate various bodies when certain bodies do not align with societal standards and this was certainly reflected in my study.

Given the very little focus in the field on the lives of lesbian and queer female teachers in schools specifically, I conceived of my study as responding to this gap especially in light of the current context or resurgence of anti-LGBT backlash. Given that over 30 years had passed since

Khyatt's (1992) first study and 16 years after Stebbins's (2008) study on lesbian teachers in schools I wanted to explore the experiences and stories of lesbian/ queer female teachers in current times of anti-LGBT backlash. My study found that in many ways many of the problems identified by these researchers continue after all this time. Indeed, fifteen years after Stebbins's research, my research revealed that homophobia and heteronormativity are still prevalent in schools. Only one of the participants was completely out at work and the other three were only out to some such as queer students. What my study revealed was that where these teachers worked and lived geographically played a huge part in their decision of whether to come out. One of the participants worked in a small town in Manitoba, one spent most of her career at a Catholic school, and one lived in a small town in Alberta. The homophobia and heteronormativity prevalent in those areas forced them to become more cautious while disclosing their sexuality at work. The only participant who came out to everyone at work was able to be more authentic due to her position in a school board. However, when she was a teacher, she also experienced horrible homophobia which almost forced her to quit her job. Even now she talked about how she was still facing the challenges as a result of the heteronormativity in the education system in the form of underrepresentation of queer educators. During the interviews, two participants both mentioned that, despite the negative experiences of being queer teachers, they realized that they held the "privilege" of being white and able to pass as straight.

When the anti-LGBTQ+ protests broke out in Canada in 2023, the participants who worked as teachers recalled feeling lonely and unsupported at that time. Their feelings are a result of the failure of their schools and the government to support queer teachers and students. As a result, they were worried about the backlash of mentioning their sexuality at work and saying the "wrong" things to students or colleagues. Besides, they felt trapped in a "panopticon"

through self-monitoring and self-disciplining (Foucault, 1977, p. 200). It meant that they had to change the way they delivered their classes or were on high alert when topics such as sexuality and same-sex marriage were brought up in class.

Implications for Further Study and Final Reflection

This thesis has implications for educational research and practice particularly in terms of knowledge about the lived experiences of lesbian/ queer female teachers. Scant research has been conducted to analyze the work experiences of lesbian/ queer female teachers and the “identity management strategies” they use to deal with the homophobia and heteronormativity prevalent in school (see Griffin, 1991). Given the current conditions of anti-LGBT backlash, further research is needed to see how systemic changes can take effect in the education system to challenge the long-existing and resurgent homophobia and heteronormativity. In addition, more research about how the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and race should also be undertaken to provide insight into the specific experiences of racialized queer teachers and how they are different from those of white queer educators due to the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality.

While the study set out to document the ‘unique’ or specific experiences of lesbian and queer teachers as women, my participants for the most part did not identify their gender as a factor but more broadly the impact and effects of heteronormativity and homophobia in their school communities which they were forced to navigate. It was the systemic oppression on the basis of sexuality at this time of intensified anti-LGBT rhetoric that they tended to highlight. The impact of this sexuality-based oppression seemed to override and eclipse any gender specific

issue for the most part. However, they did tend to reflect on and acknowledge their white privilege. This left me wondering if perhaps including more participants might yield more specific insights not only into other intersectional variables and dimensions of lesbian and queer teachers' lives in schools but also their embodied gendered experiences as women.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Guide

Project Title: The experiences of lesbian and queer female teachers in Canadian schools

Document Title: Interview Guide

Principal Investigator

Dr. Wayne Martino

Co-Investigator

Chen Lin

Introduction (for all participants)

- Welcome the participant.
- Provide the participant with a brief description of the study's purpose.
- Remind the participant that they have given their consent to audiotape the interview.
- Remind the participant that they can pause or end the interview at any time.
- Ask the participant if they have questions about the interview or research in general.

Questions

1. How old are you?
2. How many years of teaching experience do you have?
3. What are your teachable subjects?
4. What is your sexual orientation?
5. To what extent are you open about your sexual orientation in your school environment?
6. Have you ever encountered instances of homophobia or discrimination in schools based on your sexual orientation?
7. What factors influence your decision whether to disclose your sexual orientation or keep it private in your professional life?
8. Does being lesbian affect your relationship with students, your colleagues, parents in your school community? If so, can you talk about how exactly?

9. Does being a lesbian teacher affect how you are perceived by others in the school community?
10. How have your work experiences been affected after disclosing your sexual orientation?
11. Have you ever experienced any instances of sexual harassment or unwanted sexual attention within the school setting?
12. In your opinion, do you believe it would be beneficial for queer teachers to be able to openly share their sexual orientation in schools?
13. To what extent has the current context of increased anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and backlash impacted on queer teachers in schools and your life specifically as a lesbian/queer teacher? Have you noticed a difference?

Appendix B

Invitation to Participation

Hello,

You are being invited to participate in a study that we, Dr. Martino and Chen Lin, are conducting. Briefly, the study involves the experiences of lesbian/queer female teachers in secondary schools in Canada and how they manage their identities in face of homophobia and heteronormativity.

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be interviewed once for one hour and the interview will be audio-taped. You have the flexibility to choose between a Zoom interview or a location of your preference for the interview. All information collected for the research will be kept confidential.

You will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card via e-mail as compensation for your valuable participation in this study.

If you would like more information on this study or would like to receive a letter of information [if not already attached to this email] about this study, please contact the researcher at the contact information given below.

Dr. Wayne Martino

Chen Lin

Appendix C

Letter of Information and Consent

Project Title

The experiences of lesbian and queer female teachers in Canadian schools

Document Title

Letter of Information and Consent – Chen Lin

Principal Investigator + Contact

Dr. Martino

Additional Research Staff + Contact

Chen Lin

1. Invitation to Participate

You are being invited to participate in this research about the identity management strategies used by lesbian teachers because you identify as lesbian teachers working in secondary schools in Canada and your experience can be a valuable source of data.

2. Why is this study being done?

Limited Research focuses specifically on lesbian/queer women in schools. The purpose of this research is to shed light on the realities faced by lesbian teachers and to learn more about their experiences within the Canadian K-12 education system. This study is important at this time of increasing anti-LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) hate.

3. How long will you be in this study?

It is expected that you will be in the study for two weeks. There will be one interview during your participation in this study and the interview will take approximately one hour. After collecting the data, the co-investigator will transcribe all recorded interviews and send the transcriptions to you through secure OneDrive for confirmation.

4. What are the study procedures?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to agree to be interviewed about your experiences as a lesbian teacher. You have the flexibility to choose between a Zoom interview or a location of your preference for the interview. You will be interviewed once for one hour and the interview will be audio taped. All the data will be stored on OneDrive. After the meeting, I will send you the transcript, you can decide whether you want to edit or delete any of the content.

5. What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?

Participants may disclose experiences of homophobia and harassment which may be distressing.

6. What are the benefits of participating in this study?

The possible benefits to society relate to exposing systemic homophobia and heteronormativity in Canadian schools. Generating knowledge about this systemic oppression is important for informing policy and creating greater awareness so that lesbian and queer female educators can be better supported in schools.

7. Can participants choose to leave the study?

If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request (e.g., by phone, in writing, etc.) withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed, please let the researcher know and your information will be destroyed from our records. Once the study has been published, we will not be able to withdraw your information.

8. How will participants' information be kept confidential?

The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information which could identify you will be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential.

Delegated institutional representatives of Western University and its NonMedical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research in accordance with regulatory requirements. Other than that, only the Principal Investigator and the Co-investigator will have access to the information.

The privacy policies of the third-party software to be used in the research are as follows:

1. Zoom: <https://explore.zoom.us/en/privacy/>
2. Microsoft: <https://privacy.microsoft.com/en-ca/privacystatement>
3. NVivo: https://help.mynvivo.com/nvtranscription/Content/NVT_data_security.htm
4. Qualtrics: <https://www.qualtrics.com/privacy-statement/>

The data of these software is stored in Canada with the exception of Qualtrics, which stores its data in Ireland.

9. Are participants compensated to be in this study?

You will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card via e-mail as compensation for your valuable participation in this study.

10. What are the rights of participants?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate, you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time, it will have no effect on your work.

You do not waive any legal right by consenting to this study.

11. Whom do participants contact for questions?

If you have questions about this research, please contact co-investigator or principal investigator. If you have any questions about the ethics of the research, please contact the Office of Human Research Ethics of the University of Western Ontario.

Consent for participation

If you wish to participate in the research, please click the following Qualtrics link and by submitting this survey, you are indicating your consent to participate.

https://uwo.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cGWV9HmRPBe88ce

Appendix D

Ethics Approval Notice



Date: 20 October 2023

To: Prof. Wayne Martino

Project ID: 123755

Study Title: The experiences of lesbian and queer female teachers in Canadian schools

Short Title: The experiences of lesbian and queer female teachers in Canadian schools

Application Type: NMREB Initial Application

Review Type: Delegated

Full Board Reporting Date: 03/Nov/2023

Date Approval Issued: 20/Oct/2023 15:01

REB Approval Expiry Date: 21/Oct/2024

Dear Prof. Wayne Martino,

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. **All other required institutional approvals and mandated training must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.**

Documents Approved:

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Recruitment_Email-Chen_Lin	Recruitment Materials	05/Oct/2023	2nd
Interview_Guide-Chen_Lin	Interview Guide	24/Aug/2023	1st
Letter of Information and Consent-Chen_Lin	Written Consent/Assent	10/Oct/2023	2nd
Debriefing_Form-Chen_Lin	Debriefing document	23/Aug/2023	1st

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Dr. Trevor Bieber, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Isha DeCoito, NMREB Chair

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Chen Lin

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: Nanjing University of Information and Technology
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2011-2015 B.E

The University of Hong Kong
Shenzhen, Guangdong, China
2015-2017 M.A.

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