# 'Sir, if I let you blow me, will you not put a behaviour point on?' The working-class, gay teacher and the limits of neoliberal inclusion

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## Abstract

This study examines social-class and sexuality in the context of being a teacher in a secondary school in England. It is pertinent as some levels of LGBT inclusion, are currently expected in English schools, however this varies within and across schools. This study explores the case of a single, gay, man from a working-class background, in relation to the homophobia and harassment he routinely experiences as a teacher, as well as the (in)active response of his institution. Findings suggest that the school is (re)produced as hostile for the gay teacher, through a combination of discourses where gay is positioned as subordinate by the students, and where gay is sublimated by the school and staff. Moreover, despite the teacher's resilience, these problems are enhanced by the current individualized model of neoliberal inclusion, which may not be inclusive of all LGB people.

## Introduction

Schools are predominantly and actively heteronormative spaces; within this, teachers are expected to present a version of asexual, heterosexuality – as anything outside this may be constructed as a risk to childhood innocence (Connell, 2015; Llewellyn, 2023, 2024). As such, historically LGB[1] teachers have struggled with their identity formation particularly because of the discordance between private and professional identities (Connell, 2015; Neary, 2013). However, with the movement towards LGBT inclusion in aspects of English education policy and practice, recent research has suggested that there may be space for LGB teachers to inhabit a professional LGB identity (Brett, 2024; Llewellyn, 2023, 2024). However, this position is not regularly or readily available, particularly as levels of LGBT inclusion and support vary widely both within and between schools.

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Within this body of research there is a growing awareness of differences within the LGBT categories (e.g. Brett, 2024), and some awareness of intersectional identities, particularly with regards to race (e.g. see Msibi, 2019 or Francis, 2023a), however, there is very little acknowledgement of a teacher's social class and how this may impact, available discourses, knowledge formation, and identity negotiation. This is important, as teaching in the UK is largely a middle-class profession, both in terms of who constitutes the profession and how the profession is produced. This framing is prominent within official discourses, where recurrent governments have sought to make up the middle classes through various strategies (see Gewirtz, 2001), including recently the promotion of a 'standard English' (Cushing, 2021) and 'levelling up' (DfE, 2022). Crucially, however, these tactics are constructed through the appearance of 'classlessness' (Reay, 1998). As such, there is largely an invisibility to a teacher's social class, within schools, educational policy, and public rhetoric.

Social class is a 'notoriously slippery' concept (Bottero, 2004). While historically class may have been associated with occupation, recent critical research tends to interpret class thought consumption, culture or capital. Within this, class is to some extent dynamic, being produced within systems (Skeggs, 2004). For instance, occupations and consumption may change, but norms and practices from early childhood and family life may retain some importance (Ryan and Sackrey, 1996). Crucially for this article, the production of sexuality is inextricably tied to social class (Skeggs, 2004), as LGB liberation has been 'forged through the bourgeoise' (Evans, 1993), through the politics of equal rights (Duggan, 2003).

The discussion of LGB teachers in relation to social class and sexuality therefore takes on special significance. Moreover, it is relevant at this current time, as some levels of LGBT equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI)[2] are expected in English schools. English schools have only recently added LGBT to their Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)[3] curriculum. This contrasts to countries such as Scotland, where inclusion is expected more broadly across the curriculum. Subsequent practices and perceptions of LGBT inclusion are also informed by the neoliberal context, where structural inequalities tend to be concealed, with a preference for individualized responsibilities and actions (Woolley, 2017).

It is against this backdrop, that this article asks if the position of the LGB professional teacher is available across social classes. It explores the case of John, a single, gay man from a working-class background, who teaches in a secondary school in a lower socio-economic area within the North of England. This research therefore adds to the body of literature exploring LGB teacher identities by, to my knowledge, uniquely examining social class. Furthermore, it adds to research that critiques a neoliberal individualized approach to LGBT inclusion, which has global significance (Hall, 2020, 2021; Martino et al., 2022; Omercajic and Martino, 2020; Pascoe, 2023; Woolley, 2017). The article therefore also asks if there are limits to the LGB professional teacher identity recently discussed in literature, including my own (Llewellyn, 2023).

## LGB teacher literature

The general teacher identity literature states that 'sub-identities, such as race, class, gender, and personal experiences, exist, and interact within a professional teacher identity' (Zembylas and Chubbuck, 2018: 184). Moreover, Akkerman and Meijer (2011) suggest that the 'personal and the professional context become indistinct'. However, for LGB people, the sub-identity can be problematic. For many LGB teachers, there has been conflict between personal and professional boundaries and identities (Connell, 2015; Grey, 2013; Llewellyn, 2023, 2024; Llewellyn and Reynolds, 2021; Msibi, 2019; Neary, 2013; Rudoe, 2010, 2018), where anything outside of cisheteronormativity can be positioned as a threat to childhood innocence (Connell, 2015; DePalma and Atkinson,

2009; Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Llewellyn, 2024; Monk, 2011). Many LGB teachers have accordingly formed various strategies for self-preservation and protection (Gryphon, 1991; Landi, 2018; Msibi, 2019; Rudoe, 2010) including changing a partner's pronouns or developing a persona of 'hyper-professionalism' (Msibi, 2019) that places them beyond rebuke.

Rather than routinely employ such techniques, research from recent decades (e.g. Grey, 2013; Llewellyn and Reynolds, 2021) has highlighted that many LGB teachers would like the option to disclose their sexuality in their workplace. For teachers, disclosing one's sexuality may be a psychological need (Grey, 2013), with an impact on well-being (Glazzard, 2018). It can also be a political act (Grey, 2013), to resist a regressive system, and/or to conform to discourses of pride. More recent research (Brett, 2024; Llewellyn, 2023, 2024; Reimers, 2020) has found that some LGBT teachers are able to utilize their identities to advocate for LGBT inclusion in their schools, although this is not consistent across schools. In some cases, this may be premised upon regarding children as agentic social actors, rather than ascribing to a reductive separation between student and teacher (Llewellyn, 2023, 2024).

However, it is important to acknowledge the value judgements inherent in these choices and positions. First, that disclosing one's sexuality is not a singular act; instead, it is a continuous, context-dependent process. Second, that being out exists in relation to society being a static heteronormative space. Third, that the expectation to be out is largely premised upon positioning 'the closet' as shameful (Seidman, 2013). In this regard, research has found (Llewellyn and Reynolds, 2021), that teachers can feel shame if they are not actively 'out and proud' within their schools. Therefore, being out is not a neutral position; it is one that is bordered by hierarchies and expectations, as well as wants and needs. Consequently, not being out may also be an act of resistance.

## Framework

In order to examine these complex and contradictory positions further, the rest of this article draws on the work of Michel Foucault and Sara Ahmed – allowing for a movement between discourse and the embodiment of space. Ahmed's work is also more explicit in critiquing diversity within neoliberalism.

For Foucault, power, knowledge and discourse are entwined, and discourses, are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972: 54). In this instance for example, what it means to be a professional LGB teacher is produced in practice. Discourses, alongside power and knowledge produce normalization (Foucault, 1978), which is prominent within a governing system such as schools (Walshaw, 2007). As such, there are expected ways to behave, and expected norms to follow, for both staff and students. In this case the presence or absence of (homo)sexuality in schools is a discursive construct.

Furthermore, within a neoliberal system, self-regulation is normalized (Walshaw, 2007), under the promotion of the autonomous self (Rose, 1999). Teachers are predominantly neoliberal subjects who are fabricated to improve themselves, their practice, and their schools. The subject here is both shaped by and shapes discourses (Foucault, 1980a) where certain subject positions are legitimized over others. Although, individuals do have a constrained agency (Foucault, 1989). Hence, where there is power there is also resistance. However, resistance – such as creating a LGB teacher identity within a heteronormative space – would not eradicate norms, but instead create new 'network of norms' (Jakobsen, 1998) that constitutes normativity.

In relation to sexuality, whilst there is a movement towards treating all people as human beings, neoliberalism's take on sexuality has been described by Duggan (2003) as 'homonormative' and Puar (2017) as 'homonational' – in both cases, there is a contracted, and assimilated, version of liberation for LGB people. As such, arguably state power encourages a very specific, appropriate

kind of sexuality, that is presented as a 'normal', family relationship. In a societal sense, this can be seen through the premise of equal rights, or equal love. Within these contexts, Ahmed explains that there may be a 'right kind of queer' (2010: 106) that becomes acceptable within certain conditions.

Francis (2023a, 2023b), and others (see Neary et al., 2016) have applied Ahmed's (2006a) work within education to argue that 'schooling serves as a straightening device' (4). Drawing on Puwar (2004), Ahmed describes bodies as 'out of place' and as aligned to the cisheteronormative through repeated acts that (re)produce a normative path. As such, there is a turning towards objects, both physical and practices, such as curriculum, pedagogies, routines and rituals, of the heteronormative school. In contrast, to turn away would designate someone, in this case the LGB person, as deviant (Francis, 2023a). Within this, Ahmed (2014) uses the concept of 'stickiness', to explain how some bodies cohere, and are reproduced, as problematic within contexts and relations. Language and practices, therefore, can become stuck to some bodies and not others – for example the connection that LGB people are not only deviant but highly sexual. Ahmed (2014) further explains that emotions, which she theorizes as 'social and cultural practices' (9), also stick to the out of place body. More specifically, within the EDI context, Ahmed names 'nonperformativity' as 'institutional speech acts that do not bring into effect what they name' (2021: 30). For example, an agreement to take action may not enact that action. Ahmed is clear here, that the concern is that the 'conditions for the action to succeed are not in place' (2012: 117). As such, there is often a circular practice to complaint (Ahmed, 2021). Ahmed's work also explicitly explores happiness as a 'straightening device' (Ahmed, 2010: 91), a contemporary neoliberal device that draws people back in line with expected norms.

Linking, therefore, both Ahmed and Foucault, 'subjectivities and spaces are heteronormatively and homonormatively shaped' (Neary et al., 2016: 259). As such, LGB (and social class) are implicated in discursive structures of power and knowledge, but also are enacted and embodied within (the) space (of the school). Therefore, before an analysis of John's experience, both Ahmed and Foucault are utilized to trouble the authoritative discourses present in current school EDI.

## (De)constructing LGBT diversity

In general, there is a reactive approach to LGBT inclusion within schools. This aligns with discourses of the English government which follow anti-bullying strategies (Stones and Glazzard, 2019). Hence, inclusion in schools is often premised upon a constraining victim narrative (Formby, 2015; Monk, 2011; Ringrose and Renold, 2010; Rudoe, 2010). Any proactive LGBT inclusion beyond anti-bullying is often actioned by individual teachers and can be through narratives of liberation and pride (see Brett, 2024; Llewellyn, 2023, 2024; Reimers, 2020).

As such, the literature and research set up interesting contrasts. In general, there is a movement from framing LGB teachers (and students) through a victim narrative, towards discourses of resilience, resistance and empowerment. Indeed, Stones and Glazzard (2020) are purposefully, 'presenting positive narratives rather than positioning gay teachers as victims' (1). Reimers (2020) similarly deliberately 'asked for respondents for a study of LGBTQ teachers that aimed to focus on positive aspects of their work' (117). It is understandable that there is a shift from reductive victim narratives that surround and stigmatize LGB people, towards narratives of pride; particularly within schools, which have been consumed by a disapproval of homo(sexuality). Here, there is possibly a movement to reappropriate the 'stickiness' (Ahmed, 2014) of said language. However, discourses establish what is allowed to be said and what is silenced (Foucault, 1978). Thus, it is possible that narratives not aligned to a politics of pride are intentionally foreclosed, and possibly invalidated. Love (2009) explains that 'the survival of feelings such as shame, isolation, and

self-hatred into the post-Stonewall [riots] era is often the occasion for further feelings of shame' (4). Furthermore, discourses establish how the subject is constituted and thus what is permitted (Foucault, 1980a). This framing thus arguably places LGB people within an unviable position of being at risk or resilient – of being heroes or victims.

In their work with LGBT youth, Robinson and Schmitz (2021) argue that 'affirmative framings of gender and sexual identity trajectories can be key sources of resilience' (3). Indeed, research with young people highlights the emergence of 'queer capital' (Francis and Kjaran, 2020). With regards to teachers, research has also demonstrated that queer/LGBT can be a pedagogical resource (Brett, 2024; Llewellyn, 2023; Reimers, 2020), although this is not without emotional labour (Llewellyn, 2023). Moreover, both Reimers and Llewellyn acknowledge that the majority of teachers in their studies can be read as homonormative, where stories of family are prominent within the school setting. As such, it is possible that there is a 'right kind of queer' (Ahmed, 2010: 106), that is permitted, who is aligned to the permitted family values of the nation, and the project of modern liberalism (Puar, 2017).

In wider research, Hall (2020, 2021) draws attention to the limits of the focus on the family as a driver for LGBT inclusion. Specially, that it promotes a (homo)heteronormative model of liberal citizenship, and that it does not prepare children to negotiate a range of queer identities. In reference to trans and gender diverse students in Canada, Omercajic and Martino (2020) describes this pedagogical style as a 'discourse of accommodation'. Similarly, through research in US high schools, Pascoe (2023) explains that inequalities are not addressed at structural levels and performances of diversity and inclusion are more straightforward for those who conform to the 'right kind of body' (Ahmed, 2012: 152).

Thus, whilst these scholars recognize the importance of the transformation that has happened within schools – from LGBT as silenced to *some* inclusion – many draw attention to the limits of current (neo)liberal models of LGBT inclusion found in many schools and advocated in government policies. Namely, that the model of inclusion does not contest privileges already present (as in the early radical work of DePalma and Atkinson, 2009), but instead aligns (*some*) LGBT people within already established (hetero)normativities. In the US, for instance, Ward (2008) explains that 'working-class queers and queer people of colour are often marginalized as organizational channels for managing and celebrating diversity are created' (16). However, all of this is premised upon 'the illusion that same sex object choices have become accepted and acceptable' (Ahmed, 2010: 106). Instead, there is a conditional acquiescence of queer bodies.

Thus, whilst things may have 'gotten better' – as in narratives of inevitable LGB progress (see Llewellyn, 2023 or Love, 2009), it is not clear if 'better' is equitable. Furthermore, if schools, on the whole, are no longer overtly homophobic, and some levels of LGBT inclusion are supported, the question becomes what are the new normativities that are created and are these inclusive of all LGB teachers.

## Methods and methodology

To explore these ideas, this research explores the case of John – a single, gay, man from a white working-class background, who teaches in a secondary school (ages 11–18) in the North of England. Through the use of an online semi-structured interview, and an email exchange, the article examines John's experiences of being a teacher in two schools, in relation to his sexuality and teacher role. This research therefore purposefully centres narratives of experience, in order to better understand complex systems that may facilitate privilege (Harding, 2004).

John's interview was part of a larger project, where 50 LGBT teachers were interviewed in the summer of 2020 (see Llewellyn, 2023, 2024, for details). Prior to the interview John sent an email

with an attached document entitled '*Homophobic experiences within my fifteen-year career as a secondary school teacher*'. John's interview stood out as different to the majority of the other participants who routinely drew on narratives of progress – namely that things have vastly improved for LGB people in schools (see [Llewellyn, 2023, 2024). Whilst many of the participants had experienced some levels of homophobia, John was unique in that he routinely experienced sustained levels of homophobia and harassment. Hence, further analysis of John's interview, and the email document were conducted. This was a multi-layered process largely drawn from Carabine's (2001) interpretation of Foucault. It included: multiple readings of the data (interview and email); identification of relevant discourses (e.g. social class, sexuality, adult-child in relation to schooling); examination of absences and silences; consideration of resistance and counter-discourses; impact of discourses. This was followed by re-reading the original data and the analysed data through the lens of Sara Ahmed's work. Here, and drawing on Francis (2023a), there was a more purposive reading querying how spaces, structures and practices are reproduced as heteronormative (or not), and in what ways. Furthermore, how within this, bodies become 'straightened' (or not). A final level of reflexive analysis was employed, as I am a relative insider, having been a teacher, and identifying as gay/lesbian – this is common in LGB research (Hayfield and Huxley, 2015). My own class position is more complicated. As a full-time employed university lecturer, and as the daughter of a teacher, I am undoubtedly middle-class. However, I was raised in a small working-class community (and wider family) with high levels of social depravation.

In the interview, John describes himself as 'a teenage pregnancy product, council estate, domestic violence in the family' – his route into teaching was through college and 'non-standard' qualifications. He also positions himself as driven and individually resilient 'I was determined that I wouldn't go to the scrapheap'. Furthermore, he references the multiple levels of leadership he has held. John describes the two secondary schools he has worked in as within 'economically deprived postal codes and low aspirations'. Within this, he states he has 'gone from a wholly white demographic to a non-white demographic. But the homophobia is consistent across the two'.

Ethical approval for the overall project, was granted by my institution. The name John Dillon is a pseudonym.

## Results and discussion

Whilst overlapping, the results are structured into four sections: the harassment experienced by John; the school's response; John's construction of sexuality in school; and the constraints surrounding the individualized neoliberal teacher.

### *'There is some level of harassment every day': John's experiences*

In the interview, and the email prior to interview, John repeatedly states that he experienced unremitting harassment and homophobia from students. He was also clear that this was consistent across both schools where he had taught. John had moved from a 'white demographic to a non-white demographic', hence his suggestion that 'it's not a religion or cultural thing. it's linked to education and postcode perhaps'. This harassment included name-calling and mocking, as he describes in his email:

'Girlfriend!' (all through my career);

'Gay boy'- constantly shouted out in public spaces, e.g. outside recreational areas, stairwells, corridors, shout and run past the classroom, commuting home on foot through the streets;

'Mr Gay' (all through my career);

'Hiya', with a limp wrist (all through my career);

Wolf whistles and sexualised comments like 'sweet cheeks!'

The harassment, therefore, took the form of both verbal taunts and a censuring of John's queer body, including the targeting of non-hegemonic performances of masculinity (Connell, 2005). This contrasts to recent writing on 'inclusive masculinity' found in predominantly middle-class schools (McCormack, 2013) and research that states young people have diverse perspectives on gender and sexuality (Bragg et al., 2018). However, young people are not a homogenous group, and it is possible they may present various versions of sexualities and genders depending upon the context and audience (Hall, 2020).

Whilst John is clear in his intent to be an 'openly' gay man, an intentional disclosure is not always an option for every LGB person (Ahmed, 2021). Sexuality can be more easily read on some bodies than others, and homophobia can be experienced by those who identity as LGB or not, often if they do not conform to normative gender presentations (Connell, 2005; Ravenhill and de Visser, 2017). Whilst recent research is critical of hierarchical framings of masculinity (Ravenhill and de Visser, 2017), in this school context, power circulates with hegemonic discourses of masculinity, and the effeminate gay man is relegated to the undesirable 'girlfriend'. Hence this, 'limp wrists', and sexualization are attached to the deviant gay body. 'Gay' being the subsequent identity that is out of place. Place being all aspects of the school environment.

The bullying can also be direct and involve group provocation:

I was encircled by a gang of lads once on a corridor and they were mimicking my voice and, sort of, I would describe them as, sort of, hyenas from The Lion King, kind of, panting around and high-pitched mimicking of my voice.

The 'gang of lads' are visceral in their displays of hegemonic masculinity. The out of place voice sticks to the gay man, further positioning him as not belonging. In the above and the below, space is further curtailed around the LGB body, who is prevented from extending into heteronormative space.

I'll be scared of walking up stairwells in case I get spit on. So, you can hear the kids shouting down the stairs and then, like, you'll hear them go [gasps] – like that, to – I can't even do it – you know what I mean though? Like, get the phlegm in the throat, and I have to move away from the outside of the stairwell, cos I think they're gonna spit on me.

This harassment is similarly visceral but also physical. It can also be more personalized:

She [a student] would start every lesson going, 'I'd hate to be gay. Wouldn't you hate to be gay?' and nudging her friend and saying, 'what would you do if you were gay sir? Would you kill yourself? Cos I would'.

In all of the examples, hate sticks to the body that does not belong, as much as John tries to align, he deviates from the normative path, thus fuelling the fictious hetero-homosexual divide. This last incident demonstrates how the repeated actions impact John's well-being (see Glazzard, 2018). Moreover, it is these acts of repetition (Ahmed, 2006b) that produce John as deviant, and why he repeatedly states 'I can no longer be a secondary school teacher because I'm gay – and that is my

decision'. John is clear in claiming agency over this resolution, rather than adopting a 'victim' positioning, which often befalls LGB people, particularly in schools (Formby, 2015; Monk, 2011; Ringrose and Renold, 2010; Rudoe, 2010). This also aligns with discourses of the professional neoliberal teacher, who assume an individualized responsibility.

The systemic and wide-ranging harassment demonstrates that it may be embedded in the school. This contrasts to government advocated school strategies which take an individualized approach towards anti-bullying (Samuel and Jonathan, 2019). It is not clear if bullying policies apply to staff, although they (re)produce an institutional tone. The repeated 'straightening' acts, therefore, have both a personal impact on John, and a broader impact on the school environment and what discourses are normalized and thus permitted (Foucault, 1978).

## 'Although my school are supportive and empathetic': The school's response

John's use of 'although', implies he is aware that there are boundaries encompassing what the school *will* and *will not* do. For example, the school will respond to harassment within the container of the classroom – 'the school will investigate in those circumstances'. However, the harassment 'is in lessons and it's outside, but they [students] often do it in places, in a way that they can't be caught'. John has been explicitly and repeatedly told, 'when it's on stairwells, when it's in corridors, it has been said to me, if we can't identify the kids, there's nothing we can do'. Whilst there may be pragmatic elements to the school's processes, his LGB body is 'orientated around' heterosexuality as the normative, and himself as someone needing orientating to this path (Ahmed, 2006b). Moreover, John's experience becomes one where a certain type of harassment is deemed punishable, and another type is not – this latter harassment, therefore becomes permitted in the school environment.

It is also evident that the school is only reactive to the harassment rather than adopting any proactive measures – 'when John reports it, we deal with it'. This process aligns with government strategies on LGBT bullying (Samuel and Jonathan, 2019). It also emulates discourses of the autonomous neoliberal (Rose, 1999) teacher, and the manner in which structural inequalities are masked within neoliberalism (Woolley, 2017). However, this reactive approach means that the responsibility is placed with John, and the person who experiences the trauma has to validate the trauma, which is a concerning common practice within complaint (Ahmed, 2021).

Furthermore, this contrasts to proactively addressing LGBT inclusion (through possible discourses of accommodation), which could be a longer-term strategy to counteract bullying. John is aware of this – 'why isn't there posters up saying, "some people are gay?" Why isn't there assemblies saying, "we have a gay member of staff who is being harassed"?' The school therefore only reacts within specific containable boundaries and the everyday rituals of the school are to sublimate and therefore straighten the deviant gay body. The school does not contest its own systems or the operations and privileging of heteronormative space. During complaint, institutions often protect their own practices and their name (Ahmed, 2021).

Within this, the school also positions John as the problem to be fixed, he is the deviant gay body – 'to become a complainer is to become the location of a problem' (Ahmed, 2021: 3).

> When I reported this homophobia to her [the headteacher] in public areas, as in out in the playground where I'm the only teacher in that area, her answer was, 'right, we'll move you inside where you're closer to other teachers'. Well, yeah, that's great. So, you are aware that I need safeguarding, but it's not dealing with the issue, is it?

Again, John is aware that the headteacher's suggestion is only a temporary (non)address of the problem. Moreover, in this instance, John becomes the person to be disciplined and taken from

public visibility. That the harassment extends to 'public areas', demonstrates the extent school space is curtailed for John, and how much of the school's structures, practices, and routines contribute towards the production of an acceptable sexuality. The space has the effect of already being straightened (Ahmed, 2006a), and the discipling strategies perpetuate the normalized discourses (Foucault, 1977). The LGB body is only tolerated within certain private boundaries (Jackson and Scott, 2004: 238).

John is also given responsibility to remedy the problem – "John, it's got to be your decision. You have to decide whether you want them back in school". This individualized responsibility is largely indicative of broader complaint processes (Ahmed, 2021), although it is problematic. John is aware that the aired punishment of exclusion may be unworkable, 'But obviously, that to me isn't a decision. I'm never gonna say, "yeah, let's get rid of someone", cos there's too many of them . . . So, it's not sustainable'. As such, the suggestion of exclusion can be read as 'nonperformative' (Ahmed, 2012) – the language placates, but it is an action that is an inaction, and does not disrupt the heteronormative (and homophobic) status quo. It is a sublimation of John's identity to the straightened path.

Some of John's colleagues have stated their support, and, whilst there is empathy much of it replicates the position that it is John's responsibility – 'you need to be reporting this', and/or it is 'non-performative' (Ahmed, 2012) – 'we've never witnessed anything, but we know it's happening'. Possibly there is a subtle 'gaslighting' (Wozolek, 2018) of John's experiences. Although they are not denied, they are sublimated to the point of perpetual and repeated inactivity. Probably as a consequence, John now demands more support from staff – 'I used to be really mousy about it . . . Now, I chase people round the school shouting for them [other teachers] to stop after they've called me "gay boy"'. The language of 'boy' is notable such that it repositions power within the teacher-student binary, and possibly through relations of social class. As such, inferiority sticks to the deviant body, and gay, in any form, is placed in subordination.

Hence, the harassment builds, John becomes more troubled, but also more resilient and develops strategies for resistance. However, the inactions of the school's 'actions' ensure the homophobia is statically present. Keeping John out of sight and responding to John's concerns through sublimation, are examples of the everyday practices that maintain the school as persistently heteronormative. John's experiences are therefore validated enough to satisfy requirements, but not enough to disrupt the heteronormative status quo. Thus, there is largely a cyclical nature to John's experience. This aligns with Ahmed's analysis of institutional complaint (Ahmed, 2021), but contrasts to narratives of linear progress often found in contemporary LGB discourses of pride (Love, 2009). It may also be why John has reached the point of stating – 'I've done fifteen years of that and I'm not making a difference . . . I'm just fighting against homophobia constantly, but not actually having any impact'.

### *'I've been a victim of a hate crime today': John's construction of (homo)sexuality at schools*

As is evident in the last few sections, John knows he 'should not have to go to work and be called "gay boy"' – a derisory disorientating positioning. John is cognizant that in professions outside of schools there are further layers of protection, 'you know, if I was in industry, if I was in a private job, people would be saying to me, 'get a solicitor and get them sued'. However, the complexities of experiencing harassment as a teacher is demonstrated, where despite his resilience, John states 'I do know my legal rights, I'm just not a fighter'. His decision not to escalate his experiences beyond the school context is framed as his responsibility, which, again, aligns to discourses of individualized neoliberal EDI and responsibility.

John is aware that 'schools remain woefully behind the majority of other workplaces when it comes to LGBT inclusion' (Lee, 2020: 11). Moreover, that schools are institutions that operate with specific responsibilities for children and young people. This is demonstrated through his suggestion that there may be some impact upon any students who witness the harassment, which is a premise he has utilized to argue for better actions in his school.

> And I said to him [the Assistant Headteacher], 'we see statistics of teenagers committing suicide and no-one ever knows why. How do we know that they're not LGBTQ and they haven't seen something like that [his harassment] happen at school and thought, "I can't live a life like that"?' And he was shocked. His mouth fell open and the Assistant Head[teacher] said, 'that's a very good point and one we've never considered. It's not just the effect on Mr [John] Dillon. Who else is around him seeing this?'

Within this, it is possible that John constructs LGB people through a victim framing, which is a common discourse within schools (Formby, 2015; Monk, 2011; Ringrose and Renold, 2010; Rudoe, 2010). This is limited as it does not demonstrate narratives of pride, which are an expectation of contemporary LGB society (Love, 2009). Although, as discussed, leaning exclusively into either of these positions can be problematic.

More broadly, John is also aware that 'we're here for the kids' is a powerful, yet constraining narrative that creates wider actions and discourses. Here, despite hierarchies between adult/teacher and child/student, power is formulated between the actual and the symbolic Child (Edelman, 2004), such that a school's duty must always be to protect children. The 'three-dimensional constellation including discourse, knowledge, and power' (Foucault, 1989: 162) is such that space for the protection of adults is absent. John explains, 'we hide behind that. So, it doesn't matter how hard the teacher journey is, the teacher should rise above that and be full of passion and commitment'. Again, this follows an individualized view of resilience and discourses of the good neoliberal teacher. This arguably contributes to why it has been an extensive process for John to accept that the homophobia he routinely experiences is an *'acceptable'* problem – 'it made me feel pathetic ten years ago'.

In these exchanges it is evident that emotions are attached to the deviant body (Ahmed, 2014). Although these are arguably amplified by John's struggle to navigate his role as a teacher and as someone experiencing bullying from students – which, he largely finds incongruous. John is clear that 'an adult shouldn't be being bullied by a child', a position which reinforces the adult/teacher and child/student divide. This, therefore, complicates the victim/bully hierarchies as John looks to maintain the adult-child power differential. However, what is absent is an acknowledgement that there are dominant heteronormative discourses and hegemonic masculinity circulating through the school, that 'transmits and produces power' (Foucault, 1978: 101). Moreover, that space is orientated around heteronormativity (Ahmed, 2006b), and within this, the bullying from students is specifically derogatory to the point of subordination.

The adult/child distinction is shown more broadly in wider extracts from John's interviews, for example in a discussion concerning how students should be reprimanded. John recalls, 'I said to her, "hand those sweets to me please". She said, "no, I'm not handing you my sweets". I said, "you need to give me those sweets or I will take them"' – this situation escalates. John's framing is that students should conform because they are told to. There are similarities here to Lareau's (2003) 'natural growth model', where adult and child roles are distinct, and consequently children are not afforded the right of negotiation. Lareau's research refers to parenting, however, she suggests these constructs are more common within working-class households. Notably, this is a very different construction of students (and the Child) to many participants within the broader project research project (Llewellyn, 2023, 2024). Here, many LGB teachers who (were able to) adopt a professional

LGB teacher identity viewed students as social actors in their own right (see James and Prout, 2015). Although in contrast to John, these teachers were not experiencing repeated routinized harassment.

More broadly, and through his everyday experiences of straightening, John is aware that homosexuality in his school is not permitted. In some instances, this had meant he has not reported the sexualized aspects of the homophobia:

> I'm scared to report sexualised comments – while I labelled that homophobia, I didn't actually go into detail with my head and say it was sexualised comments, because I'm always scared that someone will turn around and say, 'well, what is he doing to encourage a bunch of sixteen year old lads to wolf whistle at him and prance around limping their wrists and calling him sweet cheeks and making sexually suggestive remarks?' So, that terrifies me.

Or it has resulted in John not reporting the comments at all:

> [The student said] 'Well, you're gay, aren't you? If I let you blow me, will you not put a behaviour point on?' And the class started laughing. And I didn't report that because it was sexualised . . . But when I left school, I was panicking thinking if that ever comes out, I will get into trouble for not reporting it. But I didn't wanna report it because I was so scared.

Here, John is cognizant that homosexuality in schools has been positioned as deviant. More than this however, it is the overt and deviant sexualization that it is the sticky notion attached to the sticky disruptive body. The student plays with power, and disrupts John, to suggest sexual relations,[4] which follows the discourse of LGB people as hypersexual (Worthen, 2023). Indeed, containing LGBT content to the RSE curriculum arguably (re)produces that problematic discourse. This construction is further problematized by the school context, where there is a power imbalance and consequently differential responsibility within the adult-child relationship. This reading may therefore draw on discourses of childhood where children are seen as innocent and in need of overt protection (see James and Prout, 2015). Although here, the adult-child power distinction is disrupted, through the heteronormativity and homophobia circulating in the school spaces and systems.

John is also 'scared', he is 'panicking' – emotions stick to the gay teacher, who cannot adequately be straightened. More broadly, decades of gay men have been afraid of their sexuality being exposed without their consent. As such, emotions attach to the subordinated (Ahmed, 2014). However, as a good neoliberal teacher, John takes responsibility for the situation. Certain kinds of homophobia – sexualized being positioned as the most debased – therefore remain hidden and, to some extent, permitted.

## 'Don't rock the boat': Limits of the neoliberal teacher

There have been instances where a teacher in John's school has stepped in and asked leadership for more support – 'the head[teacher] took me into her office the next day' and said, 'next year I promise you, we will step this up'. Whilst making a promise of a future intention, this placates John, yet arguably places the action as an inaction, and thus maintains the status quo – which is a strategy of organizing institutional complaint. Ahmed (2021) explains how an agreement can be 'nonperfomative' – it is an accepted act which can pacify the moment, yet conserve, rather than disrupt the problematic situation.

John is empathetic to the situation 'She does listen . . . I just don't think she knows what to do with it all'. However, there are instances where an action has been curtailed. John explains – 'a

young man called me gay boy, and his father objected to a temporary exclusion', which was then revoked. Again, the use of 'boy' positions John as subordinate and as *less* than a professional middle-class teacher. Again, the practices of the school, bend to the straight body, and the deviant gay is out of place. Further incidents are recalled by John as he is encompassed by the school's everyday practices. One example concerns an LGBT inclusion assembly led by two teachers – 'another teacher in the school, objected and went to the head and said that the [school] community would be in uproar because they would say that they were glorifying trans and gay personalities' – the assembly was shortened, and certain information was removed. 'So, not only did they *not* do anything to promote LGBTQ when actually someone does, they ask the person to stop'. Here, 'trans and gay' are placed in opposition to 'the community' – they are not entwined, and the former do not belong. 'Trans and gay' people also cannot be 'glorified', this privilege belongs to other kinds of bodies. The repeated school routines reiterate and reinscribe cisheteronormativity as the only acceptable practice and body.

John is also aware that other schools may practice more LGBT inclusion, however he is not necessarily aware what form this may take. In his discussions, he largely frames LGB through a victim narrative and through difficulty, for example he suggests, that LGBT inclusion 'should be using the principle that they do with drugs awareness, alcohol awareness, crime prevention'. This contrasts to contemporary LGB inclusion which has shifted towards narratives of pride (Love, 2009). As before, the hero/victim distinction is problematic as LGB people are more complex than either singular position. Moreover, these positions create value judgements about what is legitimized or acceptable. However, it is important to note that LGB as troublesome is predominantly John's experience, and therefore it is what he knows.

John states 'luckily I'm quite a resilient person', thus aligning to contemporary discourses of the professional neoliberal teacher. Like many people in wider research in general, John positions resilience as an individualized trait – whilst research suggests factors that create resilience include 'structural and institutional resources and support systems' (Robinson and Schmitz, 2021: 6). He states, 'I'm determined to stay alive and survive'. This distress is reiterated throughout the interview:

> It's made me have suicidal thoughts. There have been times I've sat in a classroom thinking, maybe the only way to hammer home the message to school is to take myself off to the toilet and hang myself up by my tie. And then when they find my body, they will know.

Hence, intense emotions attach to John's deviant body, and are felt in terms of *both* the homophobia and the schools (in)actions. This can perhaps be summarized in the following extract below, as John recalls an interaction with his headteacher:

> She said, 'I don't want to lose you. You know, it is very tough for you, but there are LGBTQ kids here who do need you, they do need to see your resilience, and they do need to see you bouncing down the corridor smiling. You never know that you've had a hard day because you don't see it in your face. You're always smiling, you're always positive, you've always got time for everyone, you'll always give up your time for kids, you come in on the holidays to do intervention. There is no absolute sign that you are suffering, and the kids don't see that. So, they see this positive resilience and we need our kids to see that'.

In this extract, and following the practices of the school, the headteacher positions John as a body out of place this is done though several problematic discursive framings. First, that LGBTQ students are seen to need role models, and that this is the most important role for an LGB teacher. Being a role model can be rewarding but it is also an expectation that can come with emotional

labour (Llewellyn and Reynolds, 2021). Next, that John is required to maintain the appearance of happiness, which can be read as a 'straightening device' (Ahmed, 2010: 91) that pulls John in line with normative expectations. John is also more broadly being framed as a good neoliberal teacher, though his hard work, positivity, and resilience. As such, one reading of this extract is that the homophobia that John experiences is legitimized by the school as an acceptable by-product that he should, to some extent, accept and rise above. This is probably not the school's intention, but it is arguably their practice, that is reiterated by the many other straightening practices in their school, which sublimate John's gay identity. There is no conception of a structural response or structural inequalities, the emphasis is placed on the individual, which is common in neoliberalism in general (Rose, 1999), but also in practices of LGBT inclusion based on individual rights (Llewellyn, 2024; Martino et al., 2022). As Ahmed explains, for 'an institution to accept any systematic failure, may result in institutional injury'. (Ahmed, 2012: 146). Whilst the empathy expressed by the head-teacher, may be earnest, it therefore becomes an empty placeholder. These are 'effects of power circulate in a manner at once continuous, [and] uninterrupted'. (Foucault, 1980b: 119), thus maintaining conditions of their existence.

## Conclusion

Discourses operating within John's school make certain identities and subject positions more permissible that others. The discourses of heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity, and homosexuality as sexualized and deviant, reproduce narratives that are difficult for John to contest. This is arguably more difficult for a single gay man from a lower socio-economic background, as there is no homo or heteronormative for John to bend towards. John is a body out of place, he is someone who cannot be straightened completely within the school space and context, which works so zealously to maintain cisheteronomativity (Francis, 2023a, 2023b). He is also a gay adult experiencing harassment from children, something which contradicts discourses of the adult/teacher. Arguably, it is these two discourses that reproduce the school as fervently problematic for John. It is a continuous straightening – from the students, through gay as subordinated, and from the school and staff, where gay is sublimated through their non-performativity. This positioning is further problematized by the backdrop of neoliberalism, where structural considerations are ignored and instead responsibility is placed upon the individual. These discourses thus combine in a 'inter-discursive framework or web' (Foucault, 1989: 163) where the school's (in)actions do not indeed 'rock the boat', they just perpetually 'rock' John. Thus, the school's empathy becomes an empty placeholder.

It is possible that some of these experiences are drawn from discourses of social class, through either John or from the schools he works at, which are in lower socio-economic areas. However, there is no intended value judgement, instead my purpose is to set out any limitations of the LGB professional identity described in the wider data set (Llewellyn, 2023, 2024). Specifically, that the LGB professional teacher may be more readily available for some teachers than others, and these may be teachers who largely fit a homonormative middle-class identity. This aligns with other research that highlights how (neo)liberal models of inclusion premised upon (homo)normative rights can exclude LGBT people who are on the margins, including working-class and people of colour (Pascoe, 2023; Ward, 2008). As a single person John is *not* able to draw on acceptable narratives of the family. Instead, he is tangled in removing himself from sexualized comments, which often stick to single gay men. As such, power is decisively present within the heteronormative practices and spaces, that are continually reproduced within the school. There is no available space for John to be a gay man *and* to be a teacher.

My intention in this article is to share a nuanced picture of LGB teachers that is neither hero or victim – John displays resilience and resistance, beyond what *should* be expected of him. John is also a victim of hate crimes. As such, both of those positions exist simultaneously – singular positions are potentially reductive. Instead, my purpose is to focus on the systems, structures, spaces, and discourses of which John is a part. There are limits to the (individualized) resilience of the neoliberal LGB teacher who is deemed always responsible. Particularly in systems where notions of inequalities do not contest the normative structures and systems. There are problems with reactive responses that similarly do not examine existing privileges. Indeed, there may be limits to the LGB professional identity (Llewellyn, 2023, 2024) that is premised upon a politics of pride and advocates for LGB inclusion. Particularly if it is curtailed around an acceptable homonormative middle-class version of LGB. Currently, it is possible that John is the wrong kind of queer for his school, and for normative models of LGBT inclusion.

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## Notes

1. I refer to LGB when discussing sexualities, as it most fairly represents the literature. I refer to LGBT when discussing policy, as that is the acronym used. Anything different to this is because it best represents the discussion
2. This is the direct language of English government policy documents
3. This is the direct language of English government policy documents
4. This is a 'joke' by the student – sexual relations between students under 18 and teacher in the UK are illegal. This is an extension of the age of consent as teachers are in a 'position of trust', which is part of the updated Sexual Offences Act 2003.

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