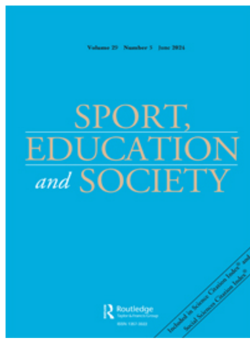

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Bursting the 'childhood bubble': reframing discourses of LGBTQ+ teachers and their students

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ABSTRACT

LGBTQ+ teachers have been noted to struggle with conflicting professional and personal subjectivities within schools, which are sites of (re)production of heteronormativity. This clash relies upon positioning LGBTQ+ as an adult activity in opposition to discourses of childhood, which are framed around protection and innocence. This research, however, took place at a time of potential change, with aspects of LGBTQ+ inclusion being present within UK schools to varying degrees. In 2020, 50 UK LGBTQ+ teachers engaged in individual semi-structured interviews. Thematic Foucauldian analysis was applied to the data to examine both the discourses produced by the teachers and the subjectivities that were navigated. Findings suggest that many teachers are able to disrupt the binaries of professional/personal and a 'new' teacher subjectivity emerges, that acknowledges their LGBTQ+ status. This is framed around neoliberal traits of honesty and authenticity. In relation, the binary distinction between student and teacher is navigated, and childhood is no longer discursively constructed by the teachers as innocent; instead, students are framed around their agency and social awareness. However, there is evidence that protectionist discourses of the child, and professional discourses of the teacher, are also being used to prevent LGBTQ+ inclusion, and restrict LGBTQ+ teachers.

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Introduction

Schools are recognised as sites that reproduce heteronormativity where LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and others) people have been absent, or Othered (Bragg et al., 2018; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Epstein, 2000; Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015). This is pertinent within neoliberalism where individualism is favoured over recognition of structural inequality (Woolley, 2017). For LGBTQ+ schoolteachers, this has meant operating within spaces where their sexuality and/or gender is often seen as in conflict with their profession (Connell, 2015; Neary, 2013) – with the archetype of the teacher being framed around asexuality and heterosexuality (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021). This is premised upon a related discursive framing of childhood, where students are positioned as in need of protecting from the adult topic of sexuality (DePalma, 2010; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Ferfolja, 2007; Renold, 2005). However, within this 'regime of truth … that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true' (Foucault, 1980, p. 131), many schools in the UK have, to varying degrees, implemented some aspects of LGBTQ+ inclusion,

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leading to LGBTQ+ teachers to navigate tensions that arise from 'doing' diversity (or not) within a predominantly heteronormative neoliberal environment (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021).

This research adds to an increasing body of work in the UK and beyond (Connell, 2015; Ferfolja, 2014; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020; Gray, 2013; Gray et al., 2016; Landi, 2018; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Neary, 2013; Rudoe, 2010, 2018) that explores the experiences of LGBTQ+ teachers within schools, who everyday traverse these discursive boundaries around: inclusion/exclusion, professional/personal, diversity/heteronormativity student/teacher and being 'out'/closeted. Experiences between and within schools can vary dependent on context (Neary, 2013) and the microculture of the school (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013); however, LGBTQ+ teachers often utilise a range of techniques (Griffin, 1991; Landi, 2018; Rudoe, 2010) to navigate their school environments. They can feel isolated (Gray, 2013; Neary, 2013), however more recently, and with increased equality and inclusion, many LGBTQ+ teachers feel comfortable being 'out' to staff but not to their students (Rudoe, 2018) – being out can be political or a psychological need (Gray, 2013). Additionally, LGBTQ+ teachers may also feel guilty about not being 'out' and working towards inclusion in their school; this is particularly pertinent within a neoliberal culture, where the narrative of the autonomous teacher is central (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021). In contrast, Ferfolja (2014) argues that the professionalism of neoliberalism allows some LGBTQ+ teachers to construct themselves as professional and remain silent about their LGBTQ+ status, which disrupts the dominant positioning of the closet as shameful (Seidman, 2003). Hence, teachers are always already agentic and will find varying methods of resistance within the complexities of dominant discourses within schools (Ferfolja, 2014; Gray et al., 2016; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021).

This article is novel in building upon these findings within the contemporary neoliberal climate that navigates heteronormativity and the 'promise' of diversity and inclusion. Using a Foucauldian analysis, it considers how teacher subjectivities are actioned, and what 'new' discourses and subjectivities are produced by teachers – particularly in relation to historical discourses of the 'professional' teacher and 'innocent' child. Furthermore, it foregrounds teachers' perspectives who are commonly not the objects of LGBTQ+ school inclusion, with the central focus being on children. Thus, there is an exploration between lived experience and discursive constructions, where discourses are 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972/2002, p. 54). This article begins by exploring the contextual and discursive framing of LGBTQ+ in UK schools, predominantly focusing on the teacher and the child. Throughout, I use the acronym LGBTQ+, unless it is in direct quotations or refers to a specific policy or research.

Framing the (discursive) context of UK schools

UK schools have had a difficult history of supporting LGBTQ+ people, in spite of increased equality laws within wider UK society. From 2020, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in England has become compulsory and LGBT inclusive, whilst in Scotland LGBT inclusion is more broadly across the curriculum. Prior to this LGBT was absent from any specific UK curriculum. However, recent reports (Cibyl, 2021) suggest a large number of schools have little to zero positive messaging about LGBTQ+ people; hence, there is variety of practices both within and between schools. In general, the majority of LGBTQ+ inclusion has been framed around anti-bullying, which is either 'homo-tolerant' (Røthing, 2008) or constrains LGBTQ+ people within a victim narrative (Formby, 2015; Monk, 2011; Ringrose & Renold, 2010; Rudoe, 2010). Research also demonstrates how teachers and students can navigate these heteronormative spaces and the 'victim' framing through resistance (Ferfolja, 2014; Neary, 2013) or renegotiating power structures (Fitzpatrick & McGlashan, 2018). Allen (2015), however, draws attention to the victim/hero binary, arguing that the (re)search for resistance and agency can arguably mask underlying discrimination; moreover, that the positive hero framing risks becoming a 'caricature to LGBT youth's lives' (p. 374).

Whilst Allen's work critiques the focus on discourse, my work centralises it with its focus on agency and teacher subjectivities in relation to the dominant discourses teachers produced and

navigated within schools. This is similar to Ferfolja (2014), moreover, that I also engage with the neoliberal climate. However, I not only discuss teacher subjectivities, but I utilise these narratives to critique the teachers' construction of the child which is still pertinent within contemporary society and educational policy, which I explain below.

Arguably UK schools have suffered from the legacy of the discriminatory Section 28 – the 1988 Local Government Act which stated, 'a local authority shall not … intentionally promote homosexuality' (DES, 1988). The pro Section 28 rhetoric was purposeful in framing (homo)sexuality as dangerous for children (Burridge, 2004; Epstein, 2000). Whilst negativity towards LGBTQ+ people may have diminished within wider society, oppositional ideologies to LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools are rising (Nash & Browne, 2021), which purposefully utilise discourses of childhood. Recently in Birmingham, UK, and in Ontario, Canada, hostility to LGBTQ+ included protest signs such as 'let kids be kids' (BBC, 2019; Bialystok & Wright, 2019), which is 'a moral rhetoric that can legitimize anything without actually having to explain it' (Meyer, 2007, p. 98). This is reflective of movements around the world, for example, 'Con mis Hijos no te Metas (Don't Mess with My Kids)' in Peru and wider Latin America (Rousseau, 2016), and is a common narrative that is used both currently and historically to legitimise LGBTQ+ discrimination (see Burridge (2004) for Section 28 examples).

Largely drawing from Western Enlightenment thinking, dominant discourses of childhood are framed around innocence and protection from corrupting adult societies (Kehily & Montgomery, 2009). Whilst invariably there must be responsibility afforded by adults to children, the stark adult–child dichotomy found within Enlightenment narratives is arguably disempowering. Children are positioned without agency and primarily determined in terms of 'what they are not and … what they cannot do' (Buckingham, 2000, p. 13). This contrasts to contemporary sociological discourses of childhood which are premised on children as active citizens in their own lives and society (James & Prout, 2015; Qvortrup et al., 1994).

Indubitably children operate within the structures of a power differential. Moreover, the power differential is augmented for sexuality which is determined as an adult activity (Foucault, 1978/1998) and thus is viewed as antithetical to childhood (Jackson & Scott, 2004). However, as society follows a 'heteronormative logic' (Bragg et al., 2018, p. 421), children are curiously expected to present as both asexual and heterosexual (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021), with the heterosexual child as central to the narrative of a reproductive future (Edelman, 2004). In relation, LGBTQ+ teachers are similarly bounded by discourses of asexuality and heterosexuality (Connell, 2015). Any presentation outside of this can be viewed as a threat to childhood innocence and the heterosexual order. LGBTQ+ teachers thus are always in a position of navigating or often upholding a personal/professional boundary around their LGBTQ+ status (Connell, 2015; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Neary, 2013).

Framing the theory

To explore these binaries and the teachers' discursive constructions of the child and of the teacher, I draw on Foucauldian theories of subjectivities, power/knowledge and discourse. For Foucault, discourses do not have static meanings but instead are products of how they are enacted. Moreover, when discourses dominate they become part of the 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1977/1991), and influence ways of thinking, being and acting (Walshaw, 2007). For this article, the discursive nexus of schools is predominantly framed around heteronormativity, the professional asexual/heterosexual teacher and the moral, innocent child (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015). Discourse and power also produce forms of knowledge (Foucault, 1977/1991), for example, whether LGBTQ+ is suitable knowledge for children, young people and schools, and by extension, whether LGBTQ+ teachers are suitable educators.

For this article, the process of becoming a subject (teacher) is (re)produced through active positioning within the available discourses. It is a continuous process, where positions are negotiated, created or resisted within the 'whole network of the social' (Foucault, 1982, p. 345) and where

subjectivities produce relations of power. This is particular in schools, which often 'perform a normalising function' (Walshaw, 2007), and operate as heightened sites of power (Foucault, 1978/1998). Schools, therefore, are places where teachers and students fashion their bodies within the moulds that are available. Although as Foucauldian power is productive, both children and teachers have a constrained agency and can, to some extent, resist the subjectivities found within discourses.

These positions are complicated by the neoliberal era of education where power is thought to be decentred and individuals are governed via self-regulation (Rose, 1999). For education, this means that the successful teacher is the autonomous professional teacher, who claims themselves as an authentic modern subject (Rose, 1999). This is arguably a fabrication which is enhanced for LGBTQ+ teachers as Western societies demarcate sexuality as the 'truth' of the subject (Foucault, 1978/1998). Additionally, the focus on the individual within neoliberalism potentially masks underlying structural inequality (Woolley, 2017).

Specifically, this article is about LGBTQ+ teachers as the 'subject' and how they negotiate their subjectivities, in relation to dominant discourses produced by teachers.

Methods and methodology

In the summer of 2020, 50 teachers, who are referred to using pseudonyms, were recruited via social media announcements, that were endorsed by a prominent LGBTQ+ teacher group and a teaching union group. The call for participants was deliberate broad asking for anyone who identified as LGBTQ+ with UK teaching experience. Hence, there was a mixture of targeted, snowball and respondent-driven sampling, which is common in LGBTQ+ research that purposefully work towards social change (Bell, 1997). Although, it is also possible that the majority of participants were political and/or interested in LGBTQ+ education. The 50 participants varied in age experience, gender, phase and teaching role. This ranged from a 23-year-old newly qualified teacher to teachers with over 30 years' experience. The majority of participants started teaching between 2005 and 2015. The sample included classroom teachers, middle managers and senior leadership. A small number worked as peripatetic teachers or classroom assistants. Thirty-five participants worked in secondary schools, and 11 in primary schools – with the rest in alternative provision, such as pupil referral units or special schools. All but one participant worked in the state sector. The majority taught in English schools, six in Scottish schools, three had experience of teaching in Wales and two had experience in Northern Ireland. The majority identified as homosexual (gay/lesbian) with some preferring queer, with a small number as bi/pansexual; four identified as non-binary and/or trans. The vast majority were white British or Irish, whilst a small number identified themselves with further intersectional categories, such as disability, ethnicity and religion.

Each teacher participated in one individual interview which was predominantly conducted by the author, with a smaller number via a second researcher. The interviews were focused around topics but were deliberately active (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003), deviating around the participants' responses. Pre-planned topics included: the participants' roles; being out or not; inclusion; policy; curriculums and change. Supplementary topics included: being a parent, Section 28; leadership; and intersectional identities. Interview times ranged from 27 min to one hour 54, with the average being 61 min. The majority were conducted online over video conferencing and three via telephone. All but one (where permission was not granted) were audio recorded, transcribed semi-verbatim and checked for accuracy. All participants were given consent forms, information sheets and privacy notices, and were informed they could withdraw at any point. The research was also given ethical approval by the author's institution.

Analysis was conducted by immersion in the data through multiple readings and coding utilising NVivo software. Codes were determined via both inductive and deductive coding and ranged from semantic to latent interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The latter resulted in the topic of this article, where the data were deductively examined to understand how the subject and subjectivities are produced through discourses (Walshaw, 2007). Moreover, a movement between the whole interview

and the codes was maintained to counteract fragmentation that may occur when using software for qualitative analysis (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

Both interviewers are insiders within the LGBTQ+ 'community'. Hence, there are aspects of 'insider research', which is widespread in 'political orientated' LGBTQ+ research (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015, p. 94), and thus bring a need for self-awareness and reflexivity within all aspects of the research process (Coffey & Delamont, 2000). Within these interviews, the researchers worked to build rapport, empathy and active listening, whilst being aware that power relations are only disrupted and not removed (O'Connor & Madge, 2001). Additionally, the analysis required further levels of reflection on the subjectivities within the interviews.

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the place of the interviews, online interviews are also useful for accessing 'hard-to-reach' communities (Wilkerson et al., 2014) and increasing the geographical range of participants. However, a criticism of the sample is that it does not reflect the proportion of secondary to primary school teachers in the UK. Hence, I was mindful in the analysis to centre primary school teachers' narratives. A further criticism is that the sample is primarily English based, and white cisgender. There is not enough data to analyse race and ethnicity in detail; however, I am cognisant of reproducing a White-centric analysis. Furthermore, romantic Enlightenment constructions of the child – which I am deconstructing in this article – are premised upon Eurocentric Whiteness (Bernstein, 2011). Differences between schools are not brought to the forefront of the discussion, as this was not a theme arising from the analysis.

Results and discussion

Discourses of the teacher

Previous studies (Connell, 2015; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Neary, 2013) identify that many LGBTQ+ teachers feel there is a conflict between their professional and personal subjectivities; dominant discourses of teachers being tied to asexuality and heterosexuality in order to protect childhood innocence. There is evidence to suggest that some teachers still experienced these barriers, often where LGBTQ+ inclusion was absent or insignificant within schools. However, many teachers were able to navigate the professional/personal boundary and saw being LGBTQ+ as part of being a teacher, which they primarily framed around being honest, authentic or yourself, in order to foster positive relationships with students (Wardle, 2009). These teachers are navigating the professional/personal binary, arguably, by drawing on the neoliberal climate of the professional teacher (Ferfolja, 2014) who is autonomous in their decisions and practice (Rose, 1999). However, in contrast to Ferfolja, these teachers also navigate the being out/closeted binary and claim themselves as honest, authentic LGBTQ+ teachers – through the 'real' subject that is central to neoliberalism (Rose, 1999).

This section starts with examples of this 'new' LGBTQ+ teacher subjectivity, and how this is discursively constructed, before finishing with a discussion of conflict and barriers.

Many participants highlighted that when introducing LGBTQ+ issues older staff often question 'are we allowed to talk about that' (Peter, secondary school teacher), demonstrating the historical contingencies of LGBTQ+ as inappropriate knowledge for schools (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015). Robin, a secondary school teacher explains how his perspective has changed from his first school in 2003, where he thought 'my personal life is my private life, I'm not discussing it', to the present day, where he is actively involved in LGBTQ+ inclusion, and therefore felt it was important to 'be honest about it'. Robin points out that these privileges are always afford to heterosexual colleagues and thus the subjectivity of the honest heterosexual teacher is always already available.

> … sort of being honest in the same way as your heterosexual colleagues. If they're allowed to talk about their wife and children, why can't I talk about my husband and my children?

As mentioned by Robin and emphasised by multiple teachers, the importance of 'being honest' is an integral part of the modern teacher. As Noah, a secondary school teacher states 'students really

respect honesty and just being frank with them'. Honesty is important in that it builds relationship with students. Additionally, LGBTQ+ teachers are aware that if they do not answer honestly, this could be 'damaging or deflecting' (Ross, secondary school teacher), as LGBTQ+ has been silenced within schools (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015). Ross is also aware that this stays within the bounds of teacher professionalism, thus challenging dominant constructions of the teacher premised upon asexuality and heterosexuality.

> Of course, keep a professional distance from the students, but I think there've been a couple of students who have asked, and I've been quite open about it. I mean mainly because I haven't wanted to fuel any discriminatory things … I mean I personally, think it would be quite damaging if I react in a way that was kind of deflecting or something.

A similar story is told by Hannah, a secondary school teacher about her primary school teacher partner. She discusses both sexuality and gender presentation, and how it is important to be honest and to position LGBTQ+ as normal, positive and part of being a professional teacher, demonstrating how this discursive positioning translates across school phases. Furthermore, Hannah highlights that LGBTQ+ teachers often have to actively work to deconstruct the heteronormativity within schools (Epstein, 2000; Gray et al., 2016).

> Because she works with four- and five-year-olds, they ask her are you a boy or a girl? Do you have a girlfriend or boyfriend? Like they ask her all those sorts of like completely unguarded questions. So, she actively normalises being like 'I have short hair, but I'm a girl. I have a girlfriend because girls can marry girls' … I think she feels like if she were to be guarded in answering them, it would be expressing to that four- or five-year-old that that topic is something that you need to be wary of talking about.

Being honest also relates to being yourself and authentic, which is tied to sexuality within Western society (Foucault, 1978/1998). Hence, 'being out' is arguably a technique of power (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021). Ferfolja (2014) suggests that for LGBTQ+ teachers neoliberalism allows them to resist the position of the 'out' teacher and instead claim their professional subjectivity. In contrast, in this research, numerous participants stated that LGBTQ+ teachers had a 'right to be their authentic selves' (Luke, secondary school teacher) through their sexuality. With statements such as 'I've always wanted to be authentic and I think I felt not as authentic when I wasn't out', which Hari, a secondary school teacher also links to his Indian ethnicity. Thus, suggesting LGBTQ+ people of colour may have heightened awareness of the need to reclaim their LGBTQ+ teacher subjectivity.

Being yourself is a position that is present in many aspects of schooling, including the curriculum, explained by Henry, a secondary school teacher:

> I would never lie about it and then you always hear from teachers that go, but 'that's my private life'. You know, heteronormative values are expressed or 'my husband and I went and did this'. You know 'my wife and I bought this for the kids'. So, you know, if I've got a gay partner why would I not mention him using the correct pronouns, of which they are comfortable with, or if I'm talking about a gay character in a play or an English text.

The curriculum overlap is consistent across secondary and primary phases, with PSHE (personal, social, health, education) and the Arts and Humanities often being mentioned in secondary, whereas primary school focus is around the family, as Andrew explains who has taught children ages 4–7.

> Because it's part of my life that we don't hide … So, I say that I've got a husband and two children. The other teachers are saying the same about their partners and their children.

Both Henry and Andrew are able to navigate the professional/personal binary and agentically reposition sexuality inside professionalism. They are purposefully aware of 'heterosexual privilege' (Connell, 2015, p. 69), and that these are the conditions always available to heterosexual colleagues.

In contrast to Ferfolja's (2014) findings, who argues LGBTQ+ teachers can use neoliberal professionalism as a form of resistance, Catherine, a Secondary school Catholic Religious Education teacher, who has not mentioned her sexuality to students, explains how this may constrain her relationships with students.

> So, the kids you don't tell them all … But you give them something about your personal life that builds a relationship … But I always feel that there is something, a barrier between me and the kids … and then I feel guilty for any kids who are gay or LGBTQ.

Not being honest (or out) can result in narratives of shame, via not supporting LGBTQ+ students, and not contesting heteronormativity particularly within an increased environment of LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021). Being honest (and out) may also facilitate teachers in building relationships with students (Wardle, 2009). Although, it does reassert the 'real' subject of neoliberalism.

In contrast, many teachers in this study position this lack of openness as problematic, particularly if the professional/personal binary is used as a barrier by colleagues in leadership positions. This is found in several participants narratives, and is explained by Alison, who is in a middle leadership position. Below she discusses being out to both staff and students:

> I just made a decision really early on that I wasn't going to lie or hide it or not feel like myself in front of my colleagues
>
> Researcher: So, it's important with staff, but does that translate to kids?
>
> Good question, I have an internal struggle about this … I'm really passionate about LGBT people, it is not a subsection of our lives, it is our lives.

The teachers in this study are also very aware of not adding to the heteronormativity found within society and the historical silence within schools (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015). Alison is also aware of the inequity around the personal/professional divide. Alison's school has a 'rule' that teachers cannot talk about their personal lives. This school year, Alison confronted the head teacher (who was also gay) and explained that people did talk about their personal lives – 'the vice principle talks about her husband in assemblies'. She continues articulating that 'what that policy essentially says is you can talk about your personal lives to an extent that we deem acceptable'. She expresses her 'internal struggle' and feelings around not adding to that 'sort of shame'. The subjectivity of the out and honest LGBTQ+ teachers is not easily available to Alison and is restricted via discourses of the professional teacher. Alternatively, Alison (and Catherine) may be positioning themselves negatively in contrast to the 'out' LGBTQ+ teacher who does inclusion. In this space, silence is not the available option; however, silence is productive (Foucault, 1978/1998) and can be an act of resistance for LGBTQ+ teachers who either align themselves to professionalism (Ferfolja, 2014), against the 'real' neoliberal subject, or against the narratives of shame attached to the 'closet' (Seidman, 2003).

Hannah, who runs an LGBTQ+ inclusion group in her school, negotiates this differently, and does not present with 'shame'. She works at a school who is actively seeking an LGBTQ+ inclusion award. However, she was similarly confronted by a professional/personal barrier from senior leadership: '"It's not appropriate … to be sharing personal information in assembly" … also at one point we were told that we shouldn't be promoting homosexuality'; directly mirroring the language of Section 28. Hence, some inclusion may be more performative than inclusive (Ahmed, 2007). Moreover, that certain discursive constructions can reinforce binaries between teachers and students and reproduce exclusion for LGBTQ+ people.

The majority of the participants were very aware that the distinction between professional and personal subjectivities was a largely historic false binary. In contrast to Ferfolja's (2014) findings, these teachers act of agency was to locate LGBTQ+ within the honest autonomous professional, rather than outside. However, Josh, a secondary school teacher, provides a counterexample and more aligns to Ferfolja's (2014) findings. He states: 'I've never been someone who's apologetic about myself, but for some reason when it came to teaching, I was surprised, how I dealt with it' [that he's not out to everyone]. He knows he 'should feel confident in my job and being myself'. However, he argues that teaching is 'a unique profession in that regard'. In most other places, you openly talk about your family. But in education, in schools, it's still something that it's not

[talked about]. 'Cause you're dealing with children who haven't matured yet'. He frames this around separating 'you as a teacher from you as a person'. He doesn't appear to feel 'shame' as Alison and Catherine did, instead Josh positively frames this position around his need for protection, which can be a strategy practised by LGBTQ+ teachers (Griffin, 1991; Rudoe, 2010). However, it is also possible that Josh may be caught in the powerful intersection of discourses of LGBTQ+, the professional asexual/heterosexual teacher, and the innocent, moral child (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015). Within this, he constructs LGBTQ+ as 'too personal' and arguably constructs childhood as reductive (Buckingham, 2000; James & Prout, 2015; Qvortrup et al., 1994), as he is the only participant to refer to children as lacking maturity, which is often not how young people position themselves (Fitzpatrick & McGlashan, 2018). These discourses of childhood are explored in more depth and detail in the next section.

Discourses of childhood and youth

Analysis of the teachers' narratives suggests discourses of childhood as innocent are not the predominant way of talking about children, and instead teachers doing LGBTQ+ inclusion work often position children as socially aware, active agents. Moreover, they prepare their students for the social world, rather than protect them from it, which is aligned to contemporary constructs of childhood (James & Prout, 2015; Qvortrup et al., 1994). Similar to discourses of the teacher, this can come through open discussions, and building relationships. Thus, through the autonomous neoliberal teacher, these LGBTQ+ teachers not only deconstruct the binaries of the professional/personal and being out/closeted but they navigate the power differential of student/teacher. This relates to findings of Fitzpatrick and McGlashan (2018) who argue that students view themselves with agency, power and in contrast to reductive discourses of childhood. Whilst these narratives reframe the future outside of heterosexuality, there is a possibility that new discourses of childhood draw on discourses of youth as fixing the future (Lesko & Talburt, 2012), rather than within the present. This is a continuous problem for discourses of childhood who are tied to both nostalgia and futurity.

As before, I begin by discussing 'new' discourses of the student (childhood and youth) framed by the teachers, before finishing by discussing how the historic dominant discourses can be used to restrict LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools.

Many teachers in this study framed young people today as socially aware of the world in which they lived; 'they're quite woke [socially alert] the kids these days', states Susan, a primary school teacher. She continues, arguing that 'more respect could be given to the young people', thus, recognising the reductive way that children can be framed. Arguably the romantic vision of childhood more restricts than it respects, as it positions children as pre-social (Buckingham, 2000). Noah similarly views children as active agents who are socially aware of difference. Moreover, he notes this may be different to previous generations.

> Students now, that generation completely get it and are so open. And I'd say lots are exploring their sexuality and it's not a thing whatsoever for many of them. But even one generation above me, even people in their like mid-30s. Yeah, the world was so different.

He continues, explaining how students raise concerns when social issues are absent from school: 'You know, we don't do anything about race – we don't do, black history month, that isn't good enough' leading his school to implement school diversity week. Hence, his school positions students as active agents and beyond a clear teacher/student power binary. Peter similarly explains the wider awareness of current students:

> I think the students are more aware of what's going on in their environment, and I think you know back when I was 11 or 12, I wouldn't have had a clue about climate change. I wouldn't have had a clue about what was going on in other countries in terms of kind of wars and various things. Not with all students. Some are still very much in that kind of childhood bubble, which is great, but others are really hyper aware of what's going on and so they're kind of the advocates they stand up for what is right.

Also indicating that constructs of childhood do not signify a universal category of child, even though childhood is often framed as such in society and policy (James & Prout, 2015).

Similar comments are present in the primary school teachers' interviews, again demonstrating positioning children as agentic and part of the social world. Ben, a retired primary school head teacher explains:

> I think children are more switched onto social issues full stop, whether that's climate change, LGBT, looking at recycling anything like that, I think both through social media and awareness, they are much more clued into things like this, than perhaps children where I first started in education.

This kind of rhetoric was present in teachers who work in both England and Scotland; however, in contrast to the English teachers discussed above, Liam, who works in Scotland, can explicitly link social awareness to the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence.

> Scotland very much now with the implementation of the LGBT curriculum, the school being so inclusive and with the real commitment in the Scottish curriculum to social justice, I felt comfortable, and I mean I always let the kids lead the conversation.

The view of children as socially aware, social agents (through students leading discussions) is replicated in many interviews, mirroring contemporary constructs of childhood (James & Prout, 2015; Qvortrup et al., 1994).

Below Luke, a secondary school teacher takes this further, showing the connection, between social justice, students as agents, and the futurity of childhood and youth.

> Even just last week our head boy and head girl put a ballot out and the head girl, in one of them, her statement about that she wants to make sure that we have more equality in school, we have more LGBT focuses within school … I would definitely say student bodies have changed, and I think if anything they are a real engine to everything. It's young people that will drive it really forward for us.

This reshapes Edelman's (2004) positioning of heterosexuality as the future, but arguably maintains an overt optimism around the future represented through young people (Lesko & Talburt, 2012).

Luke also explains how this may not be a view shared by everyone 'over the years you find that kids are so much more accepting than people actually give them credit for', thus reiterating the presence of a reductive framing of childhood and youth (Buckingham, 2000). This is reiterated by other teachers – secondary senior leader Jake, notes that students are 'generally a lot tougher and a lot more aware and a lot more open and sort of understanding than we give them credit for'. As such, there is an awareness of the overt protectionist discourse limiting childhood and that this does not match children's lived experiences (James & Prout, 2015) or how they frame themselves (Fitzpatrick & McGlashan, 2018).

Even if they are not ascribed explicitly as socially responsive, many students are described as aware that LGBTQ+ is something they do not need protecting from; Olivia explains the way in which her family is discussed with her four- and five-year-old students:

> We talk a lot about who's in our house, in our family, and I'll always say, you know, well, this is Natalie. These are my children, and you know, because they're four and five, they don't question it … There's a Natalie in your house and that's about it.

The primary school teacher interviews were scattered with similar content, where students were often described as being 'open minded', or 'underwhelmed' by LGBTQ+ people. Many primary school teachers actively argued against the narrative of being 'too young', and that it privileges a normative family. 'Too young to know that they've got two gay parents – I don't think so', states Susan. Hence, the protectionist discourse is understood as inaccurate and limiting.

However, there is evidence that some schools still drew on discourses of LGBTQ+ as dangerous to the innocent and immature child (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015), often through the explicit connection between LGBTQ+ and sex, both being positioned as adult activities (Jackson & Scott, 2004).

Hannah explains how this connection can also be present in current secondary schools. She recounts a story where she was told by a senior teacher to sensor presentations from the school LGBTQ+ student group:

> [The senior leader] was like, 'well because, you know, you don't want them to suddenly be coming forward and doing a presentation about gay sex, for example'. 'I was like, are you ill?' … it felt like, oh my God, this is, this is a really negative stereotype that's being played out by someone in a professional context without them realising that it's a problem.

Hence, here there is the connection between LGBTQ+ and sex, through the pathologising of homosexuality (Foucault, 1978/1998); as such, the LGBTQ+ person is positioned as a threat to the morality and innocence of childhood (DePalma, 2010; Jackson & Scott, 2004; Monk, 2011). Moreover, the senior teacher constructs a protectionist discourse of childhood, which disempowers children (Buckingham, 2000), and may not match how young people view themselves (Fitzpatrick & McGlashan, 2018). Hannah is also aware of this, thus demonstrating her own neoliberal autonomy, and her negotiation of power.

Participants also shared other examples of students being positioned by staff as too young for LGBTQ+ which did not explicitly mention sex. This contrasts to many of the LGBTQ+ primary teacher participants who viewed difference as something to be celebrated and explored. Dylan, a non-binary primary school teacher, discusses their first placement school attended in 2015, and how the classroom teacher hid the LGBTQ+ posters when students were present.

> I said to her 'just out of interest, why do you cover that up each week?' and she went 'you know, it's just not really appropriate is it, for children to see things like that?' and I went, 'what? A poster about the fact that gay people exist?' and she went 'yeah, you know it's just it's not something we should really be teaching'.

Hence, the member of staff positions LGBTQ+ as inappropriate for children. The same school also tried to amend Dylan's gender presentation, by asking them to wear hair slides and alter their clothing:

> She said, 'oh you know some of the kids you know they just might be confused' and I said but none of the kids that I've taught while I've been here have been confused. She said, 'oh yeah but it's a bit uncomfortable for the adults as well. Because you know like you wear shirts and bow ties and stuff'.

Here, the discourses of childhood innocence and LGBTQ+ interact and the 'confusion' is at first framed around the children, which maintains a reductive view of childhood as pre-social (Buckingham, 2000). However, when pressed, the teacher states it is the adults who are uncomfortable. Arguably, just as in the discussions around Section 28 (See Burridge, 2004) the discourse of childhood innocence is used as a 'moral rhetoric' (Meyer, 2007) to legitimise the restriction of LGBTQ+, as it is the more acceptable discourse to state.

Discussion summary

> The thing I love about my school is that the kids are really nice. They will ask you 'how's your weekend?' Whereas when I was at school the thought of even asking a teacher about a partner or what they did at the weekend? Your teachers were this asexual kind of thing that lived in the back of their classrooms.

The above quotation, from David a secondary school teacher, brings together the discourses explored in the analysis section of this article, it also demonstrates how 'teachers and students interact to produce new ways of being' (Landi, 2018, p. 3). Socially constructed discourses of both teachers and students are not static, and instead are shaped within contexts. Specifically, and in contrast to Ferfolja (2014), contemporary contexts can produce neoliberal discourses of the teacher as LGBTQ+ and professional, and discourses of childhood (the student) as socially aware, agents in their social worlds, which aligns with Fitzpatrick and McGlashan (2018). The quotation also demonstrates how teachers deconstruct the professional/personal binary in ways that are

always already afforded to heterosexual colleagues (Connell, 2015). This is the subjectivity that is not always available to LGBTQ+ teachers, particularly where LGBTQ+ inclusion is limited.

Conclusion

In this research, I did not set out to explore discourses of the teacher and the child, they were not specifically interview questions. However, they are discursive themes which were present in the interviews. Writing in 2015, Ullman and Ferfolja (2015) argue that 'discursive intersections of childhood, (hetero)-sexuality/heteronormativity and teaching, coupled with morality discourses, position LGBTQ+ knowledge as incongruous with school education' (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015, p. 148). In this article, I argue that statement is, to some extent, true, and these discourses are still being used to exclude, by constructing LGBTQ+ as unacceptable knowledge for schooling. However, from this research, I also argue that for many LGBTQ+ teachers' their discursive constructions of the child are not constrained by innocence and morality; instead, they frame their students with agency and social awareness, which is aligned to contemporary sociological constructions of childhood (James & Prout, 2015; Qvortrup et al., 1994) and how many young people view themselves (Fitzpatrick & McGlashan, 2018). In relation, discourses of the professional teacher are no longer constrained by an asexual heterosexuality and instead are built around honesty and relationships. As such, rather than view their personal and professional subjectivities as in conflict as in previous research (Connell, 2015; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Neary, 2013), these teachers had space to construct a new teacher subjectivity that included being LGBTQ+. To do this, many teachers had to navigate discursive binaries that permeate education – the professional/personal, heteronormativity/diversity, student/teacher and being out/closeted. Arguably they are able to do this through drawing on notions of the autonomous neoliberal teacher who is tied to the authentic self; however, this does potentially leave those who cannot take on this authenticity and honesty with 'shame', particularly in the climate where LGBTQ+ inclusion has more prominence.

There are boundaries to this article. First, the participants mostly came via a teaching union, and LGBTQ+ social media; hence, the majority were interested in LGBTQ+ education. Thus it could be that there are more invested in LGBTQ+ inclusion and thus overtly feel discourses of 'shame'. Moreover, many of the participants fit homonormative (Duggan, 2002) narratives, thus, there may be more diverse stories to explore. The sample was also primarily English, white, cisgender, hence I am mindful of reasserting a privileged narrative. Although discourses of the child as innocent are premised upon Whiteness (Bernstein, 2011). Regardless, more research should specifically seek out intersectional categories of LGBTQ+ to unpack layers of privilege, which is hinted at by Hari.

Overall, I am mindful of reasserting a binary around progressive and traditional views of education and discourses of the teacher and the child. However, there is a material impact to these discursive constructions and subjectivities. Additionally, there are direct implications for teachers, schools and policy makers, when considering how to implement meaningful LGBTQ+ inclusion, particularly in terms of how they position teachers and students, and how education can reinforce divisive binaries. These barriers can be explicit, such as the narratives of childhood employed in protests recently in Birmingham, UK, and Ontario, Canada. The obstacles can also be implicitly found in wider 'legitimate' discourses of education and schooling, which routinely draw on the protection and innocence of childhood and teacher professionalism. Examples of which are present in this article but also found within educational policy – Bailey's (2011) government report 'letting children be children' would be a recent UK example. What children are, and what teachers are, should be more open to social change, and to the negotiations of all teachers and students. Teachers should not be constrained by inequitable, singular views of professionalism, whereas students should not be contained by a bubble that can disempower both themselves and LGBTQ+ inclusion.

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