



## Article

# How do Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Teachers Experience UK Rural School Communities?

Catherine Lee

Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care, Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford CM1 1SQ, UK; Catherine.lee@anglia.ac.uk

Received: 29 July 2019; Accepted: 29 August 2019; Published: 31 August 2019



**Abstract:** This article examines how lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers in rural schools negotiate their sexual identities within the workplace. Although there has been progress towards LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) inclusion for teachers in urban and suburban schools, this article shows that their rural counterparts often experience their school communities differently. A questionnaire gathered data from school teachers in the United Kingdom identifying as LGBT. Whilst a small number of transgender, gender queer and non-binary teachers completed the questionnaire, it is important to note that these teachers taught only in urban environments. In rural schools, respondents identified only as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB). Therefore, LGB is used when referring to the rural respondents in this study and LGBT is used when referring generally to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. The experiences of teachers working in rural schools were compared with those working in urban or suburban school settings. Results showed that LGB teachers in rural communities lack the opportunity to speak their identity into existence at school, and often find their personal and professional identities incompatible, leading to low self-worth, depression and anxiety. The article shows that in rural school communities, traditional and conservative rural norms and values are compelling and are often protected at the expense of creating safe and inclusive workplaces for LGB teachers.

**Keywords:** school; LGBT; teachers; rural; heteronormativity; cisnormativity; inclusion

## 1. Introduction

This article examines how LGB (lesbian, gay or bisexual) teachers in rural schools experience their workplace. Although there has been real progress towards LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) inclusion for teachers in urban and suburban schools, this article shows that their rural counterparts often experience their workplace very differently. It is important to acknowledge that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other sexual and gender minority groups are divergent and experience their lives and workplaces through a spectrum of complex and contradictory circumstances. Even though participants in this study share the same profession, their sexual and gender identities are intersected by age, race, faith, experience and socio-economic background, in addition to the geographical locations considered in this article. This article does not mean to assume that LGBT+ teachers would experience the same school community in the same way, instead it seeks to identify the experiences and challenges these teachers have common, when compared to their heterosexual and cisgendered teacher peers.

There has been an enduring culture of moral panic surrounding LGBT identities and the education of children. In 1988 in the UK, the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher was responsible for the implementation of Section 28 of the Local Government Act ([LGA 1988](#)), which stated that:

A local authority shall not—(a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality; (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.

Although Section 28 referred only to local authorities, the common belief at the time was that schools under local authority jurisdiction were indirectly bound by the same rules (Gray 2010). Though the Section 28 legislation was never enforced, in the 15 years between 1988 and its repeal in 2003, many LGBT teachers feared the loss of their jobs if their sexuality was revealed.

Since the repeal of Section 28, a political and cultural shift has helped to give LGBT teachers a degree of protection in the workplace. This cultural shift has emboldened some LGBT teachers in urban environments to come out in their school workplaces (Nixon 2013). However, their peers in rural schools do not appear as willing to disclose their sexual orientation to either their colleagues or students (Thompson-Lee 2017).

This article begins with a review of pertinent literature, before describing the process of collecting data from LGBT teachers. A combined results and discussion section follows before the article draws together the salient points in a conclusion.

## 2. Literature

Recent literature about LGBT teachers continues to record concerns about discrimination in UK schools (see Formby 2013; Jones et al. 2014; Rudoe 2014; Thompson-Lee 2017; Lee 2019). Evidence suggests that many LGBT teachers do not yet feel adequately protected in schools and have to navigate the intersection of complex private and professional boundaries. The reproduction of normative sexual identifications in schools is responsible for enduring institutionalised heteronormativity (Edwards et al. 2014; Gray 2013; Rudoe 2010). Teachers are employed not only on the basis of their professional capabilities but also their apparent positioning, modelling and surveillance of dominant ideologies. Schools are hegemonically heterosexual and cisgendered, characterised as oppressive and tense spaces where heterosexuality is the ever-present, regulating influence in classrooms (Krebbekx 2018). Ferfolja (2010) describes teachers as ‘purveyors of morality and regulators of social acceptability’ (p. 411) adding that ‘the teaching of children is expected to be above the political and presented as neutral’ (Ferfolja 2010, p. 411). Ferfolja notes that, ironically, this apparent neutrality is positioned within the heterosexual discourse which of course is a political position, although its normativity constructs it as natural and therefore neutral (Ferfolja 2010, p. 411). According to Ferfolja, schools use heterosexist regulation to police teacher sexuality through a variety of means. LGBT teachers may be marginalised by institutional practices that fail to be inclusive by, for example, failing to mark and celebrate a teacher’s wedding in the way that heterosexual marriage is acknowledged by the school. Institutionalised heteronormativity is then constitutive of the silencing of LGBT experience in schools (Epstein et al. 2003; DePalma and Atkinson 2006). It forces LGBT teachers to actively manage their identity on a day-to-day basis, something Ferfolja (2010) claims is symptomatic of the oppression of the heteronormative and cisnormative school environment. Although the research shows that some LGBT teachers do successfully come out at school (see for example, Jennings 2005; Fahie 2016), the literature demonstrates overwhelmingly that LGBT teachers still take great care how, and to whom, they reveal their sexuality at work (Ferfolja 2009; Rudoe 2010; Gray 2013; Thompson-Lee 2017).

Despite the considerable risks of coming out in the school community, LGBT teachers often face moral and political pressure to come out and be a role model for gay and LGBT students. Rasmussen (2004) considers the moral, political and pedagogical issues that necessarily influence educational discourses of the closet and coming out. She argues that coming out discourses tend to forge a relationship between inclusivity and coming out, a relationship that, she claims, situates the closet ‘as a zone of shame and exclusion’ (p. 144). Rasmussen asserts that by encouraging teachers to come out, it leaves those who are unable to do so feeling that they have somehow abdicated their moral responsibility as a role model to young people.

Whether an LGBT teacher decides to come out or remain silent may have an important impact on their career and promotional opportunities. Lineback et al. (2016) found that the teachers in their study tried to remain as invisible as possible so as to not draw attention to themselves, acknowledging that this strategy was not conducive to job promotion. Fahie (2016) too found that participants in his study avoided opportunities for promotion, as to do so would 'increase their professional profile and raise their level of visibility within the local community' (p. 402).

Some of the literature argues that the way in which LGBT teachers are driven to manage their personal and professional identities empowers them by placing them within discourses of resistance (Rasmussen 2004; Ferfolja 2009; Fahie 2016). As individuals with agency, LGBT teachers may challenge and resist heterosexist presumptions and subvert non-heterosexual identities in schools. Drawing on Butler's theories of performativity, Ferfolja argues that even teachers who remain closeted and silenced, or who pass as heterosexual, have power and choice. Maintaining a silence is an act of considerable power because it troubles the presumption of heterosexuality by leaving identities unclear to others.

One of the most important ways LGBT teachers can exercise agency and power is in the choices they make about where to teach. Fahie (2016) found that the extent to which LGBT teachers internalised the threat and effects of homophobia impacted directly on their career decisions, including where to work. There is a paucity of research relating to UK LGBT teachers in rural contexts. In her research, Gray (2010) interviewed a small number of teachers in rural schools and identified 'a fissure between the experiences of LGB teachers working within urban and rural areas' (p. 241). The association between living in the countryside and leading a safer, healthier and less stressful life has long been a part of both popular and academic consciousness. Smith and Holt (2005) identify that lesbian households in particular, are shown to be a significant group that 'socially and culturally (re)produce distinct constructions of rurality' (p. 313).

Schools in rural settings often play a very important role in the community. Typically, some distance from the facilities of the nearest town or city, the school building is often used beyond the school day, becoming a sports centre, library or village fete venue. The rural school is typically at the heart of the local community (Dolan 2001), seeming to belong as much to parents and other adults as it does to pupils. Anonymity from the rest of the community is impossible, and there is an inevitable blurring of the traditional teacher, parent, pupil dynamic. Relationships become complex as they are practised and revisited in a whole host of different circumstances within and beyond the school day.

Bauch (2001) recognises that rural schools differ from their urban and suburban counterparts. Traditional values and the importance of family are the norm in rural communities, and parents often choose rural schools for their children as they see them as a safer environment. Bauch argues that the small size and tightly knit social structure of rural school communities fosters a high level of parent involvement and influence in all aspects of their children's education. Woods (2005) concurs, describing the village school as, '... a focal point for community life' (p. 587). It can be used as an avenue for community meetings and events, and fundraising activities, and informal school-gate conversations between parents contribute to the structuring of community engagement. Local schooling reinforces identification with a community and friendships formed in the classroom may shape the social networks of a community for decades (Woods 2005, p. 587).

Bauch (2001) states that for the partnership between the village school and its community to be effective, leadership at the school needs to be conceived by all parties as relational, and in the countryside inclusion 'may not be available to everyone in a community, particularly outsiders and minorities' (p. 212). A rural school then is not an easy place to be if, like many LGBT teachers, you feel the need to conceal your sexual identity. According to Philo et al. (2003), people in rural environments expect to build up an intimate knowledge of each of their community members in order that positions within a local status hierarchy can be ascribed. A consequence of such a hierarchy is a 'powerful normalizing concept that acts to define who belongs and who is different' (Watkins and Jacoby 2007, p. 854).

LGBT teachers in urban and suburban schools often opt to partially reveal their sexuality to the school community (see [Jackson 2007](#); [Rudoe 2010](#)). This involves coming out to colleagues but presenting themselves as heterosexual in the classroom and to parents. Whilst potentially complex to negotiate, the relative anonymity of the town or city can enable this to work successfully for many LGBT teachers.

LGBT teachers in rural schools are more likely than their urban and suburban counterparts to face an all or nothing situation when deciding whether or not to come out. The complex and interwoven nature of rural relationships can make a partial coming out less likely to succeed. [Fahie \(2016\)](#) found that many LGBT teachers avoid posts in rural schools because being the local schoolteacher brings with it a level of surveillance which is intolerable.

[Watkins and Jacoby \(2007\)](#) asked whether the rural idyll is bad for one's health. In their research into stigma and exclusion in the English countryside, they discovered that in rural areas levels of loneliness, depression and suicidal tendencies among LGBT people were significantly higher than in urban areas. This is attributed in part to limited opportunities for rural residents to access support networks or to participate in LGBT-orientated activities. Watkins and Jacoby also argued that when LGBT people retreat to the perceived safety of towns or cities they perpetuate the heteronormative and cisnormative discourse of rural life simply through their absence from it. When this occurs, children growing up in rural areas have fewer opportunities to see on a day-to-day basis how LGBT adults live their lives, and in doing so, dispel any homophobic myths passed down from previous generations. The LGBT teacher who remains unseen by the rural community also denies emerging LGBT young people access to role models. The inevitable result of this is that many rural LGBT young people migrate to towns or cities, perceiving rural life as incompatible with their sexual identity.

### 3. Methodology

The study was predicated on a social constructivist assumption that individuals have a subjective understanding of the world in which they live and work and develop meanings from their experiences ([Creswell and Creswell 2017](#)). However, somewhat conversely, the aim was to design a data collection method that was anonymous and reached as many participants as possible. Therefore, a mixed methods approach to this inquiry was deployed, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. Utilising an anonymous questionnaire hosted online, the study aimed to provide a forum, in which participants could reveal, should they wish, quite personal details about their sexual identities without the fear of being identified. The questionnaire comprised of multiple-choice, structured and unstructured questions, with each of the closed or multiple-choice questions offering participants the opportunity to explain their answer with a free text comment.

The survey was piloted by nine LGBT teachers at a professional development event and amendments were made in light of a focus group convened to receive their feedback. The revised questionnaire and accompanying participant information sheet was then hosted online and the survey link circulated via the researcher's social media links in education and within the LGBT community. The UK's leading lesbian lifestyle magazine, *Diva*, was asked to promote the survey via their website and magazine. It was not possible to engage an equivalent magazine or online outlet for gay men however, and this meant that considerably more lesbians than gay men completed the survey (73% compared with 23%). Paper copies of the survey were also distributed at London Pride in June 2017. In order to access the survey, the teacher respondents were actively engaged with the LGBT community either online or in the physical environment and therefore possibly more open about their sexuality than some LGBT teachers may be. It is acknowledged that this is a limitation of this article.

A set of initial questions sought to establish demographic data about the respondents. This included, key stages taught, length of time as a teacher, current role and whether the respondent's school was located in a village, town or city. The remaining questions were based around the LGBT teacher's engagement with their current school community.

In total, 105 respondents completed the questionnaire over a two-month period between April and June 2017. The demographic make-up of respondents comprised: 73% female, 23% male, 4% other (including non-binary, gender queer, transgender). 43% of respondents identified as lesbian, 30% as gay, 8% as bisexual and 18% as other (including homoflexible, queer, pansexual).

Respondents spent between 1 and 36 years in teaching with 13.5 years as the average time serving as a teacher. Additionally, 46% of the teachers surveyed had worked between 1988 and 2003, during the period of Section 28 of the Local Government Act (LGA 1988) which prohibited the promotion of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship. The remaining 54% of teachers commenced their careers after 2003 and so had not experienced teaching under Section 28. A total of 39% of respondents taught in the primary phase, and 58% taught in secondary schools. Other respondents taught in all-through schools or in early years.

Responses to the questionnaire were collated by the geographical location of the respondent's school (i.e., whether teachers taught in a village, town or city school). It should be noted that definitions of village, town and city schools were not provided by the researcher. The classification of schools as rural, urban or suburban was determined by the LGBT teachers themselves. Most respondents based in villages or towns taught in primary schools (52%) and most respondents in cities taught in secondary education (69%). Furthermore, 10% of village teachers who completed the questionnaire worked at faith schools compared with the 25% from towns and 25% from cities. Faith schools were predominantly Catholic or Church of England with one Islamic Sunni school. As previously stated, it is important to note that all of the respondents from rural schools self-identified as either lesbian, gay or bisexual. Those teachers identifying as transgender, gender queer or non-binary taught only in urban secondary schools. With only 105 respondents in total, it is not possible to generalise or say with certainty why this is. However, when compared with villages, cities are typically more diverse and the concentration of greater numbers of people helps to foster a greater sense of anonymity. It may be then that transgender, gender queer and non-binary respondents avoided teaching posts in villages perceiving that urban school communities would be more diverse, inclusive and welcoming.

#### 4. Results and Analysis

The initial question asked LGBT teachers which stakeholders in their school community were aware of their sexual identity. Responses are shown in Figure 1 below.

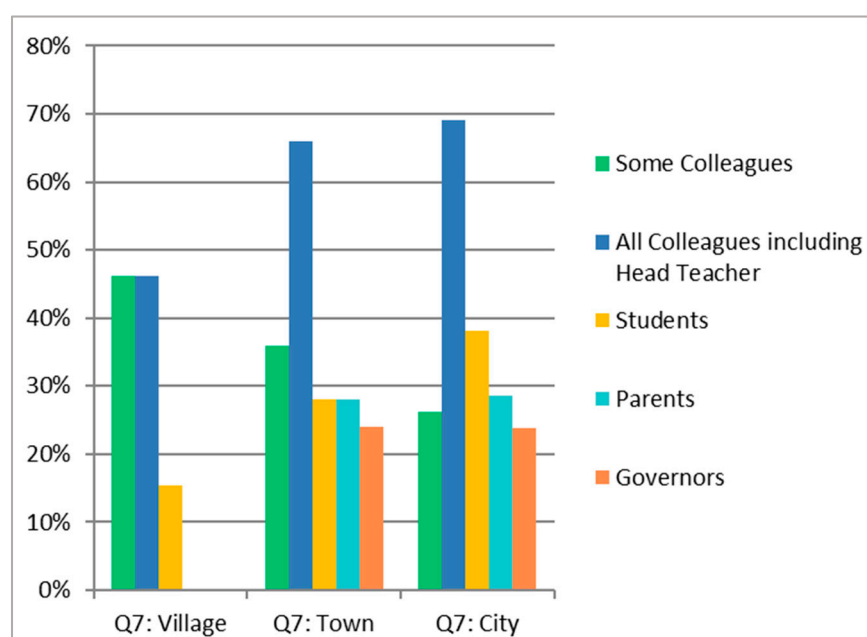


Figure 1. Which of the following people at school are aware of your sexual identity?



The results show that no teacher in a village school was out to parents or governors, and only 15% were out to pupils (compared with 28% for town and 38% for city teachers). Considerably more teachers were out to all members of the school community in towns and cities, than in villages (68% and 65% versus 45%). Just over a quarter of teachers, predominantly in towns and cities, did feel able to be out to students and several saw that they had a responsibility to be positive role models to young people by being open about their sexual identity. In qualitative comments, a number of teachers in village schools said that they were out to a few children, but this had not been through choice, implying they may have been 'outed'. In contrast, town and city teachers appeared much more relaxed about being open about their sexual identity at school. Qualitative data from city teachers included the following comments,

*I now act as a role model for students and take an active role in the student Pride Club.*

*I felt obliged as queer students were being marginalised and their needs were ignored by teachers.*

Several respondents recognised the importance of being role models for LGBT young people and mentioned several times the importance of being there for others. However, a fear of a negative reaction from parents in particular, led LGB teachers in village schools to be wary. This comment from a lesbian in a village school typifies the dilemma that several teachers expressed,

*When I got married I didn't make a fuss about this at work and I didn't change my name. I am a proud lesbian but feel wary at work. This is not because of staff or students but due to parents. My school is in a rural community and I have kept my sexuality quiet at times as I have been worried about people's reactions. I want to do more to raise awareness of LGBT issues, especially for students.*

LGBT teachers were asked whether their partner (if they had one) accompanied them to school social occasions, such as staff meals, school plays, etc. (Figure 2).

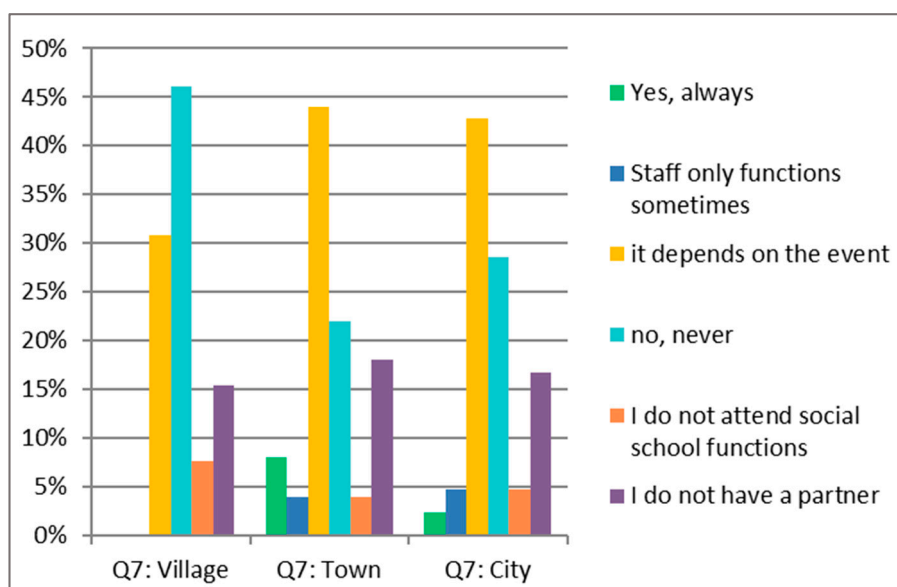


Figure 2. Does your partner accompany you to school social functions?

Few LGBT teachers in towns and cities always took their partner to social functions, but none of the village teachers did. Additionally, 43% of village teachers never took their partner to school social functions compared with 22% of the town teachers and 29% of city teachers. The data suggest that LGB teachers in village schools actively managed the intersection between home and school identities and had what [Rudoe \(2010\)](#) describes as a covert personal identity. One lesbian teacher in a village school felt that talking about a same sex partner was a more intimate declaration than talking about an opposite sex partner.

*It's difficult because straight teachers are okay to talk about their husbands/wives but it feels like an overshare to say I have a female partner. There are also concerns that I might face behavioural problems with the super religious kids if they knew.*

This quotation suggests that this teacher struggled to navigate a heteronormative school environment where heterosexual relationships were not imbued with the 'sex' of sexual identity in the way that she perceived her lesbian relationship was. Clarke (1996) stated that in order to successfully come out in the school workplace, one must be a good homosexual. This is achieved when the LGBT teacher is out but does not flaunt or make visible their sexuality or present as a sexual being. This teacher also raises the dilemma that can arise, particularly in faith schools, where there are tensions between promoting LGBT equality and providing an environment in which individuals can practise a religion that may condemn LGBT relationships.

The questionnaire sought to establish the extent to which LGBT teachers live within the school catchment area. Only 8% of teachers in villages lived within the catchment area compared with 28% and 30% for towns and cities, respectively. Those teachers living outside the school catchment area were asked to what extent this decision was influenced by their sexual identity. A total of 42% of village teachers said this was the sole reason, compared with only 11% of teachers in towns. For city teachers, sexual identity was never the entire reason for the decision to live outside the school catchment area, and for 50% this was no consideration at all. This suggests then that teachers in villages find the positioning of the school, often the heart of the rural community (Dolan 2001), more complex to navigate due to the inevitable blurring of the traditional teacher, parent, pupil dynamic, typical of village life (Woods 2005).

LGBT teachers were asked whether they thought that their sexual identity had ever been a barrier to promotion in teaching (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Do you think your sexuality identity has ever been a barrier to your promotion?

It is of note that almost a quarter of all LGBT teachers perceived that their sexual identity had been a barrier to promotion, and this comment by a gay male teacher in an urban school suggests that for all LGBT teachers, there must initially be a tentative presentation of the self when moving schools to seek promotion.

*In terms of applications to other schools, I have noticed that my applications progress further when I do not mention my work to improve LGBT visibility in schools.*

Whilst 14% of teachers in towns and 17% in cities thought that their sexual identity had been a barrier to promotion, this was more acute for village teachers, with 42% claiming that their sexual identity had been detrimental to their career progression. This comment from a village teacher typifies several,

*[I] was warned by [my] headteacher not to tell anyone about my sexuality as lesbians don't become head teachers.*

Headteachers were frequently accused by respondents of putting the fear of parental complaint above their right to equality in the workplace. A number of lesbians and gay men teaching during Section 28 (between 1988 and 2003) wrote of being asked to leave schools and being moved frequently between schools within the local authority, with many more LGBT teachers, like the respondent above, being warned by headteachers to stay in the closet to avoid harming their careers. The act of silencing a teacher by asking them not to reveal their sexual identity is similar to the U.S. military's 'Don't ask, don't tell' policy towards homosexuality during the Clinton administration. 'Don't ask, don't tell' may on the surface be perceived as an act of tolerance but in providing no space for an individual to speak their identity into existence, it shows that sanctioning what cannot be discussed is just as powerful a weapon of heteronormativity and cisnormativity as endorsing what can be discussed. Describing 'don't ask, don't tell' as an implicit sanctioning of heterosexuality, [Britton and Williams \(1995\)](#) state that,

Restrictions on the military service of gay men and lesbians concerns bias within the armed forces and in the public at large. The presence of homosexuals is perceived as a threat to effective individual and unit performance because gay and lesbian soldiers will be targets for harassment by heterosexual soldiers and, if they are officers, will not command respect. Furthermore, the presence of homosexuals in the military is asserted to impair morale and teamwork, also due to prejudices held by other soldiers. (p. 5)

It is not difficult to apply the assertions of Britton and Williams to education. 'Don't ask, don't tell' protected the reputation of the armed forces by ensuring they reflected the views of the 'public at large'. In the same way, schools reflect the dominant norms and values of the community they serve. Harassment of soldiers was anticipated and there were fears that they would not be respected. Schools fear damage to their reputations through teacher scandals, particularly scandals that are perceived to be related to sex. [Sikes \(2006\)](#) argued that when sex intrudes into schools, 'a discourse of scandalised outrage ... provokes prurient curiosity, provides scope for self-righteous indignation and ... moral panic' (p. 268). LGBT teachers may then be perceived as inviting scandal and may find themselves subject to harassment and prejudice.

Applying the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy to schools, [DePalma and Atkinson \(2009\)](#) show how silencing is a powerful heteronormative and cisnormative discursive practice. They argue that the pseudo-tolerance of 'don't ask, don't tell' 'perpetuates stereotypes and propagates the heterosexist assumption that all teachers and parents are heterosexual, and all girls and boys will grow up and eventually (want to) marry a person of the opposite sex' (p. 839). [Yoshino \(1998\)](#) described 'don't ask, don't tell' as 'mandatory invisibility' (p. 485). He claimed that the homosexual/heterosexual binary means that a ban on self-identification of a lesbian or gay identity implies the affirmation of a heterosexual identity by default. He explained, 'this is because the strength of the heterosexual presumption makes a homosexual's silence as pointed and as performative as speech affirming that she is straight' ([Yoshino 1998](#), p. 485).

LGBT teachers were asked to what extent they felt able to be themselves in the classroom. Nobody in a village school felt completely able to be themselves, compared with 44% in towns and 38% in cities. Half of village teachers said they were not at all their authentic selves in the classroom compared with 19% in towns and only 5% of city teachers. These results are consistent with Griffin's findings twenty-five years ago. Lesbian teachers in Griffin's research sought to silence children's questions or accusations by acquiring the reputation of being someone 'not to mess with' in the classroom



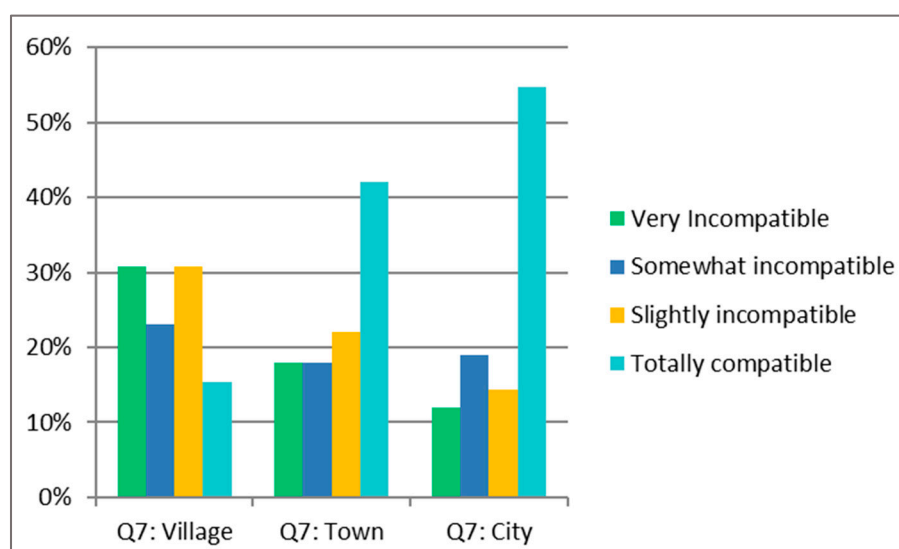
(Griffin 1992, p. 173), whilst other strategies adopted by Griffin's participants included endlessly rehearsing how they would respond to confrontation in relation to homophobic remarks or behaviours (Griffin 1992, p. 173).

LGBT teachers were then asked to what extent they felt able to be themselves in the school staffroom. Only 10% of village teachers felt completely able to be themselves compared with 57% of town teachers and 68% of city teachers. A gay male teacher based in a village school reported,

*Casual homophobic and transphobic language in staff rooms. I have heard of worse from colleagues placed in catholic schools. Open and blatant homophobia.*

The experience of this teacher suggests that the dominant discourse of the community in which the school is set, regulates what can and cannot be said in the school staffroom. Pascoe (2007) observes that school staff are entrusted to uphold and promote the dominant discourse of the wider community and this usually means that heterosexuality, male masculinity and female femininity are the only gender and sexual identities that are encouraged. This respondent's colleagues had witnessed how the religious teachings permeated faith-based school staffrooms. Where traditional interpretations of the Bible rejected LGBT identities, then this may result in the rejection of LGBT teachers' identities in the school workplace.

The questionnaire explored the extent to which LGBT teachers felt that their sexual identity was compatible with being a teacher (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** To what extent do you feel that your sexual identity and identity as a teacher is compatible?

Only 15% of village teachers thought that their sexual and teacher identities were totally compatible, compared with 42% of town teachers and 55% of city teachers. A total of 31% of village teachers thought being a teacher was totally incompatible with their sexual identity compared with 18% of town teachers and 12% of those teaching in a city.

A male gay teacher working in a town school wrote positively about coming out and being himself at school,

*I was no longer avoiding questions/dancing around the subject. I felt that I was honestly myself. There were no negative reactions from students... They just wanted to ask, very sensible questions, when the news broke (I was pictured at a demonstration, in the local paper). Most of them thought that I was courageous. As a teacher of English, who often asked students to write of their life experiences, being 'out' felt right.*

This teacher did come out to students deliberately and being seen at a demonstration (presumably for LGBT rights), led his professional and personal identities to forcibly collide. However, this incident

ended well and resolved for him the discomfort he felt in asking students to share their experiences with him through their writing, when he shared nothing of himself in return. This dilemma is consistent with those highlighted by Rasmussen (2004) as she considered the moral, political and pedagogical issues that necessarily influence educational discourses of the closet and coming out. Rasmussen suggests that coming out discourses tend to forge a relationship between inclusivity and coming out, a relationship that, she claims, situates the closet 'as a zone of shame and exclusion' (p. 144).

Ferfolja (2009) discovered in her research that LGBT teachers were fearful that teacher colleagues and parents would construct their sexual identity as incompatible with their teacher identity. Rudoe (2010) also identified a heterosexual fear of a gay agenda that recruits children to homosexuality. Gray (2010) further stated, 'The perceived link between homosexuality and paedophilia . . . contributes to the (re)production of the heteronormative discursive practices that dominate schools as educational institutions' (p. 40).

The findings in this article supports the views of Gray and Ferfolja. Almost one in five teachers felt that their sexual identity was completely incompatible with their teacher identity. This seemed to be a bigger issue for teachers in rural schools with half admitting they did not feel able to be themselves in the classroom at all, and 30% of rural teachers reporting that they were not able to be themselves in the staffroom either. As Thompson-Lee (2017) describes in *Heteronormativity in a Rural School Community*, managing the intersection between the home-self and school-self is exhausting and if done over time, can erode mental health, well-being and self-esteem.

Respondents were asked whether they had ever experienced homophobia in their role as a teacher; 58% of village teachers said they had experienced homophobia compared with 36% in towns and 48% in cities. In common with other questions, the rate of perceived homophobia was higher in villages, however the scores for teachers in towns and cities was also much higher for this question, compared with others. Just less than half of all LGBT teachers said that they had experienced homophobia in the workplace. Comments included,

*Other staff members . . . said I shouldn't be around young children and shouldn't be teaching full stop!*

*A Mum asked if being gay is compatible with teaching.*

*Was told by previous head that I was the gossip of the local headteachers briefing.*

*[A] teacher colleague told my child that being gay was dirty.*

The experiences of all LGBT teachers in this survey suggest there schools are not yet truly inclusive workplaces, with colleagues and parents responsible for perpetuating heteronormative, cisnormative and homophobic values. The National Education Union, the largest teaching trade union in the United Kingdom, advises teachers facing allegations from parents that parents are fully protected by their status and relationship to the school, through qualified privilege. Their website states,

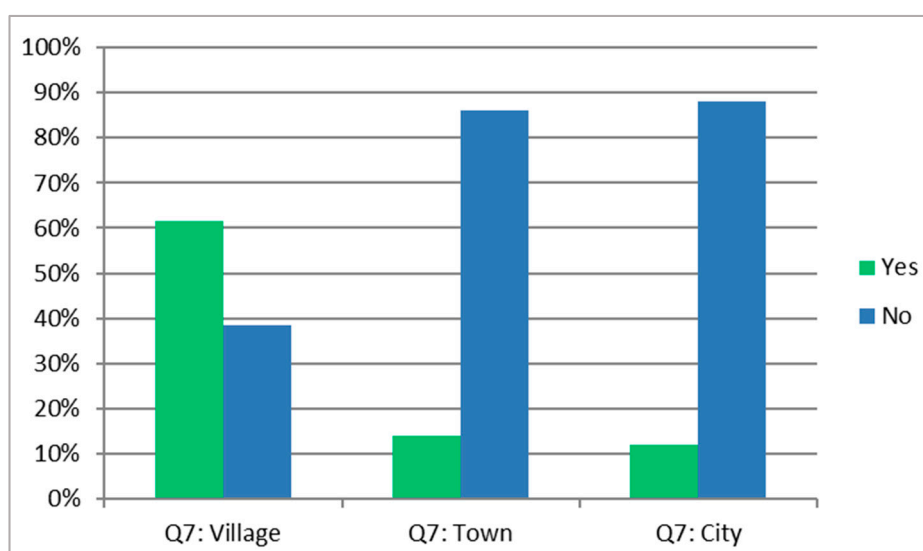
Legally, a parent who makes a complaint privately . . . to the appropriate authority (such as the headteacher) has a full defence, known as 'qualified privilege'—even if the allegation is, in fact, untrue. Professionally, it may also be unwise to bring defamation proceedings, since the effect is often to broadcast the damaging allegations even further. Defamation actions are notoriously protracted, expensive and uncertain in outcome. (NEU 2018)

This quotation from a body responsible for protecting teachers in the workplace, suggests that qualified privilege gives parents carte blanche to pass comment freely about teachers without recrimination.

Respondents were asked how often they heard homophobic language in their role as a teacher, with 31% of village teachers reporting hearing homophobic language everyday compared with only 8% of town teachers and 2% of city teachers. Only 8% of village teachers reported never hearing homophobic language, compared with 36% and 26% of town and city teachers, respectively. Whilst schools in towns and cities appeared much more aggressive in stamping out homophobic language,

it appears to be endemic in rural schools, where 54% of LGB teachers reported hearing it at least once a week. When LGBT teachers are able to be out at school, their visibility can mean that they are less likely to hear homophobic language than if they remain guarded or silent about their sexual identity. Qualitative responses from LGBT teachers uncovered a particular problem with senior leaders in schools not challenging homophobic name calling; several teachers shared their frustration that homophobic language or banter between children was too often ignored by senior staff. Stonewall's School Report (2017) in which 3700 LGBT pupils were surveyed, showed 86% regularly hear phrases such as 'that's so gay' or 'you're so gay' in school (Bradlow et al. 2017). This is far more than the 54% of homophobic language heard by our LGBT village teachers and suggests, as Stonewall alleges, teachers are not privy to the full extent of homophobic language used in schools.

LGBT teachers were asked whether they had ever accessed help for depression or anxiety linked to their sexual identity and role as a teacher. Results showed that for village teachers, depression and anxiety was extraordinarily high, with 61% of village teachers seeking help, compared with an average of 12.5% for town and city teachers (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Have you ever accessed help for anxiety or depression linked to your sexual identity and role as a teacher?

These data suggest that there may be a link between the extent to which LGBT teachers feel that their sexual identity is compatible with the school's norms and values, the extent to which they are able to be open about their sexual identity at school, and their mental health. Meyer (2003) states that lesbians and gay men may be prone to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression because their compulsory participation in heterosexist social processes, social institutions and social structures leads to repeated messages of exclusion. Meyer asserts that a 'sense of harmony with one's environment' (p. 676) is the basis for good mental health. He adds that 'when the individual is a member of a stigmatized minority group, the disharmony between the individual and the dominant culture can be onerous and the resultant stress significant' (Meyer 2003, p. 676).

Pursing the theme of mental health further, LGBT teachers were asked if they had ever had time off work for depression or anxiety linked to their sexual identity. Again, the responses from LGB village teachers were stark, with 46% saying they had been off work for anxiety or depression linked to their sexual identity and role as a teacher. This compared with only 4% of town teachers and 7% of city teachers. The findings of this article are consistent with the wealth of research which reports higher prevalence of anxiety and depression in the LGBT community than in the rest of the population (see Mayock et al. (2010) and Meyer (2003) for example). A lesbian teacher in a village wrote movingly

about how tiring it was to manage the intersection between her teacher-self and her lesbian-self at school. She said,

*I have to hide details of my private life and endlessly watch what I say. It's exhausting and on some days I feel as though I can't cope anymore.*

Teachers in cities seemed much more robust in their attitudes to their sexuality and role as a teacher. Some spoke of a responsibility to be out and be a role model to young people, seeing their sexuality as an opportunity rather than a barrier. Stonewall's School Report (2017) shows that when young LGBT people have role models among the staff, their school experience is much more positive (Bradlow et al. 2017).

## 5. Concluding Comment

From September 2020, schools in England will be required to teach Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) that is inclusive of LGBT relationships. Recently, some parents and people in faith communities have protested outside school gates, opposing the efforts of schools already teaching about LGBT inclusion through the No Outsiders programme. These protests have left some teachers and pupils needing counselling. As September 2020 nears and these protests gather momentum, it is more important than ever that we learn more about the way in which heteronormativity, cisnormativity and homophobia in schools, adversely affect LGBT teacher health, well-being and identity.

This article shows that despite a cultural shift in the UK towards greater inclusion for LGBT people, the prevailing ethos in rural schools deters LGB teachers from being themselves, and this has the potential to adversely affect career progression, health and well-being. Many teachers are not able to be themselves, are not able to take their partner to social events and feel the need to live outside the catchment area, carefully managing the intersection between home and school life. There is a stark difference between the experiences of LGB teachers in villages and LGBT teachers in towns and cities. This article suggests that whilst teachers in towns and cities appear largely able to be themselves in the classrooms and staffrooms of UK schools, teachers in rural communities are often managing complex intersections between personal and professional identities. When equality policies are not living documents and pervasive homophobia, heteronormativity and cisnormativity are permitted, the mental health of LGBT teachers can suffer. 62% of LGB teachers in village schools have accessed help for depression or anxiety linked to their sexual identity and role as a teacher. 46% of LGB teachers in villages have been absent from work because of this and, at a time when it is proving more challenging than ever to recruit and keep good teachers, action must be taken to address this. This article has revealed the considerable power of heteronormativity and homophobia in schools, particularly in rural communities. LGB teachers often lack the opportunity to speak their identity into existence at school, and the need to manage the intersection of sexual and teacher selves leads to personal dissonance, low self-worth and in many cases, depression and anxiety. In rural school communities, conservative and traditional norms, values and viewpoints are upheld, at the expense of creating safe and inclusive workplaces for LGBT teachers.

The experiences of LGBT teachers in the urban context are now fairly well documented, but to date, the equivalent understanding of LGBT teachers in rural schools is lacking. It is particularly revealing that this study did not find a single transgender, gender queer or non-binary person teaching in a rural school. The rural school community can present particular challenges one might not ordinarily expect in schools based urban or suburban contexts. It is important therefore that through further research these challenges are captured in order that they can be overcome. Young people in the countryside should have access to the diverse role models that their urban and suburban counterparts are beginning to enjoy. LGBT teacher identities must be acknowledged, understood and performed without fear, so that in all school communities the dominant discourse is one that is inclusive and reflects the lives of all those who live, learn and teach there.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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