

Rainbow Owls: A Phenomenological Analysis of LGBTQ+ Agriscience Teachers' Experiences

Colby Gregg¹
Amanda M. Bowling²

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to collaborate with School-Based Agriscience Education (SBAE) teachers who identify as LGBTQ+ to examine the unique interactions between their chosen career and their sexual and/or gender minority identities. This phenomenology utilized queer theory to analyze data from semi-structured interviews with individuals who had taught at least one year in the SBAE classroom, identified as LGBTQ+, and were employed to teach SBAE or professionally supervise an SBAE teacher. Participants consisted of six gay men, one lesbian woman, and one transgender man from eight different states across the U.S. Findings indicated three themes: 1) the three-hurdle race from closeted to proud, 2) Taking the elevator to avoid the “state” SBAE level, and 3) Affirmation and representation - the importance of being out. While the findings in this study are not generalizable, we begin to uncover the challenges that LGBTQ+ SBAE teachers face. Findings from this study have the potential to inform policy and culture reform to create more inclusive and equitable spaces for SBAE teachers from underserved communities. Of note, individual state SBAE associations should be prompt in assessing these issues since these spaces have been identified by participants as particularly egregious when it comes to a lack of inclusion.

Introduction

Relating to School-Based Agricultural Education (SBAE), many stakeholders, including the National FFA Organization (2019) have built efforts toward fostering diversity and inclusion. While many studies have been conducted on various forms of diversity within SBAE, individuals who hold an identity that's considered a gender or sexuality minority (those who are LGBTQ+ or, colloquially, “queer”) are underrepresented in the literature, even though there is “clear practitioner demand” for such research (Murray et al., 2020, p. 297). Broader literature has begun to describe how LGBTQ+ teachers and agriculturists interact with the world around them as it relates to their lives and careers. Of note, this literature identifies four broad themes of research related to LGBTQ+ teachers' lived experiences: heteronormativity, coming out, impact of the school environment, and the cultural expectations of teachers serving as role models to students.

Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is the concept that all social relations are imbued with meaning in the context of gendered social agents, in which the agents whose roles “match” with their associated gender are given communal priority over those who do not (Jackson, 2006). When these views are pervasive within a cultural setting to the point where discrimination based on sexual orientation is justified, this is known as homophobia (Morin & Garfinkel, 1978). In a study completed in a rural community in Australia, gay and lesbian participants consistently experienced homophobia within all sectors of their lives, including the workplace (Gottschalk & Newton, 2009). Across the world in Great Britain, another study found that young

¹ Colby Gregg is an Agriscience Teacher and FFA Advisor at Santa Fe South High School, 6921 Plaza Mayor Blvd., Oklahoma City, OK, 73149, cgregg@santafesouth.org. <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0351-1823>

² Amanda M. Bowling is an Associate Professor of Agricultural Education in the Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership at The Ohio State University, 2120 Fyffe Rd., Columbus, OH 43210, bowling.175@osu.edu. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2526-725>

gay men were more concerned about constructing an identity while navigating a homophobic society than they were with their sexual health amid the concerns of HIV (Flowers & Buston, 2001).

Closer to home, gay men who work within the agricultural sector in the U.S. report experiencing significantly more workplace homophobia than those who do not (Parent & Steede, 2020). Identifying homophobia is important because navigating homophobic societies can have mental health consequences, according to a study that established a relationship between psychological distress and experiencing internalized homophobia, stigma, and prejudice (Meyer, 1995). In navigating homophobic cultures, queer people, particularly teachers, often must separate their “private” and “public” selves, giving an experience of living two separate lives as a form of self-preservation (Bower-Phipps, 2017; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Gray, 2013; Griffin, 1992; Jackson, 2006; Mayo Jr., 2008; Olson, 1987).

Coming Out

When queer teachers do decide to combine these public and private lives by “coming out of the closet” at school, each experience is unique and falls somewhere on a continuum which can be found in more detail in Figure 1 (Griffin, 1992). Before coming out, many queer teachers cited safety as a critical issue to avoid the process in the workplace altogether; these teachers particularly stated using the conservatism of a community as a sign of danger (Bower-Phipps, 2017; Griffin, 1992). When they did decide to come out, teachers often sought a “safe” form by coming out to a coworker or administrator first (Gray, 2013). By coming out, queer teachers were able to find a greater sense of job satisfaction, a higher sense of authenticity, and more confidence in their teaching, and were empowered to actively work against homophobia, heteronormativity, and negative stereotypes about queer people in their schools (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Gray, 2013; Haddad, 2019; Jackson, 2006). Those teachers who were able to come out in the context of the subjects they taught had the greatest success, while those who taught at either the elementary level or in a subject that includes concepts of sex (like health and science) had more difficult experiences (Jackson, 2006; Tompkins et al., 2019). This is likely due to communities with large religious populations reducing “sexuality” to “sexual behavior” rather than acknowledging that sexuality also includes emotional and relational dimensions (Yip, 2010). This isn’t surprising when you consider that sexual minority identity development has historically been understood as “fundamentally defined by one’s sexual partners” (Bishop et al., 2020, p. 15). However, the first probabilistic LGBTQ+ study on sexual minority identity development has shown trends indicating that sexual identity development is happening both earlier and faster, pushing identity development milestones earlier into adolescence, *before* individuals may have any sexual experience (Bishop et al., 2020).

Figure 1

LGBTQ+ educators’ identity management strategies.

<i>Closeted</i>	<i>Passing</i>	<i>Covering</i>	<i>Implicitly Out</i>	<i>Explicitly Out</i>	<i>Out</i>
Out to no one	Lying	Censoring	Telling truth w/o Labels	Affirming LGBTQ+ Identity	Out to school community
	I assume you don’t know.		I assume you know.	I know you know.	
	Seen as Heterosexual	NOT seen as LGBTQ+	Maybe seen as LGBTQ+	Seen as LGBTQ+	
FEAR ←		<i>Personal/Professional</i>		→ SELF-INTEGRITY	
SEPARATION ←		<i>Self</i>		→ INTEGRATION	

Note. Adapted from Griffin (1992).

School Environments

In examining professional spaces, queer teachers who taught in high diversity environments with a progressive school atmosphere reported that it was easier to come out in the workplace (Bower-Phipps, 2017; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013). However, when these factors associated with positive school atmospheres are absent, teachers reported significantly higher levels of homophobic bullying by students, administrators, and parents (Dykes & Delpont, 2018). Notably, administrators were often leaders in this context; when they weren't supportive, the process of coming out at work was more difficult for teachers (Haddad, 2019; Jackson, 2006; Tompkins et al., 2019). Beyond administrators, other teachers' dispositions have the potential to negatively impact the school environment. While no studies could be found detailing present teaching populations, a survey of teacher candidates in Texas noted that participants had a moderately negative attitude toward gay and lesbian populations (Wyatt et al., 2008). This troubling finding indicates why some queer teachers would avoid coming out at school.

Regardless of their level of "outness", queer teachers recognized, reported, and addressed homophobic comments in schools at significantly higher rates than their cisgender/heterosexual (cis/het) colleagues (Meyer et al., 2015). These types of comments can also be directed toward queer teachers through the form of gossip among students and teachers alike when teachers do not conform to gender norms; this can lead to "othering" of queer teachers and facilitate homophobia via an unwelcoming environment (Smith & Smith, 1998; Tompkins et al., 2019).

Queer Teachers as Role Models

When positive school environments exist, tasks of teaching about queer issues, speaking up against heteronormativity, and serving as role models for queer students seem to fall quickly to LGBTQ+ teachers who are explicitly out (Tompkins et al., 2019). One contributor to this could be that LGBTQ+ teachers are more likely to report unsafe environments for *any* member of a marginalized population than their cis/het colleagues do (Tompkins et al., 2019). In addition, LGBTQ+ teachers reported that few cis/het educators were aware of the concept of heteronormativity, or if they were aware, were less willing to actively challenge it (Meyer et al., 2015).

Even when they weren't out, gay teachers still took it upon themselves to "monitor" students who were out or that were rumored to be gay to publicly protect them or to privately provide them advice (Mayo Jr., 2008). This (pre/ab)sence of such a "gay guardian teacher" could be an important factor in the sexual minority identity development of LGBTQ+ individuals from areas of low population, especially since studies of rural gay men and women have reported strong feelings of isolation in addition to a strong felt need for queer role models in their communities (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Gottschalk & Newton, 2009).

Theoretical Lens

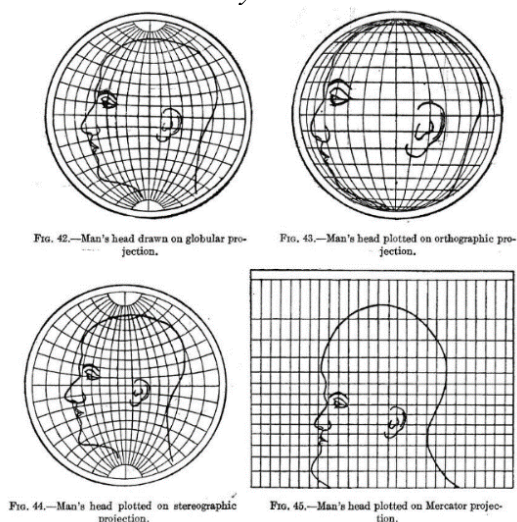
Queer theory was the theoretical lens utilized in this study's design and analysis. Queer theory in and of itself has a very rich history in being utilized to dissect concepts that go against "normality" (Jagose & Genschel, 1996). Because of this rich and varied history, queer theory is often oversimplified and defined as the study of "otherness", otherwise known as "queerness". This oversimplification is problematic because it posits queerness as an essential quality to "have" rather than a subjective attribute only understood through the lens of the ever-shifting experiences of the subject (Dilley, 1999). This subjective definition of queerness, rooted in postmodern constructionism, is best understood when compared to its opposite counterpart of "normal" – or the majority practice, idea, or opinion.

In scholarly research, queer theory tends to lend itself to three basic purposes: examining the experiences of those who are not cis/het, juxtaposing the experiences of these individuals with what is

considered “normal”, and analyzing why these experiences are not considered “normal” (Dilley, 1999). To further understand the use of queer theory for the three purposes listed above, it can be helpful to visualize different map projections. Because we live on a 3-dimensional globe, we cannot accurately represent the earth visually on a 2-dimensional surface, such as a map. Because of this, scholars have proposed different ways to represent a spherical globe as a flat map. However, regardless of the approach you take, it is impossible to have a perfect map. To illustrate this dilemma, Figure 2 reproduces an image first published in a cartography textbook in 1921 representing how four different map projections will provide different inaccuracies when the same shape (a face) is projected. When examining these changes between projections, one could note that the greatest inaccuracies between the four examples occur in the *margins* of the map, far away from the *central focus*. To bring this analogy back to queer theory, when we examine society, the *central focus* will always be the majority “norm” which often means that the *margins* will default to be the *other*. Queer theory seeks to directly address this by *re-centering* the focus point of our proverbial map – re-shifting the margins to the center, so we can better understand these marginal experiences *outside of the norm*.

Figure 2

A comparison of various map projection errors. Published in Elements of map projection (1921) Special Publication No. 68 by the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, Department of Commerce.



This research followed the first tenet proposed by Dilley (1999) to form a greater understanding of the lived experiences of gender and sexuality minority SBAE teachers. Additionally, queering as an analytical tool for constructing knowledge can be leveraged to identify meaning units outside of traditional lenses of understanding (Halperin, 2003). This lens provided the tools necessary to 1) center the inquiry around *the participants' lived experiences on the margins of the norm*, and to 2) identify how LGBTQ+ SBAE teachers queer their own understanding of the world through their experiences.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to identify the unique challenges LGBTQ+ SBAE teachers face due to the intersection of their career, rurality, and their gender and sexuality minority identities. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do LGBTQ+ SBAE teachers identify with and/or dissociate with the larger SBAE community?

2. What are the issues facing LGBTQ+ SBAE teachers related directly to their profession, their gender and sexuality minority identity, or both?
3. To what degree do LGBTQ+ SBAE teachers face homophobic prejudice?

Methods

This research was a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994) whose central phenomenon was the lived experience of SBAE teachers who identify as LGBTQ+. We used a constructivist lens as each participant's experience relating to gender and sexuality was constructed through unique social interactions that may or may not be shared (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This was especially important to note since sexuality can only truly be understood through subjective experiences relating to society's implied normality and otherness.

As researchers, we must reconcile our own identities and biases throughout the research process. The research team consisted of a doctoral student who identifies as Queer and is perceived as a cisgender man and their faculty advisor who identifies as cis/het, both employed by a large midwestern university. Both researchers have 4 or more years of experience teaching in the SBAE classroom and have been heavily involved with some of the organizations mentioned directly by participants. Due to the importance of personal identity when conducting qualitative research, we purposively identified our biases when possible and attempted to bracket them within the research (Creswell, 2013).

Validity and Reliability

Multiple strategies were employed to ensure validity and reliability of the present study. Of note, Elo et al.'s (2014) recommended checklist for improving trustworthiness was referenced at all stages of study design and analysis. Strategies that were employed primarily consisted of peer debriefing with other LGBTQ+ graduate students and faculty members with knowledge of qualitative research, and member checking with participants to ensure their quotes were not misinterpreted.

Paradoxically, one of the strengths of the validity of this research is also one of the largest concerns: the noted lack of specific detail of participant experiences. While this lack of detail was purposive in an attempt to mask participant identities, it also limited the analysis that could be reported herein that relates to age and dating experiences within the wider SBAE community. Additionally, there were some participants who shared some extreme experiences that they then later asked to be removed from the analysis. All of these requests were addressed and confirmed with participants when member checking the results.

Participants

For this study, we sought SBAE teachers who (1) identified as LGBTQ+, (2) had taught in the high school classroom for at least one full year, and (3) were either presently employed as an SBAE teacher – **OR** – were employed in a direct supervisory position over at least one practicing SBAE teacher. The addition of "supervisory position" clause was added via IRB amendment due to three interested participants reaching out to the research team to participate and not qualifying solely because they did not presently teach in the SBAE classroom although they were still involved in the profession. These three interviews provided confirmation that data saturation was met after the first four interviews, at least as it pertains to the perspective of gay men.

Participants were sampled via snowball sampling by notifying potential participants through social media groups and list-serv emails designated for SBAE teachers. Particularly, communications were worded in a way that encouraged those interested to contact the researchers directly to maintain individual

privacy. Potential participants and other third parties who had viewed the call for participants were encouraged to forward the call on to those whom they knew fit the requirements, with an emphasis that nobody should contact the research team with any name other than their own. As participants identified themselves, data were collected by semi-structured, extensive interviews that asked participants to describe their experiences in the SBAE profession. A summary of study participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Study participants and relevant contextual information.

Pseudonym	Location	Identity	Career Stage
Amber	Midwest	Lesbian Woman	Early
Bryce	Pacific Northwest	Gay Man	Mid
Cameron	Great Plains	Gay Man	Mid
Dane	Southeast	Gay Man	Early
Eric	Deep South	Transgender Man	Late
Franklin*	Great Plains	Gay Man	Mid
Gary*	Southeast	Gay Man	Mid
Harold*	Great Plains	Gay Man	Mid

Note. Details are purposely vague to preserve participant identities.

* = served in SBAE supervisory role at time of interview

The lead researcher conducted all interviews following an interview protocol that was IRB-approved. Interviews occurred over Zoom, and included questions like “how welcoming would you describe the agricultural education community?” and “what would you describe as the biggest professional obstacles you face because of your LGBTQ+ identity?” Each interview averaged approximately 40 minutes, *except* for Eric’s, whose interview lasted for almost two full hours. Following each interview, the same researcher transcribed the interviews, line-by-line coded the data and utilized the constant-comparative method to determine any preliminary themes that arose (Glaser, 1965). Findings and codes were both peer- and member-checked in an effort to preserve the validity of the findings. While the perspectives of the final three participants were greatly valued, these interviews were primarily used for confirmatory analyses. This is because no new categories of codes arose from the inclusion of these data.

The coding process began with a cycle of structural coding, notating quotes of interest from the participants to collect like quotes together (Saldana, 2016). From this first cycle of coding, three general groups of quotes were collected: self-reflections, interactions with other adults, and interactions with students. After quotes were collected through this coding process, the second round of coding utilized a pattern coding method to organize quotes and identify any major themes from the data (Miles et al., 2014). Through this process, three themes were identified from the participants.

Findings

Overall, findings from this study indicate that LGBTQ+ SBAE teachers face challenges that are explicitly and implicitly tied to the intersection of their chosen careers and their gender or sexual minority identity. Three distinct themes arose from the data: 1) A three-hurdle race from closeted to proud; 2) Taking the elevator to avoid the “state” level of SBAE; and 3) Affirmation and representation – the importance of being out.

Theme 1: The Three-Hurdle Race from Closeted to Proud

The first theme arises from participants detailing similarities in the varying paths they took in coming to terms with their minority identity, reconciling this identity with their previous judgments toward gender and sexuality diversity, and finally “coming out” as proud of these identities. The coming out process itself is taxing, like any hurdle someone might face, and participants described this process to be repeated thrice in their SBAE experiences. This is where the theme name of “three hurdle race” arises.

The repeated process of coming out was described by most participants in three distinct settings: “private,” “public – school,” and “public – FFA.” While the private arena was not of particular interest in this study, most participants indicated that their struggles lie primarily in the public-facing arenas of school and the FFA. While the sheer number of “coming out” moments shared varied by participant (Eric told *eight* different coming out stories, while all other participants told two to four), a public/private dichotomy is very apparent in all participants’ experiences. Eric even shared himself that he had so many coming out stories because he came out twice: the first as a lesbian woman in his young adult years, and the second as a heterosexual transgender man.

When comparing their experiences across these three settings, participants indicated different levels of acceptance in each. For instance, in Bryce’s coming out journey, he faced pressure to stay closeted at the first school he taught at. However, he found that as he moved teaching environments, they became more and more welcoming. In his current position, Bryce shared that he’s “proud now, especially since I’ve moved schools”. This was a sentiment shared by the other four individuals who had changed schools while teaching SBAE. Cameron, who had not changed schools, felt that his experience was much more subtle: “I was out in life but wasn’t out at school until the kids started noticing I didn’t have a girlfriend around year three.” Students noticing their SBAE teacher’s relationship status (or lack thereof) was another common topic between participants. While it was not initially identified in all interviews, member checking confirmed that all participants in this study had to, at one point or another, field a question from a student or community member about why they **didn’t** have a different-sex romantic partner – another example of heterosexuality serving as a “default” norm being implicitly applied to others.

The third and final setting of coming out in this theme arose from teachers expressing elevated caution when attending events within the larger SBAE community. These events were also attended by teachers and students from other schools who were potentially unaccepting of those who identify as LGBTQ+. At one point, Dane expressed that he was worried about these spaces because “You know, you just have to be careful around [SBAE teachers], you don’t know if they’re just *yee-haw* or if they’re also *Republican*.” This association between political conservatism and a lack of tolerance from others was also alluded to by multiple other participants.

When it comes to coming out, Eric had a much different perspective than his sexuality minority counterparts. As a transgender man who previously identified as a lesbian woman, he’s had to encounter the coming out process twice in his rural community. Eric had taught at his current school as a core subject teacher for over two decades before switching subjects to agricultural education. Because of this unique situation, he shared multiple stories that involved his students with their older siblings, or even parents, who were students of Eric’s when he was a female presenting teacher. Interestingly, Eric shared a queering of his own teaching history in this story, referring to his first two decades of teaching as “back when I taught in drag”. This phrasing indicates where Eric is applying his own queering approach to the idea of what a “teacher” looks like. When asked to explain this idea further, he shared that he “dressed the part” of a female teacher, even though he didn’t have the words to express his discomfort with presenting as female at the time. Because of his long-standing history in his current community, and his lack of experience with SBAE in general before his current position, Eric’s coming out followed a traditional Public/Private dichotomy, without the “Public – FFA” arena. Eric noted that within the state SBAE community, he kept himself at a distance primarily because he doesn’t see much of a need to interact.

Theme 2: Taking the Elevator to Avoid the “State” SBAE Level

The second theme details participant experiences surrounding the stratified structure of SBAE organizations at the national, state, and regional levels. This theme arose when it became clear participants actively chose to participate in SBAE teacher organizations at the national and regional levels, but **not** the state level. Particularly, most participants cited that exclusion by other SBAE teachers was the primary reason for this. While this was not the case for Eric, as described in the previous theme, five participants (four current teachers and one supervisor) all shared this sentiment.

Cameron, from a Great Plains state, said that he was ‘extremely’ welcomed within the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) but could not say the same for his state chapter of the association. With his experiences in the Southeast, Dane echoed this thought, saying that while he participated in events with The National FFA Organization, he was “not as involved in the [state] ag teacher organization” and went as far as to label himself as a “lurker” at statewide SBAE events due to his discomfort with other SBAE teachers. When asked if this was extended to his regional community (the schools in the same and surrounding counties), he shared that “well...they aren’t *not* accepting.” When asked for further detail, Dane confirmed his regional SBAE cohort was more accepting than the statewide SBAE community writ large. When asked for specific actions from other SBAE teachers, Cameron relayed that “people can be a little standoffish sometimes. When it comes to [the state chapter of NAAE], especially.” He went to share that he felt he was purposively left off multiple committee communications, at least three times. When asked why he felt it would be intentional, Cameron shared that it could be either because of his sexuality or because other teachers felt intimidated by his chapter’s success. Regardless of the reason, Cameron was quite certain that it was an intentional action because it had happened “too many times for it to be a coincidence”.

Again the outlier, Eric, because of his unique teaching history, had never particularly sought involvement in any SBAE teacher associations. An extension of his lack of “hanging” with SBAE teachers, he only felt that he never “drank the Kool-Aid” because he was an “established teacher” already when he took over his school’s SBAE program. This could be the case, but if so, indicates a potentially troubling phenomenon with non-traditional SBAE teachers if they don’t find value in their professional organizations.

Theme 3: Affirmation and Representation – the Importance of Being Out.

The final theme from this study emerged from participants believing it was important to be “out” in their positions, and the resulting pros and cons they faced because of this belief. Participants found that their outness had some direct effects, such as helping them build rapport with their students, particularly with their repeat students who also served as officers for their local FFA chapter.

Not an outlier in this theme, Eric shared that he doesn’t “avoid it anymore...like I did when I started. If the students have questions, I answer them. Honestly, I appreciate it” indicating a positive view of the candid conversations that almost always led to deeper student understanding. Bryce noted that “I wanted to be the teacher I needed when I was that age” which was echoed by the other gay and lesbian teachers. Through being out, participants were able to instill some positive changes in their schools. These changes included direct interactions with students like being asked specific questions about being LGBTQ+, in addition to their classrooms being increasingly labeled as “safe spaces” by their students.

Some of these conversations even provided students with an opportunity to rethink their assumptions and biases. Eric provided many examples of such student conversations, but one example included a teaching moment that he felt particularly proud about.

- Student: *My sister and I had this argument last night. She said that she had you as a teacher and that you were a girl. I told her she was wrong, and she goes "I'll bet you \$5!" so I'm here to win the bet.*
- Eric: *Do you have \$5 in your pocket?*
- Student: *Yessir.*
- Eric: [With a tinge of sarcasm] *No, you don't, that's your sister's now.*

This conversation serves as a bite-sized example of Eric taking an indirect approach because “sometimes you have to take it a little more gently and smooth”. As exemplified here by his (perceived) quick wit, Eric is used to fielding these questions. When referencing the continuum of LGBTQ+ Educators’ Identity Management Strategies (Figure 1), the quotes above point to Eric being much closer to “explicitly out” with his identity as compared to the younger, sexuality diverse participants who described situations that pointed more to an approach closer to “covering” within the school environment.

Unfortunately, being out ultimately came with an explicit downside for some participants. As these teachers moved gradually from “closeted” to “out”, they found that students, coworkers, community members, or other adults within SBAE spaces would raise issues with them and/or treat the teachers as a scapegoat. Eric shared a conversation he had with his principal when he came out, stating “I told him I’m not going to be your poster child...do *not* send children to me to answer all their questions.” When asked why he took this stance, Eric detailed that he initially felt worried for himself and the fear of losing his teaching certificate. Unfortunately, he also shared these fears have only increased in the last year or two, citing the large number of “Don’t Say Gay” bills present in a variety of state legislatures at the time he was interviewed.

Another downside for some teachers after coming out was being used as a scapegoat for others. For example, Amber once registered a transmasculine (assigned female at birth) student as male to attend FFA camp under his identified gender – a decision that was made by her administration. It wasn’t until after the camp session began that she was confronted by the camp director and told to “keep [your] politics and lifestyle out of FFA” – positing the “blame” on her shoulders when the student was outed (either accidentally or purposively – Amber and her student were both unsure how he was outed). It should be noted that the overall distinguishing factor of this theme from the other two is the sense of *potential and actual consequences* of being out – regardless of whether these consequences are perceived as positive (i.e., affirmation for their potentially LGBTQ+ students) or negative (i.e., disrespect and blame in response to a decision that was out of their control).

Conclusions and Discussion

While we cannot generalize these findings to the experiences of all LGBTQ+ SBAE teachers, this study begins to document this community’s experiences. The findings here indicate that participants 1) felt as if there were three different “coming out” processes related to the intersection of their identities and career; 2) participated heavily in SBAE organizations, except for the state level; and 3) felt that being “out” as a teacher was important (and dangerous) for multiple perceived reasons.

In evaluating the transferability of findings from this study, we see many trends that mimic those found within the existing literature. Of note, participants here alluded to both public and private “selves” that have become more integrated as they’ve moved along their teaching career. This mimics the separation of selves in many other studies examining LGBTQ+ teachers employ this separation as a form of self-preservation (Bower-Phipps, 2017; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Gray, 2013; Griffin, 1992; Jackson, 2006;

Mayo Jr., 2008; Olson, 1987). We also saw similar benefits and drawbacks related to teacher “outness” that have been documented in other populations (Mayo Jr., 2008; Meyer et al., 2015; Tompkins et al., 2019). Finally, multiple participants indicated that political conservatism was a sign of unaccepting groups or individuals (Bower-Phipps, 2017).

Where the sample deviates from the existing literature is the identification of issues and specific arenas that are tied specifically to SBAE peers and professional organizations. While this could indicate higher levels of prejudice in SBAE spaces compared to other fields of education, an alternative explanation could be that those who volunteered for this study will inherently be more involved in professional spaces since these spaces were how participants were recruited. More research is needed to determine if SBAE teachers have inherently higher professional organization participation than other teachers, or if SBAE teachers and spaces do truly foster higher levels of homophobia.

As participants identified different successes and struggles within their SBAE experiences, it should be noted that some methodological implications arose from the analysis as well. Of note, in almost all the interviews in this study, there was one point where the participant stated to the interviewer “you know how it is” because of their experience as a queer SBAE teacher. In a moment of reflexivity as a qualitative researcher, it’s important to note that this could potentially lead to lost context for the data and subsequent analyses had participants not been prompted into more detail. However, this leads to the question if this allusion to a shared identity from a participant can serve as a marker for the validity and reliability of the data. Can this acknowledgment of a researcher’s knowledge from a particular perspective serve as a marker for trustworthiness?

Limitations

The limitations of this study are many. First, identity relating to gender and sexuality is understood by many to be complex, fluid, and impacted by social learning. So, while there are three explicit identities stated for the participants of this study, we cannot be guaranteed that those with similar identities share these same experiences.

Additionally, while there are a variety of identities represented within this study, it should be noted that not all identities that make up the LGBTQ+ community were represented. In addition, all participants identified as white – indicating that the analysis from this sample cannot and should not be used to describe the experiences of nonwhite LGBTQ+ SBAE teachers.

Further factors to consider when interpreting these results include the size and location of the community the participants were raised, and similar traits of the locations where they currently live and work. Notably, one participant moved to their current region of the U.S. after teaching in a different region. Had these details been shared, it could lead to their quick identification to any readers of this manuscript. To preserve the anonymity of participants, these details were not specifically requested in the semi-structured interviews, and - if discussed - were removed from any textual analysis.

Recommendations

Relating to the population of interest, recommendations for researchers stemming from this study are simple: continue to document the experiences of LGBTQ+ teachers. While it is impossible to assess the frame of this population within the SBAE community, continued documentation and transferability of future studies will continue to improve understanding of this population and will provide a stronger base of scholarship to inform future research and policy.

For teacher educators and state/national staff, it's important to learn about the experiences of LGBTQ+ teachers that they work with. This is imperative for state staff to be prepared to have candid conversations with queer teacher candidates about the reality of teaching SBAE in their context. Particularly, SBAE state staff and those in supervisory roles have an obligation to communicate *honestly* with teacher candidates about the risks of being out as LGBTQ+ in our profession, and where they might anticipate unwelcoming spaces in their state and context.

Relating to the homophobic prejudice and exclusion that has been experienced by the participants at the local and state levels of SBAE, all members of the SBAE community (researchers, teacher educators, practitioners, state staff, supervisors, etc.) who identify as an ally to the LGBTQ+ community should seek to take an offensive approach in identifying sources and impacts of LGBTQ+ prejudice in the SBAE community. While resilience can be an important factor for the success of queer teachers, especially as it pertains to their well-being, it's important to remember that the end goal is not to build resilience but to build a more equitable environment where resilience is not needed.

References

- Bishop, M. D., Fish, J. N., Hammack, P. L., & Russell, S. T. (2020). Sexual identity development milestones in three generations of sexual minority people: A national probability sample. *Developmental Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001105>
- Bower-Phipps, L. (2017). Discourses governing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual teachers' disclosure of sexual orientation and gender history. *Issues in Teacher Education*, 26(3), 23-37.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- Dilley, P. (1999). Queer theory: Under construction. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 12(5), 457-472. <https://doi.org/10.1080/095183999235890>
- Dykes, F. O., & Delpont, J. L. (2018). Our voices count: The lived experiences of LGBTQ educators and its impact on teacher education preparation programs. *Teaching Education*, 29(2), 135–146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2017.1366976>
- Elo, S., Kääriäinen, M., Kanste, O., Polkki, T., Utriainen, K., & Kyngäs, H. (2014). Qualitative content analysis: A focus on trustworthiness. *SAGE Open*, 4(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440145226633>
- Ferfolja, T., & Hopkins, L. (2013). The complexities of workplace experience for lesbian and gay teachers. *Critical Studies in Education*, 54(3), 311–324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2013.794743>
- Flowers, P., & Buston, K. (2001). "I was terrified of being different": Exploring gay men's accounts of growing-up in a heterosexist society. *Journal of Adolescence*, 24(1), 51–65. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.2000.0362>

- Glaser, B. G. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social Problems*, 12(4), 436-445. <https://doi.org/10.2307/798843>
- Gottschalk, L., & Newton, J. (2009). Rural homophobia: Not really gay. *Gay & Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review*, 5(3), 153-159
- Gray, E. M. (2013). Coming out as a lesbian, gay or bisexual teacher: Negotiating private and professional worlds. *Sex Education*, 13(6), 702–714. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2013.807789>
- Griffin, P. (1992). From hiding out to coming out: Empowering lesbian and gay educators. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 22(3–4), 167–196. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v22n03_07
- Haddad, Z. (2019). Understanding identity and context in the development of gay teacher identity: Perceptions and realities in teacher education and teaching. *Education Sciences*, 9(2), 145. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci9020145>
- Halperin, D. M. (2003). The normalization of queer theory. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 45(2-4), 339-343. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v45n02_17
- Jackson, J. M. (2006). Removing the masks: Considerations by gay and lesbian teachers when negotiating the closet door. *Journal of Poverty*, 10(2), 27–52. https://doi.org/10.1300/J134v10n02_03
- Jagose, A., & Genschel, C. (1996). *Queer theory*. Melbourne University Press.
- Mayo Jr., J. B. (2008). Gay teachers' negotiated interactions with their students and (straight) colleagues. *The High School Journal*, 92(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.0.0007>
- Meyer, E. J., Taylor, C., & Peter, T. (2015). Perspectives on gender and sexual diversity (GSD)-inclusive education: Comparisons between gay/lesbian/bisexual and straight educators. *Sex Education*, 15(3), 221–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2014.979341>
- Meyer, I. H. (1995). Minority stress and mental health in gay men. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 16(1), 38-56.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis. A methods sourcebook*. Sage.
- Morin, S. F., & Garfinkle, E. M. (1978). Male homophobia. *Journal of Social Issues*, 34(1). 29-47.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage Publications.
- Murray, K. A., Trexler, C. J., & Cannon, C. E. B. (2020). Queering agricultural education research: Challenges and strategies for advancing inclusion. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 61(4), 296-316. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2020.04296>
- National FFA Organization. (2019). *Diversity and inclusion*. <https://ffa.org/diversity-and-inclusion/>
- Olson, M. R. (1987). A study of gay and lesbian teachers. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 13(4), 73–81. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v13n04_04

- Parent, M. C. & Steede, G. M. (2020). Minority stress among gay and bisexual men in agricultural occupations. *Journal of Rural Social Sciences*, 35(1). Article 3.
<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jrss/vol35/iss1/3>
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.
- Smith, G. W., & Smith, D. E. (1998). The ideology of “fag”: The school experience of gay students. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 39(2), 309–335. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1998.tb00506.x>
- Tompkins, J., Kearns, L.-L., & Mitton-Kükner, J. (2019). Queer educators in schools: The experiences of four beginning teachers. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 42(2), 384-414.
- U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey (1921). *Elements of map projection, Special Publication No. 68*. Department of Commerce.
- Wyatt, T. J., Oswald, S. B., White, C., & Peterson, F. L. (2008). Are tomorrow’s teachers ready to deal with diverse students? Teacher candidates’ attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 35(2), 171-185.
- Yip, A.K. (2010). Sexuality and religion/spirituality. *Sexualities*, 13(6), 667-670.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460710384555>