“I am what I am…”
comparing the experiences of openly gay and lesbian PE teachers with non-specialist peers in a period of declining homohysteria

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Climates

- Hostile
  - Section 28
  - Homophobic

- Conditionally tolerant
  - Glass closet
  - Don’t ask, don’t tell
  - Edwards et al. 2014 - teachers

- Open and inclusive
  - McCormack 2011 – students
I am a gay member of staff and the worst place is the

While most of the gay pupils I have known have felt safe
coming out in school, all but one of my gay colleagues
have concealed their own sexuality for fear of this being
used against them by pupils and their parents.

Thomas, secondary school teacher, independent school (South West)

I have worked with a gay teacher and staff were more
hostile to him than the children.

Zainab, primary school head teacher, special school (Scotland)
There has been no real improvement in the proportion of teachers who believe that their head teacher or school governors (in England and Wales) demonstrate clear leadership in tackling homophobic bullying.
Stonewall Teachers’ Report 2014
Physical Education specific:

In other schools the macho expectations (sport) or feminine role models can be quite specific and unforgiving.

Marie, secondary school teacher, independent school (East Midlands)
School Report: open survey of over 3000 participants
(intended sample = LGBT students in school)
SUPPORT

• More than half of LGBT pupils (53 per cent) say that there isn’t an adult at school they can talk to about being LGBT.

• Just four per cent of LGBT pupils know of an openly bi member of staff, and three per cent know of one who is openly trans. One in four LGBT pupils (27 per cent) know of an openly gay member of staff, and 22 per cent know of an openly lesbian member of staff.
Previous research

• Countries
  • Australia (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013)
  • England (Gray, 2013) - data from 2008
  • Ireland (Neary, 2012; Fahie, 2016)
  • America (Connell, 2015)

• Subject specific
  • Physical Education teachers (Sykes, 2009; Edwards et al., 2014)
  • Music teachers (Palkki, 2015).

• Edwards et al., (2014) state, ‘One such knowledge gap is in understanding the lived experiences of lesbian and gay teachers working in schools following the abolition of Section 28’ (p. 3).
Cultural change
## Participant overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years teaching</th>
<th>Types of school</th>
<th>Subject Area</th>
<th>Leadership position</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>3 years</td>
<td>Secondary, Private</td>
<td>P.E</td>
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<td>2 years</td>
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<td>Multi-academy, secondary, comprehensive</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes – SLT (Dept)</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Primary school</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>White European</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Secondary, independent</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes – Head of 6th</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>8 years</td>
<td>Secondary, faith school</td>
<td>P.E</td>
<td>Yes - pastoral</td>
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<td>4 years</td>
<td>Secondary, comprehensive, academy</td>
<td>P.E, DT</td>
<td>Yes – pastoral</td>
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<td>22 years</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>White British</td>
<td>21 years*</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>P.E</td>
<td>Yes – SLT (Asst)</td>
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</table>
Participant 3: “Things students are saying you know ‘that's so gay’ used to be endemic like it is a lot all over society and that as an indicator that's steadily declined”

Participant 5: “with pupils it’s mainly the kind of thoughtless 'oh that's so gay' which is never directed at me”

Participant 7: (PE) “One of the boys came in and said ‘argh miss I used gay as a descriptive word, I didn't mean it negatively’ …. he got really quite upset that he'd upset her”
Participant 10: “I'm very quick to say, ‘you can't say you're gay’, I'm very quick to stamp on that, certainly quicker than others.”

Participant 11: “I'm a big one for language being really really important so I must have been one of only a handful of teachers at [college] that would pick kids up for saying the word gay, gay being 'oh that's stupid' - 'oh that's really gay'."

Participant 12: (PE) “it's important that we challenge something that isn't right and isn't acceptable so if I hear someone shout 'oh that's so gay that is' I will pick up on it. You know, I'll just say 'do you know that can be quite an offensive term actually and you're not using it in an appropriate way?'”
Effects on pupils – Teaching

Participant 3: “I think I'm a **much better teacher** than I ever have been before” “I think that **openness** does help to build trust.”

Participant 4: “I always saw myself as different at school if anything I am **more aware and more supportive** to children who might have those differences or might not quite be fitting in with the other children, so if anything it makes me more aware.”

Participant 9: “As a teacher I'm **very open** we talk about anything and there's no question you can't ask in my classroom and I'll always answer”

Participant 10: “I'm **very aware of difference** in my children, I think that makes me a better teacher.”
Effects on pupils – Teaching (PE)

Participant 1: “If anything they’re probably a little bit more engaged and actually talkative and they’ve just been very positive with it all.”

Participant 6: “Perhaps I've built better relationships with some because they know, you know because they don't have a support group you know. Certain kids come to extra-curricular clubs because you know they feel a connection with me simply because, you know, maybe they're going through their own identity issues, so I've picked up on that before you know, certainly more so, you know pupils who, especially girls who maybe are questioning their own sexuality, maybe tend to build a stronger relationship with me”

Participant 7: “I think the kids are more open and confident to talk about and know they can speak to me. I mean I'm quite an open person about anything really, especially, well anything, yeah, they can talk to me about anything, they know they can.”

Participant 8: “However I do feel that also that the ability to be confident to come out in front of kids or to talk to other members of staff gives them the ability to have confidence if they have those sorts of feelings and they see you probably being a little bit more as you say of a trailblazer in terms of saying, you know 'it's alright, I'm happy with myself'”
Coming out

Participant 1 (PE): “I've got feedback from pupils in different years - there's a few of them that on the notes they gave me saying you know ‘thank you’ without them saying their names they say that they're part of the LGBT community so they felt supported so there are definitely out pupils within the school for sure.”

Participant 7 (PE): “I would say in the last few years there's been more of an open kind of talking point. I mean I've got year 7 lads that are out I've got a year 10 girl that's transgender”

Participant 3: “I've only had 3 pupils come out to me”
Private vs public debate

Primary -
Participant 2: “It's not something the children...if it was raised, if the children asked questions then yes it would be something that we come across. I would not be unhappy or uncomfortable to talk about, but it’s not something 4 year olds really raise”

Participant 4: “It’s just purely something personal to me, I don’t feel like...even if I was straight I don’t think I’d mention it in front of the children I don’t feel like bringing too much of your home life in is a good thing to me I just don’t”

Secondary -
Participant 3: “Whereas now I will just casual like just kind of drop the 'oh my husband drives me insane when he does that' just that sort of thing so I think that builds trust with people”
Private vs public debate (PE specific)

Participant 6: “As a teacher I don't think it affects you know my lessons or my teaching but certainly I am more cautious you know when I teach gymnastics and you have to support…you know I'm very careful about that and you know, I make sure that I'm very clear about how I'm going to support them and which perhaps if I wasn't gay I wouldn't, I wouldn't be as worried about it”

Participant 7: “I just said you can't, obviously in a position of loco parentis and a position of care, student care, you can't tell the kids how to act upon their feelings but obviously we want to act as a support network so it's a fine line really, it's a fine balance of getting it right and also making sure the doors open at the same time kind of thing”

Participant 1: “I wouldn't have taken it upon myself to make it public knowledge because it's, you know, none of their business really but you know I don't mind them knowing it was just the fact of how it all came about really.”

Participant 8: “Obviously been conversations about it but never ever directly to me but if a child did say that to me I think I'd definitely, at this point in my teaching, would say yes to them”
General conclusion

• Language is changing

Positives
• Teachers are coming out
• Pupils are coming out
• Positively affecting teaching
• From hostile to conditionally tolerant/open and inclusive

Negatives
• Climate – hostile, conditionally tolerant, open and inclusive
• Reverse relative deprivation
• Fear of reprisal – PE context
• Public vs private – primary and PE


• Edwards, L.L., Brown, D.H.K. & Smith, L. 2016, "We are getting there slowly": lesbian teacher experiences in the post-Section 28 environment*, *Sport, Education and Society*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 299-318.


