

Teachers and Teaching

The Lived Experiences and Minority Stress of Lesbian-Identifying Teachers in Australia

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For any queries please contact:

CTAT-peerreview@journals.tandf.co.uk

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The Lived Experiences and Minority Stress of Lesbian-Identifying Teachers in Australia

The lived experiences and minority stress of lesbian-identifying teachers in Australia contributes to ongoing compromised social and wellbeing outcomes for this cohort of people. Whilst past research focus on lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers as a collective, research specifically examining lesbian teachers within the Australian context, is limited, ultimately presenting a lack of representation to experiences unique to this specific cohort of teachers. Drawing upon the lived experiences of four lesbian-identifying teachers in Australian primary and secondary schools, and employing Ilan Meyer's *minority stress model*, we present an analysis which delineates the adverse experiences still present in the working lives of lesbian teachers. We highlight the diverse adversities they experience as a result of the intersection between their sexualities and professional identities. Through thematic analysis, the study developed three themes related to 1) social influences of teachers' context, 2) adverse experiences unique to being a lesbian-identifying teacher, 3) and identity management. This study contributes to knowledge regarding the unique experiences and minority stressors of lesbian teachers and provides specific insight to the challenges still present and felt for this cohort of teachers.

Keywords: education; sexuality diversity; lesbian; teachers; Australia

Introduction

Despite extensive discrimination and adversity in the past, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people in Australia live and work in times where their human rights are evolving (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013). For example, the landmark 2017 plebiscite legalising same-sex marriage brought Australia into alignment with many other Western nations, and also demonstrated a change in community attitudes (Robinson & Greenwich, 2018). Increased visibility of LGB individuals in public life and greater awareness of LGB issues in Australian society has also brought about a change to culture, one that is

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4 becoming more sophisticated, welcoming, and affirming towards LGB identities. Such
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6 identities are becoming more normalised and accepted, for example, diverse genders
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8 and sexualities are covered in the Australian national curriculum (Australian
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10 Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2022). However, schools remain institutions in
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12 which hetero-cis-normativity persists (Rasmussen et al., 2017; van Leent & Spina,
13
14 2023) and limitations (at best) for LGB persons continue (Cutler, 2023; Hill et al., 2020;
15
16 2021; Monash Centre for Youth Policy Education Practice et al., 2023; Russell, 2021).

17
18 Within Queensland, Australia, the state government has initiated changes related
19
20 to diverse genders and sexualities over several years. Some of these changes include a
21
22 range of legislations and policies that attempt to address some of the structural
23
24 inequalities sexuality and gender diverse persons experience, including changes to
25
26 adoption laws, age of consent, and more recently changes to birth certificates (Jeffries,
27
28 2021). In relation to education, a workforce strategy called *Proud at Work* was launched
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30 in 2018 to work towards providing safe, and inclusive workplaces for Queensland state
31
32 schoolteachers (Queensland Department of Education, 2022). In 2022 the *Proud and*
33
34 *Work Workforce Strategy* was launched with measurable actions, including the
35
36 encouragement of pride events in schools, data collection related to sexuality and
37
38 gender, targeted professional development programs that inform staff about sexuality
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40 and gender diversity, and representing the Queensland Department of Education as an
41
42 inclusive employer (Queensland Department of Education, 2022, 2023). However,
43
44 within private, religious schools, this acknowledgement of gender and/or sexuality
45
46 diversity can be more problematic. For example, the Queensland Anti-Discrimination
47
48 Act (1991) allows for faith-based schools to discriminate against staff members due to
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50 their sexuality or gender identity, which authorises religious schools to discriminate
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52 lawfully in ways that secular organisations cannot (see Courty & Rendall, 2022). This
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4 has implications for sexuality diverse teachers in terms of their experiences and options
5 available for their employment and progression (Mockler, 2022; Ferfolja & Ullman,
6 2020). While the current Queensland Government has flagged changing these laws to
7 protect the employment of gender and sexuality diverse teachers (Lynch, 2023), there
8 are still implications as schools continue to teach according to religious doctrine.
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15 Despite the aforementioned framework and policy advancements in Queensland
16 state schools, the working lives of LGB teachers can still present limitations and issues
17 that are not experienced by their cis-heterosexual colleagues. Research from other
18 jurisdictions in Australia suggest that LGB teachers describe self-surveillance and
19 identity management, whether their working environment is accepting or not (Ferfolja
20 & Hopkins, 2013). Some also describe covert and overt discrimination, as well as fears
21 around job security, homophobia, bullying, and the burden of occupying and balancing
22 teacher and LGB identities (Gray, 2021). These limitations can manifest in minority
23 stressors, which consequently impact the health, working lives, and wellbeing of
24 lesbian-identifying teachers. Although literature exploring the complexities of gay and
25 lesbian teachers as a collective exists, few studies are concerned only with lesbian-
26 identifying teachers (see for example, Ferfolja, 2008; 2010) and no research exclusively
27 concerning the Queensland teaching context, including from a minority stress
28 perspective. Drawing on the abovementioned challenges and gaps in research, this paper
29 seeks to explore the experiences and narratives of lesbian-identifying teachers through
30 minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), and is framed by the following research question:
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What are the lived experiences and minority stresses of lesbian-identifying teachers in
Queensland, Australia?

Literature Review

Minority sexuality identity, and consequently a lesbian identity, remains a recognised

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4 risk factor for poorer health and wellbeing (Perales, 2019; Meads, 2020). The education
5
6 setting workplace experience parallels this, with LGB teachers reporting minority stress
7
8 and poorer wellbeing than their heterosexual colleagues (Lineback et al., 2016; Simons
9
10 et al., 2021). Although many LGB teachers would prefer to be totally out to their school
11
12 communities, many adopt identity management strategies out of fear that their careers
13
14 may be limited, or they will be bullied and discriminated against if they disclose their
15
16 sexuality in a system that, in the main, still privileges cis-heterosexuality (Llewellyn &
17
18 Reynolds, 2021). The cumulative impact of this for lesbian-identifying teachers is
19
20 minority stress, which can materialise in negative effects on health, wellbeing, and
21
22 socialisation (Haas & Lannutti, 2021; Simons et al., 2021). These minority stressors are
23
24 adverse experiences unique to sexuality diverse teachers.
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28 Being an LGB teacher also impacts relationship building. For example, Ferfolja
29
30 (2005) found that some Australian lesbian-identifying teachers described how this
31
32 particular identity made it challenging to build authentic relationships within school
33
34 communities, as there were limits in what they felt safe discussing at work, which is
35
36 pertinent to both identity management and adverse experiences unique to being a
37
38 lesbian-identifying teacher. Because relationships are considered to be a central element
39
40 in successful teaching, this can create a significant barrier for lesbian-identifying
41
42 teachers to thrive in their profession (Howard et al., 2020; Hooker, 2018). Hooker
43
44 (2018) also found that most of the LGB teacher participants within their study in the
45
46 United States (US), felt unable to be visible in their workplaces for fear of harassment
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48 or losing their jobs. This fear contributed to limitations in their ability to build collegial
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50 relationships, which many felt impacted their teaching and ability to be an authentic role
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52 model for their students (Hooker, 2018).
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4 Research on LGB teachers as a collective has demonstrated that there are
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6 disparities in workplace experiences within their cohort and compared with
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8 heterosexual teachers (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013). From a minority stress perspective,
9
10 the marginalisation of sexuality diversity can lead to both distal and proximal stressors
11
12 (Stones & Glazzard, 2019). Examples of distal stressors include events external to the
13
14 person, such as bullying, discrimination, and being passed over for career-advancing
15
16 opportunities due to prejudice. Proximal stressors include internal thoughts or feelings
17
18 as a result, such as a fear of being viewed or treated differently, feeling a need to over-
19
20 compensate in work output to act as a contingency in case their sexuality becomes
21
22 known, anxieties around work, and mental distress (Rothblum, 2020; Rudoe, 2010).
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24 Another proximal stressor which has been described extensively in the literature is
25
26 identity management. In a foundational study conducted in the US, Griffin (1991)
27
28 identified that LGB teachers enact thoughtful strategies about how, and the extent to
29
30 which they will disclose their sexuality identity at work, either by being implicitly out,
31
32 explicitly out, or by passing or covering all, or aspects, of their identity. These identity
33
34 management strategies can add significant burden, as they require careful consideration,
35
36 and management of conversations and self, and for some, trigger a degree of anxiety
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38 (Ferfolja & Stavrou, 2015; Rudoe, 2010; Gray, 2013).
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42 Within the research on the experiences and minority stressors of LGB teachers,
43
44 there is some insight about the influences of culture, environment, and social
45
46 demographics of schools on the workplace experience of this cohort. For example, Lee
47
48 (2019) identified that LGB teachers in rural and remote schools in the United Kingdom
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50 (UK) felt less protected and sought more mental health assistance than their urban
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52 colleagues. These teachers also experienced more homophobic language in their
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54 working environment than their urban counterparts (Lee, 2019). Research by Babie
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4 (2021) also identified the current state of the powers afforded to religious schools in
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6 Australia to discriminate against LGB teachers, including the diversity of views within
7
8 religious institutions. However, the research by Babie (2021) provides a review of the
9
10 laws and their powers, rather than the impacts of religious freedom laws on LGB
11
12 individuals. Research by Ferfolja (2005) on LGB teachers in Australian Catholic
13
14 schools have revealed that many participants' interactions with students were monitored
15
16 by leadership staff. Some felt that they were being suspected of paedophilia or that
17
18 leadership felt they were aiming to recruit students to an LGB identity (Ferfolja, 2005).
19
20 However, in later research, Ferfolja and Hopkins (2013), found that the religious
21
22 denomination of a school is not necessarily an indicator of homophobia, and that two
23
24 participants within their study found their Catholic school was less hostile than public
25
26 schools. Nevertheless, other participants in the study related experiences of not having
27
28 their contracts renewed past probation once their sexuality was known, or not being
29
30 considered for promotions, despite having a wealth of experience (Ferfolja & Hopkins,
31
32 2013). In this way, it is evident that there are mixed LGB experiences in both public and
33
34 religiously affiliated schools (Ferfolja 2005; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013). A further study
35
36 investigating homophobia in Catholic schools in Canada and Australia also found that
37
38 sexuality diverse teachers were more likely to experience job loss, subtle forms of
39
40 exclusion, silencing, and identity management to maintain employment (Callaghan &
41
42 van Leent, 2019). Looking more broadly at contemporary experiences of lesbian-
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44 identifying teachers in Queensland, Australia could provide further nuanced and recent
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46 insights.
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50 Although there is some research in the space relevant to the experiences of
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52 lesbian-identifying teachers, most of the research is related to LGB teachers as a
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54 collective, rather than as a unique cohort of educators. Likewise, much of the research is
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4 in geographical areas outside that of Queensland which has unique social, cultural and
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6 political history and policy context. This presents a gap for further investigation, given
7
8 the specific policy context, to appreciate the unique experiences and minority stressors
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10 of lesbian-identifying teachers in Queensland, Australia. These gaps highlight the
11
12 importance of further investigation, as lesbian-identifying individuals have their own
13
14 unique stories and stressors, which can provide insights to the knowledge and future
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16 affirming educational policy/guidelines.
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20 **Theoretical framework**

21
22 The minority stress model is a public health and social research framework that
23
24 provides insight into some of the health and wellbeing discrepancies between
25
26 heterosexual and LGB individuals (Meyer, 2003; Schneider, 2018). Its purpose is to
27
28 assist professionals and individuals in understanding and improving the lived
29
30 experiences of LGB individuals, by describing the impacts and causal factors of the
31
32 chronic stress that can be associated with being part of a sexuality minority population
33
34 (Meyer, 2003). Minority stress theory describes three types of stressors that can affect
35
36 an individual who belongs to a minority group, namely, general, distal, and proximal
37
38 stressors. General stressors are experienced by the populace in general, while distal
39
40 stressors refer to experiences of minorities, such as abuse or discrimination based on a
41
42 person's minority status (Brett & Bassington, 2023; Bhugra et al., 2018; Stones &
43
44 Glazzard, 2019). Proximal stressors then refer to the internal impact or the reaction that
45
46 may come as a result of distal stressor events, such as concealing one's sexuality,
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48 expectation of rejection, or anxiety related to anticipated homophobic mistreatment
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50 (Brett & Bassington, 2023; Bhugra et al., 2018; Stones & Glazzard, 2019).
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54 Recent research suggests that LGB teachers, and consequently lesbian-
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56 identifying teachers, are subject to a sexuality identity that is created through discourse
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4 and influenced by communication and interaction with others (Jones et al., 2014). These
5
6 interactions may be positive, negative, or both, and can lead to lesbian-identifying
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8 educators navigating their sexuality and professional identities in ways that are both
9
10 congruent and incongruent with each other, including their personal values (Cutler,
11
12 2022). This might lead to a degree of identity management, an added burden and stress,
13
14 which is worthy of further analysis. These are stressors that are experienced in addition
15
16 to the stressors that are unique to the teaching profession and a career path, such as high
17
18 levels of demand, stress, and burnout (Carroll et al., 2022). In addition to the stressors
19
20 involved with identity management, lesbian-identifying teachers might also experience
21
22 homophobia, covert and overt discrimination, fears around job security, silencing, and a
23
24 degree of interpersonal isolation (Ferfolja, 2013; Ullman & Smith, 2018). It is important
25
26 to highlight that fear and identity management were still present and described in
27
28 studies by Ferfolja and Hopkins (2013) and Brett and Bassington (2023), even when
29
30 these teachers felt accepted in their communities. This demonstrates that minority stress
31
32 can still have impacts, even when environments are not hostile to sexuality diverse
33
34 people.
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38 Although it is known that there can be health and social disparities between
39
40 LGB and heterosexual individuals (Perales, 2019), it is not as widely acknowledged that
41
42 there can be unique stressors for LGB teachers, especially because some of the impacts
43
44 can be more covert in nature. For example, sexuality difference can be marginalised
45
46 through implicit bullying, the denial of opportunities, or the suggestion that a non-
47
48 heterosexual teacher (including pre-service teachers) keep their life private at school
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50 (Blake, 2023; Bower-Phipps, 2017; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Neary, 2013; Russell,
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52 2021). For this reason, minority stress theory garners an insight into the lived
53
54 experiences of lesbian-identifying teachers, separately from the collective of their LGB
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4 community, one that can be used to improve workplace wellbeing and schooling
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6 cultures for the benefit of those who exist within them. This can be achieved through
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8 greater understanding, which can lead to interventions, behaviours, and attitudes in
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10 schools that reduce harm and support wellbeing (Frost & Meyer, 2023).
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12 13 14 **Methods and analytical framework**

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16 This critical analysis draws on semi-structured ethnographic interviews with four
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18 lesbian-identifying schoolteachers in Queensland, Australia in late 2022. Participants
19
20 were recruited through electronic flyers advertised within sexuality and gender diverse
21
22 social media groups, settings related to Queensland teachers, including within personal
23
24 and professional networks of the research team. Eligible participants were 18 years old
25
26 or above, identified as lesbian, and a currently practicing and registered primary or high
27
28 school teacher in a Queensland, Australian school (i.e., state or independent schools).
29
30 Although recruitment garnered teachers from different settings, the study lacked
31
32 representation of participants from diverse cultural and ethnic groups, including First
33
34 Nations backgrounds. This created a limitation, in terms of gathering data from a range
35
36 of intersecting perspectives.
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40 After providing written informed consent, the schoolteachers participated in
41
42 semi-structured, ethnographic interviews with the lead author (Fetterman, 2019). The
43
44 interview guide included demographic questions, followed by open-ended questions
45
46 inviting them to describe their experiences, identity management strategies, including
47
48 any challenges they endured as lesbian-identifying teachers in Queensland schools.
49
50 Interviews were recorded via Zoom, and then transcribed verbatim using Otter
51
52 (<http://otter.ai>). Participants were given copies of their transcript and provided the
53
54 opportunity to withdraw or edit any responses, within a two-week timeframe. To ensure
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56 confidentiality, each participant was given a pseudonym, including any partners they
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4 may have referred to. Informants were not incentivised to participate. The research
5
6 project was approved by the University of XXX (redacted for peer-review).
7

8 To organise and make meaning of the four schoolteachers' lived experiences and
9
10 minority stress in Queensland schools, Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic
11 analysis was used. More specifically, Braun and Clarke (2019) encourage scholars
12 making use of thematic analysis to do so through their revised six-step guide (Braun &
13 Clarke, 2019, 2022). This six-phased guide consists of 1) familiarising yourself with
14 your data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) generating (initial) themes; 4) reviewing
15 themes; 5) defining and naming themes; and 6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke,
16 2019, p. 593). While the six phases were "applied flexibly" and informed by the study's
17 theoretical framework, the steps were chronologically applied with the end goal of
18 capturing the "uniting idea" of a theme (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593). As such, the
19 thematic analysis generated three major themes: 1) Social influence – the teacher
20 situated within the influences of their contexts; 2) Adverse experiences unique to being
21 a lesbian-identifying teacher; and 3) Identity management.
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36 These themes provide insights to some of the common and challenging aspects
37 that contribute to minority stress in lesbian-identifying teachers, as well as some of the
38 overall impacts on individuals.
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44 **Results and discussion**

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46 Table 1 describes participant characteristics (including pseudonyms).
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50 ****Insert Table 1 here****
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53 The findings of this study are arranged around three themes that were generated through
54 the thematic analysis. Although the themes are organised discretely, there are aspects of
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4 some themes that are related to others, or that have an impact or influence within other
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6 themes. The first theme, *Social influence – the teacher situated within the influences of*
7
8 *their contexts*, explores the extent to which these teachers' school context influences
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10 their experiences as lesbian-identifying teachers, or their behaviour related to 'outness'
11
12 (around being out to varying degrees). The second theme, *Adverse experiences unique*
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14 *to being a lesbian-identifying teacher*, describes some of the negative workplace
15
16 experiences these lesbian-identifying teachers have, that would not be experienced by
17
18 their heterosexual colleagues. The final theme, *Identity management*, explores the way
19
20 in which these lesbian-identifying teachers manage their identity within their working
21
22 environments, and its impacts.
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24

25 26 27 ***Social influence – the teacher situated within the influences of their contexts***

28
29 Study participants described, to some degree, factors from the social environments in
30
31 which their schooling settings were situated, that influenced their workplace
32
33 experiences as lesbian-identifying teachers. These included geographical, social, and
34
35 religious contexts. All participants described needing to manage their identity in the
36
37 workplace in order to feel safe from covert and overt discrimination, as well as bullying.
38
39 One participant, Alana, described their fear when talking about her perception of job
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41 security:
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45 I'm permanent in the department and you need a shoehorn to get someone out of
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47 permanency pretty well. I have seen how the workplace can be made very
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49 uncomfortable for (gay/lesbian identifying) people so that they feel like they have
50
51 no other recourse but to quit. So they might not have been kicked out of the job,
52
53 but that does threaten their job security when they don't feel comfortable to work
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55 anymore. So I have worried about that happening to me, but it hasn't as yet
56
57 happened to me because of not being out. (Alana, 31)

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59 From Alana's experiences, we can interpret that the social influences from within the
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4 schools can pressure lesbian-identifying teachers to not be out, not bring their whole
5
6 selves to work and thus, to carry fear about discrimination and bullying that may lead to
7
8 job insecurity. Alana shares her experience of her long association with the school and
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10 stated,

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13 We also work in a school that has a demographic with a lot of Torres Strait
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15 Islanders and Aboriginal families of which religion (Christianity) is still quite a
16
17 prominent aspect of their culture. So that would be a sense of confronting them
18
19 with being gay or living with another woman. (Alana, 31).
20
21

22 Alana's perceived association between culture and religion (Christianity) with the
23
24 broader social context of which the school is situated influences her understandings
25
26 about what it might mean to 'be out'. It has created a proximal fear of consequences,
27
28 which led Alana to taking measures to cover her lesbian identity, including how she
29
30 interacted online, and what she spoke about to others in the workplace. This level of
31
32 forethought and management is a proximal minority stressor that impacts wellbeing,
33
34 and the ability to work collaboratively and authentically with others (Howard et al.,
35
36 2020; Hooker, 2018). Because relationship-building forms a key part of successful
37
38 teaching, not having as much agency over this process is impactful for quality teaching
39
40 and learning, as well as workplace wellbeing (Hooker, 2018).
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43 Adding to some of this fear for Alana was that her personal circumstances were
44
45 changing, and she was embarking on a lesbian relationship after previously being
46
47 married to a man; a past relationship that was known in the school community. Alana
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49 also described the relationship with her new partner as adding complexity to the
50
51 situation, because "she's [a] teacher at our school. It's not just my privacy, I have to
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53 protect someone else, which needs to be a consideration" (Alana, 31). This juxtaposition
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55 of Alana's heterosexual versus her lesbian-identifying teaching life indicates that the
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4 proximal stressors she experienced after starting a relationship with a woman, are
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6 unique to lesbian-identifying teachers, which has been described as an ongoing concern
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8 in the research surrounding sexuality diverse teachers (Ferfolja, 2005; Hooker, 2018;
9
10 Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Neary, 2013).

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12
13 Jan, another participant described the social context of the schools she worked in
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15 as influential.

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18 ... And yeah, there was a lot of that. I don't know, intolerance to anything that was
19
20 a bit different to them. That culture seemed to be held. Those are discussions they
21
22 talk about at home or you know, don't be a pussy. Don't be like any of those.
23
24 Yeah, I haven't heard those things in schools with a higher socioeconomic. Maybe
25
26 the kids think that, but they don't say it. Yeah, I think it probably does buy into it. I
27
28 think the socio-economic thing does come into it. (Jan, 52).

29
30 Jan also remarked that she had worked in a Catholic school in a higher socio-economic
31
32 area and did not experience overt homophobic language, maintaining the same personal
33
34 presentation. She also remarked that "some demographics seem to handle it (difference)
35
36 less well" (Jan, 52). This suggests that indicators of hostility or discomfort towards
37
38 lesbian teachers are not unifactorial, but often a result of an interaction between
39
40 multiple factors. Some research has found that the potential for discrimination depends
41
42 upon the specific views of the leadership team, rather than supporting Australian law
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44 via the Sex Discrimination Act (Callaghan & van Leent, 2019; Ferfolja & Hopkins,
45
46 2013). However, the potential for hostility and the freedom for religious schools to
47
48 discriminate lawfully leads to proximal stressors and identity management nonetheless
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50 (Ezzy et al., 2022; Gray, 2013; Skerrett et al., 2015). While Jan has had these
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52 experiences as an individual, the complexity of the intersections of class, culture and
53
54 religion which shape social-cultural experiences of gender and sexuality constructions
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4 in schools must be acknowledged as more nuanced and diverse conceptually beyond
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6 any individual experience.
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8 In a previous job, Regan worked in a Queensland state school that she described
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10 as being in a “Small country town, lots of bogans” (Regan, 41). In this environment, she
11
12 became pregnant through in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) and the rumour was spread
13
14 amongst staff that she had slept with a male staff member, as nobody had ever seen her
15
16 partner. This is a unique, adverse experience arising from the fact that she had “passed”
17
18 as heterosexual, and thus, a heteronormative assumption about the discourse and
19
20 particulars of her family were made. Although Regan did not express being affected by
21
22 this, rumours may have a much larger impact on individuals with greater vulnerabilities,
23
24 such as less social support or resilience, which have been identified as protective factors
25
26 for minority stress for lesbian-identifying teachers (Rothblum, 2020; Mahon et al.,
27
28 2021). The idea of resilience acting as a buffer on minority stress is a risk factor for
29
30 detrimental outcomes, as it is not necessarily a meritorious aspect of a person, but rather
31
32 a result of factors beyond individual control (Meyer, 2015). Having an unequal social
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34 structure within the workplace, then, lends itself to the potential of minority stress,
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36 which furthers the disadvantage of lesbian-identifying teachers.
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39 From these experiences as reported by the lesbian-identifying teachers, it is
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41 evident that social influences of the context in which the teachers work impact their
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43 sense of being out, being themselves and being safe at work. Geographical, social, and
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45 religious aspects of both the internal and external socio-cultural contexts of the school
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47 impact on the minority stress of lesbian-identifying teachers.
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51 *Adverse experiences unique to being a lesbian-identifying teacher*

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54 Some participants described, to differing degrees, a perception that they could not be
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56 their authentic lesbian-identifying selves at work. The experiences described were
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4 unique to the participants' identities, in that they are likely not to have been experienced
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6 by a heterosexual teacher in the same circumstances. These included inappropriate
7
8 comments and fears around job security.
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10 Careful curation of social media profiles was described by Alana, who also
11 expressed concerns around job security. She stated that she intentionally does not post
12 anything to social media featuring her partner, nor enter into many discussions with
13 colleagues or students around her personal life, whereas she did when she was married
14 to a man. In terms of identity management, this is described as *covering* – not revealing
15 anything related to sexuality identity to the workplace community (Griffin, 1991; Lee,
16 2023). Alana expressed disappointment at this, commenting that “social media is, I
17 think, something that we’ve grown up with, as part of one of the ways we celebrate our
18 relationships. So, we don’t do anything. Like you wouldn’t be able to tell the damn
19 thing off of our Facebook profiles” (Alana, 31). She expanded on this, stating,
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32 ...going away for a weekend, something that you’d normally tell your kids what
33 you’re up to, and having to censor how I described that weekend. I don’t know, I
34 used to use conversations between Jordan [ex-husband] and I, as learning moments
35 with the kids. I would bring him into the conversation a lot and sort of say that this
36 is what an adult functioning relationship can look like, when I’m trying to resolve
37 [social emotional] problems in the classroom. Have you guys tried using this way
38 to solve your problems, like very gentle and age appropriate? I don’t feel like I can
39 do that at all in my current relationship. So it’s like a whole thing that I used to use
40 authentically to teach, that’s not just a script. (Alana, 31)
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47 In this example, it can be observed that Alana exercised forethought in ways that others
48 may not need to, and through this, was unable to authentically interact in her classroom
49 in ways that she did when she was in her previous, heterosexual, marriage.
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53 Alana described a desire to teach authentically by being able to be more open
54 and truer to herself in classroom and collegial conversations, as well as online, but
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4 experienced a degree of silencing, as she felt held back by fears around her job security
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6 and the reactions of her school community. Suppes et al. (2021) and Neary (2013) have
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8 found that being more open can facilitate community integration and strengthen
9
10 identity, which benefits mental health. However, their research have also found that
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12 being more open influences individual perceptions of discrimination (Neary, 2013;
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14 Suppes et al., 2021). Although Alana had not widely disclosed her sexual identity at
15
16 work, her fears and perceptions of discrimination represent a proximal minority stressor,
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18 as it has caused her to monitor what she discloses and how she used social media, a fear
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20 and contingency that would be unlikely to affect a heterosexual colleague (Neary, 2013;
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22 Velez et al., 2012).

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25 By contrast, Angie, who described herself as “obviously gay” and made no
26
27 effort to hide it, experienced overt hostility when she was asked to attend a school
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29 camp:
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32 They’re not really overt [sic] about it. I went to go on school camp this year, and
33
34 one of the teachers said to me... “oh you can’t sleep in a tent or unit in a room with
35
36 the other female staff. You’re gay.” Oh, because I’m gay, I want every female, is
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38 that what you think? What, so you think I should sleep with the boys? That’s pretty
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40 much what she thought, that I should sleep in the room with the men. She had this
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42 opinion, and the rest of us were just like “Oh, whatever.” (Angie, 52)

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44 In this situation, Angie described that the rest of the staff supported her against the
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46 homophobic opinion and remark. She also stated that she will always “clap back” in
47
48 response to these comments. Despite the support she received from her colleagues, it
49
50 represents an uncomfortable conversation that would likely not have occurred if she had
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52 been heterosexual. More specifically, a heterosexual teacher would not be subjected to
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54 this form of heteronormative bias and questioning, creating a divide between a lesbian-
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56 identifying teacher and some of her heterosexual colleagues, including stress and
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4 exclusion to an individual teacher (Stones & Glazzard, 2019). Although this experience
5 represented a distal stressor (Stones & Glazzard, 2019), the response from Angie's
6 colleagues was dismissive towards the person's concern about camp and added no
7 power to the homophobia. Owens et al. (2022) and Gröschl (2016) found that having a
8 supportive workplace culture acted as a protective factor against minority stress and
9 workplace bullying. However, it was also noted that this should not work in isolation
10 without other forms of support, such as having relevant policies in place, professional
11 development related to sexuality diversity, and a workplace culture encouraging
12 inclusion (Ferfolja & Stavrou, 2015). Research by Gray (2013) supports this, suggesting
13 that participants who were able to be more open about their sexuality at work,
14 experienced greater job satisfaction and less management between their private and
15 professional lives. Unfortunately, according to these participants, lesbian-identifying
16 teachers have extra terrain to navigate which their heterosexual counterparts do not, thus
17 potentially impacting their mental health and wellbeing.
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33 34 35 ***Identity management*** 36

37 All participants, except for Angie who described her sexuality as "obvious" to others,
38 reported varying degrees of identity management. Some expressed doubt around sharing
39 aspects of their personal life in case it was deemed inappropriate for their role, while
40 others were fearful of more dire consequences, such as hostility, job loss, or loss of
41 privacy.
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48 For example, Jan who taught in the state school system in Brisbane at the time
49 of the interview stated that while she was out to her teaching team, she was careful with
50 what she shared with administrators (deputies, principals, and heads of department.) At
51 one stage, Jan needed to inform her principal of a situation after her marriage had
52 ended. She explained:
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4 ...my marriage had broken down and there was DV [domestic violence] involved.
5 I'd had some threats and I had to let my principal know in case a car turns up or
6 something, or someone rings the school and asks, am I there? I just referred to my
7 partner, I didn't give an agenda. (Jan, 52)
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10
11 This adds a layer of forethought to a situation that would already have been difficult and
12 traumatic. When she expanded on how she managed her identity at school, Jan said that
13 it was challenging to have to monitor her conversations with others. At times, students
14 would ask her questions about her life, which she needed to close down. She expressed:
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20 I can't be completely open with the students. Are you married, do you have kids,
21 that sort of thing? And I just change the topic really quickly. So I usually say that I
22 used to have a dog then whoosh, off to talk about something else. Whereas I guess
23 heterosexual teachers probably don't have that issue. (Jan, 52)
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28 Although greater levels of visibility may not be the most advantageous for all lesbian-
29 identifying teachers, being more authentic to ones' identity, such as in the case of
30 Angie, is associated with psychological benefits, including increased self-esteem,
31 greater social support, and overall wellbeing (Tatum et al., 2016; Beals et al., 2009).
32 Identity management as a process can also be cognitively burdensome, bringing about
33 stress and anxiety (Ferfolja & Stavrou, 2015; Rudoe, 2010; Gray, 2013). As Jan
34 described, it is a process of monitoring conversations and changing the topic, and for
35 Alana, it was about careful curation of her social media, which represents situations and
36 strategies that can create minority stress and would not be considerations for
37 heterosexual teachers in the same environments. Another participant, Regan, described
38 that her current environment, a Christian school, was diverse in its staff cohort. She
39 stated that,
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54 I'm quite comfortable in this environment ... It's a very eclectic bunch of teachers,
55 but we all seem to just tolerate, accept, get on with each other really well. Like, the
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4 staff ranges from ... a 70-year-old man down to 20-year-old females that work as
5 well ... Christian, non-Christian, Mormon, gay, not gay, married, divorced; we all
6 just seem to get together in this weird, wonderful mix. (Regan, 41)
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10 Regan also described that pride day was celebrated in her school, but she also felt she
11 had to read the room before disclosing her identity. She expressed that she was not
12 explicit about her sexuality identity, but also had not sought to hide it. Without doing so
13 explicitly, Regan had used the identity management strategies of passing and covering,
14 which may have been a contributing factor towards her avoiding stigmatisation (Aybar
15 Camposano et al., 2022).
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22 Aybar Camposano et al. (2022) described two methods that sexuality diverse
23 individuals may use regarding identity management, namely, by disassociating from
24 their sexuality identity, or by connecting to their in-group, a 'collective' strategy. In
25 situations where an individual perceives that their sexuality identity is not 'othered',
26 they were found to be more likely to use collective strategies. Where an individual
27 perceives that there is a potential for discrimination or adverse experiences, it was
28 observed that they were more likely to disconnect from their identity. Aybar
29 Camposano et al (2022) also found that individuals who connected with their identity
30 more openly were found to have more access to relevant social support, and greater
31 reports of wellbeing. An identity management strategy described within this study is
32 'social mobility', where people discriminately disengage from and manage their identity
33 in certain environments and adapt assimilating traits to avoid negative experiences
34 (Aybar Camposano et al., 2022). While this may be successful in protecting lesbian-
35 identifying teachers from discrimination and stigmatisation, over time, it can lead to
36 greater experiences of distress and reduced psychological wellbeing. Denying one's
37 sexual orientation over time is implicated in higher levels of depression, anxiety,
38 vigilance, and substance use (Brennan et al., 2021). It can certainly be argued that
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4 concealment and management of ones' lesbian identity in turn can result in avoiding
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6 stigma, discrimination, and negative workplace outcomes; conversely, the stress of
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8 concealment and identity management is positively associated with the burdens of
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10 limited social support, shame, and impacted personal relationships, as well as increased
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12 depression, anxiety, and substance use (Pachankis et al., 2015; Brennan et al., 2021).
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15 16 **Conclusion**

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18 Despite progress towards policy recognition and broader human rights for sexuality
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20 diverse individuals such as lesbian-identifying teachers, schools remain institutions
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22 where there is silencing, discrimination, stigmatisation, and minority stress (Ferfolja,
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24 2013; Stones & Glazzard, 2019). The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that
25
26 there is still a perception by the lesbian-identifying teachers interviewed that they need
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28 to manage their identity, read their colleagues, and maintain boundaries between private
29
30 and professional identities (Gray, 2021). Within a range of environments — there may
31
32 be a range of identity management strategies employed to avoid adverse experiences,
33
34 both professionally and personally. Over time, this may lead to minority stress, which
35
36 may create a more hostile workplace environment for lesbian-identifying teachers.
37
38 These findings, along with the research discussed alongside them, demonstrate that
39
40 there is still work to be done in schools (Aybar Camposano et al., 2022). The ability to
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42 achieve workplaces that are welcoming and safe for lesbian-identifying teachers could
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44 be realised with more awareness around sexuality diversity in teaching environments,
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46 greater professional development, and increased visibility and recognition/
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48 representation in schools with a vision that schools are becoming spaces of belonging
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50 for lesbian-identifying staff (Ferfolja & Stavrou, 2015; Gray, 2013).
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55 Another poorly understood area of this research is the impact of school
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57 environmental factors on homophobia. Two of the participants described differing
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4 degrees of hostility that impacted their wellbeing and interaction with their school
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6 communities. The perceived influencing factors included rural location, misogynistic
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8 attitudes, poverty, homophobia, and religion. This highlights an area in need of further
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10 investigation, especially considering teacher mobility in Queensland with forced
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12 transfers, as this could have implications for lesbian-identifying teachers. This, in turn,
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14 creates a greater impact on staffing, as lesbian teachers may be reluctant to transfer to
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16 locations that are perceived as less accepting of sexuality diversity, in fear of their
17
18 safety. Further investigation of the impact of rights to religious freedom as it impacts on
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20 the rights of others based on gender and sexuality. One limitation of the study is that
21
22 there was a small sample size of four participants. Similarly, all the participants were of
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24 European Australian descent, a greater understanding of intersectionality involving
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26 religion, disability, First Nations Australians, and culturally and linguistically diverse
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28 lesbian-identifying teachers may develop further insights within the Queensland,
29
30 Australian context.
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34 In conclusion, this project has identified the ongoing burden of minority stress
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36 for some lesbian-identifying teachers in Queensland. However, there are more specific
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38 insights to be gained from exploring influencing factors within the lived experience of
39
40 this cohort of teachers, such as the culture of the school, religion, socio-economic
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42 factors, and leadership, as well as the influence of intersectionality.
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Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethical statement

The research was granted ethical approval by the University of XX Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No: removed for peer-review). All study activities were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of XX's Human Research Ethics Committee, and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments, including the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – Updated 2018.

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Table 1: Participant characteristics

Participant (pseudonym) and ethnic background	Age	School type	School denomination	Type of region	Sharing (outness) about their sexuality
Jan European Australian	52	Currently primary school – has taught primary and high school	Currently state school – has taught in Catholic schools	Currently metropolitan, has taught in regional Queensland	Out to some
Alana European Australian	31	Primary school	State	Regional Queensland	Out to very few
Angie European Australian	52	High school	State	Regional Queensland	Out to everyone
Regan European Australian	41	Currently high school – has taught primary school	Christian	Currently metropolitan, has taught in rural Queensland	Out to some