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## **Responding to Heteronormativity: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Asexual Preservice Teachers' Dreams and Fears**

Laura Bower-Phipps  
Southern Connecticut State University

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**Abstract:** Heteronormativity, the “privileging of heterosexuality through its normalization” (Jackson, 2006, p. 109), causes confusion and anxiety for many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and asexual preservice teachers as they consider how they will talk about their lives with students. This article explores how preservice teachers have experienced the normalization of heterosexuality and the ways in which these experiences will shape their professional practices. Focus group and follow up interviews with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and asexual preservice teachers were analyzed using a constant comparison method. Findings suggest that participants’ professional vision was largely a response to heteronormativity. They wanted to be out, be role models, and create safe spaces; yet they felt unable to achieve this vision in what they perceived as heteronormative school climates. Implications for teacher preparation programs and policies include the importance of equipping all preservice teachers to identify and disrupt heteronormativity in schools.

**Keywords:** *preservice teachers, teacher education, queer theory, teacher identity, LGBTQIA+*

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Schools tend to be heteronormative institutions that create a closet for non-heterosexual teachers<sup>1</sup>, forcing them to make decisions about the extent to which they share their sexual

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<sup>1</sup> Terminology for sexual orientations and identities is in constant flux (Peters, 2014). While this article focuses on preservice teachers who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and asexual, other terms are employed when discussing the work of other authors. When discussing sexual diversity in general, LGBTQIA+ is used to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual, and others who identify outside the rigid category of heterosexual.

orientation (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006). Heteronormativity, the “privileging of heterosexuality through its normalization” (Jackson, 2006, p. 109), shapes teachers’ professional practices. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual teachers talk about carefully separating their lives into personal and professional, not allowing the two to intermingle (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013). One gay educator described “monitoring one's teaching behavior, and policing oneself for evidence of homosexuality, lest a colleague, parent, or principal deduce our sexual persona for us” (King, 2004, p. 126). On the other hand, some lesbian, gay, and bisexual educators discuss the importance of sharing their sexual orientation as a means of serving as a role model for sexually diverse students, maintaining their own psychological well-being, and as a response to homophobia and biphobia experienced within schools (Gray, 2013).

Despite the promise of sexually diverse role models, decisions about coming out are complex, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual teachers tend to spend a great deal of mental and emotional effort considering and managing these decisions (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013). Challenges around coming out decisions are compounded for preservice teachers, whose professional identities are still developing (Benson, Smith, & Flanagan, 2014). Preservice teachers spend a significant amount of time becoming socialized into the education professions (Lortie, 1975) and learning norms of the profession, many of which turn out to be heteronormative (Gray, 2013). Considering the toll on inservice teachers as they make decisions about coming out, teacher educators must consider the unique needs of sexually diverse preservice teachers and engage in what Benson (2010) calls “queer-care” (p. 13). Supporting sexually diverse individuals in teacher preparation programs is an essential component of providing classroom teachers who are role models for sexually diverse youth (Macgillivray, 2008) and who foster students’ understanding of sexual and gender diversity (Melillo, 2003; Rofes, 2000).

In an attempt to inform sexually diverse preservice teachers and the teacher educators who prepare them for the classroom, this article addresses the following questions: In what ways have lesbian, gay, bisexual, and asexual preservice teachers experienced heteronormativity? How has heteronormativity shaped their anticipated professional practices? In what ways are sexually diverse participants prepared to queer professional practices?

### **Review of Literature**

Content related to sexual diversity has been strikingly absent from teacher preparation. For example, a content analysis of eight of the most popular foundations of education textbooks found that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) topics were rarely included in these textbooks. When the topics were included, textbook authors pathologized non-heterosexual identities and positioned LGBT individuals as victims (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). Similarly, an examination of 41 syllabi from multicultural courses within teacher preparation and interviews with 80 instructors of multicultural courses demonstrated that LGBT topics are often absent from multicultural coursework in teacher preparation. When they are addressed, it is in “decontextualized ways that mask heteronormativity” (Gorski, Davis, & Reiter, 2013, p. 224). Gorski and colleagues noted that when compared to other forms of diversity, sexual orientation (when included) was far less likely to be discussed through a critical lens or to be addressed through specific readings. Instead, sexual orientation was included in discussions of bullying or general oppression, a phenomenon that has been noted by other scholars as well (e.g. Sadowski, 2010). In considering the climate of teacher preparation programs for LGBT preservice teachers, Horn et al. (2010) evaluated 57 teacher preparation programs across the state of Illinois for their “inclusion of LGBTQ-related course content, attitudes toward gender identity and sexual

orientation, and their ability to teach about LGBTQ lives and communities” (p. 70). Of these, 72% received a failing grade.

Further, conversations around LGBT issues tend to privilege lesbian and gay identities over bisexual identities, leading to what Rodriguez (2016) calls “bisexual erasure” (p. 169). Due to bignegativity and biphobia, bisexuality has become largely invisible in schools (Elia, 2010). Asexuality is similarly absent from any discussion of LGBT topics in teacher preparation, with most mentions of asexuality and teachers referring to the de-sexualization of teachers, due to fear of teachers' bodies (e.g. Johnson, 2006; Mallozzi, 2014; Sinclair & Reece, 2016), instead of discussing asexuality as a unique sexual orientation (Durães, Martins, & Borralho, 2016).

While many teacher educators do agree that anti-homophobia and anti-heterosexist content should be included in teacher preparation, they rarely actually do so for a variety of reasons: (1) they feel that other identities or areas of difference are more pressing to discuss, (2) they view sexual orientation as beyond the scope of primary education and therefore irrelevant for early childhood and elementary preservice teachers, and/or (3) they anticipate resistance from preservice teachers (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008). In the rare examples of teacher preparation that addresses anti-heterosexism, anti-homophobia/biphobia, and anti-heteronormativity, the focus remains on developing heterosexual preservice teachers as allies for LGBT youth and helping these teachers unpack their heterosexual privilege (e.g. Clark, 2010; Vavrus, 2009; Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2013). Despite the importance of preparing heterosexual allies, teacher educators must also attend to preparing sexually diverse preservice teachers for the classroom.

Very few researchers have focused primarily on LGBTQA+ preservice teachers' experiences. Benson and Flanagan (2014) raised “queer student teachers' concerns” (p. 384) as they investigated a series of workshops intended to prepare LGBT preservice teachers to enter schools. All nine queer participants reported feeling better equipped to transition from coursework to the field after engaging in the workshops. These results demonstrate the potential teacher educators have for specifically impacting sexually diverse preservice teachers. DeJean (2010), himself a gay teacher educator, reported on his interactions with a lesbian preservice teacher, calling for queer teacher educators to support queer preservice teachers through “courageous conversations” (p. 233) about queer lives within educational settings. Highlighting the absence of disclosure of non-heterosexual identities in schools, he described the risk that gay and lesbian educators take in talking to each other about their experiences and the importance of doing so. He contended that queer teacher educators are best equipped for these conversations, due to their own experiences in heteronormative educational settings.

Given such limited research on sexually diverse preservice teachers, it is unclear how heteronormativity has shaped their professional aspirations and how teacher educators of varying sexual orientations can best support sexually diverse preservice teachers. This article addresses that gap through exploring how preservice teachers who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and asexual have experienced heteronormativity; how heteronormativity shapes their anticipated professional practices; and the extent to which they are prepared to queer these practices.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To understand the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and asexual preservice teachers in schools, it is important to recognize those schools as social institutions that are shaped by heteronormative societies (Mallozzi, 2014). Institutions, such as education, medicine, and the law, establish certain ways of being in the world as acceptable and “normal,” while naming all other ways of being as deviant (Foucault, 1978). Michael Warner (1993) described the core of

heteronormativity as viewing heterosexuality as the “very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction, without which society wouldn’t exist” (p. xxi). Not only does heteronormativity privilege heterosexuality over other sexual orientations; rather, heteronormativity erases all other orientations.

Within schools and classrooms, heterosexuality is reinforced through classroom discourse, especially teachers’ tendency to ignore homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic slurs (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2015); gendered locker rooms, bathrooms, and extracurricular activities (Carrera & DePalma, & Lameiras, 2012; Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009); and school policies, which frequently omit sexual orientation from anti-bullying or harassment policies, and often reinforce heteronormative gender divisions (Payne & Smith, 2010).

Heteronormativity also cultivates the belief that teachers are heterosexual unless they state otherwise. Further, any statements of non-heterosexuality may be viewed as deviant at worst and an aberration at best (Foucault, 1978). An alternative to heteronormativity is queer theory, which troubles dichotomies within gender and sexuality (Piontek, 2006). Queer theory is particularly useful for this study, which not only includes individuals who identify as lesbian and gay, but also those who identify as asexual, “the fourth sexual orientation” (Durães, Martins, & Borralho, 2016, p. 735), and bisexual, an orientation that in itself leads to disrupting binaries (Nathanson, 2009). Queering teacher education “is not about reifying rigid notions of a normative dichotomous sexuality between hetero and gay/lesbian, but instead focuses on deconstructing and decentering normative heterosexuality” (Vavrus, 2009, p. 384).

### Methodology

This research used qualitative methodology to understand the experiences and professional aspirations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and asexual preservice teachers. Such methodology allowed for exploring the meaning participants have constructed from their experiences and identities (Merriam, 1998).

### Participants

Participants were recruited through emails to all students within the school of education at a regional university as well as LGBTQA+ listserves on campus and announcements in education courses. Seven preservice teachers consented to participate. Table 1 includes pseudonyms for the participants as well as sexual identity, area for which they are pursuing teacher certification, and ethnicity.

Table 1  
*Participants*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sexual Identity</b>	<b>Certification Area</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>
Kelly	lesbian	elementary and special education	White
Samantha	lesbian	elementary education	White
Matt	gay	special education	White
Rudy	bisexual	elementary education	Black
Doug	gay	elementary education	White
Alyssa	bisexual	elementary education	White
Holly	asexual	special education	White

## Data Sources

Through engaging in a focus group interview, which can be particularly useful in understanding shared experiences of marginalized groups (Fielding, 1993), participants were able to co-construct meaning from their collective identities as they relate to schools (Munday, 2006). The focus group interview protocol (See Appendix A) queried their current levels of outness, anticipated outness as teachers, and experiences that shaped their thinking. Given inservice LGBT teachers' heavy focus on outness within the research on LGBT teachers (e.g. Connell, 2012; Endo, Reece-Miller, & Santavicca, 2010; Gray, 2013), outness was a logical starting point for the focus group.

In the second part of the focus group interview, preservice teacher read a list of advice from inservice LGBTQA+ teachers (gathered as part of a related research project and found in the Appendix B) and responded to their advice. Given assertions that preservice teachers have little access to LGBTQA+ inservice teachers as role models (Benson, Smith, & Flanagan, 2014; DeJean, 2010), it was important to connect preservice gay, lesbian, bisexual, and asexual teachers to the experiences their inservice counterparts.

The focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed, and the transcript was sent to all participants for member checking. A follow up email was sent one month later to ask participants to contribute additional thoughts following the focus group and inviting them to participate in follow up interviews. Two participants (Matt and Alyssa) responded to the email with additional thoughts, and six participated in follow up interviews (Samantha abstained), for the purposes of member checking, further exploring themes from the focus group interview, and probing individual experiences and aspirations. (See Appendix C for follow-up interview protocol.) These interviews were also audio-recorded and transcribed.

## Data Analysis

Transcripts from the focus group interview and follow up interviews were analyzed through a queer lens, looking for statements of deviance (defined as anyone saying something is not appropriate or is abnormal), normalcy (what is typical or normal, particularly in relation to teachers and/or sexual orientation), and queer (points of resistance and possibility, subverting the normal/deviant binary). This line-by-line analysis started with the focus group interview and proceeded to the individual interviews, in the order in which they were conducted. A list of data points (participants' statements) was created for deviance, normalcy, and queer. Inductive themes were developed from the combined lists and data were coded according to theme using a constant comparison method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Initial themes included coming out vs. being out, heteronormative expectations, outness as binary, socio-political climate of schools, double consciousness (how am I being perceived), teacher as role model, safe/unsafe as binary, and laws as barometer of LGBTQIA+ safety. From these themes, three categories (Merriam, 1998) were developed: outness, safe spaces, and teacher as role model.

An additional form of data analysis was developing reconstructed life stories (Rosenthal, 1993) from each participant based on their comments during the focus group. These are included in Appendix D to allow participants to speak for themselves about their sexual identities. This is particularly important because language around sexual orientation is contested, fluid, and continually changing.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

The researcher's identities informed data collection, including interactions with participants, and data analysis. In considering the "role of [her] own and others' racialized positionality and cultural ways of knowing" (Milner, 2007, p. 338), it is important to state that the researcher identifies as lesbian, cis-female, and white. She has taught in the states of Pennsylvania, Nevada, and Connecticut at the elementary, high school, and university level respectively. She informed all participants (and potential participants) of her sexual orientation and teaching experience.

### **Findings**

Three key themes were identified through analysis of focus group and follow up interviews: outness, safe spaces, and teacher as role model.

#### **Wanting (And Fearing) To Be Out**

Preservice teachers experienced heteronormative expectations in schools, which Rudy, bisexual, captured by explaining, "I think most people assume that teachers are heterosexual 'my husband, my kids' or in terms of a male teacher, 'my wife and my kids.' I think that's automatically an assumption that people make." These heteronormative expectations created the need for participants to decide the extent to which they would be out, as previously voiced by inservice LGBT teachers (Connell, 2012; Gray, 2013). Kelly, a lesbian, shared her experiences doing fieldwork in schools, "[Other teachers] just assume I'm straight. They'll ask me questions about my boyfriend and stuff. I just kind of let it slide." Participants acknowledged that coming out decisions are a unique burden for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and asexual teachers. Kelly stated, "You have to think about how much of your life you want to share. But if you're straight, then you don't have to think about it. You can share all of your life, because it's acceptable in the greater society."

Participants expressed a desire to be out when they become classroom teachers, with authenticity being a key motivator. While inservice LGBT teachers tend to bifurcate the self into personal and professional (Endo, Reece-Miller, & Santavicca, 2010; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013), participants envisioned a more unified self. Matt, gay, explained, "Ideally, you should be who you are in life." They also talked about being out as easier, as Samantha, lesbian, shared, "I think that being honest from the start for me, would probably be the best thing. Just right from the get-go rather than having to hide and then come out." These participants accepted the "coming out imperative" (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 144) that is pervasive in educational research and LGBTQA+ advocacy organizations. While Rasmussen (2004) argues that resisting coming out is an equally valid choice that can be used strategically for political, ethical, and pedagogical reasons, participants felt that being out was an essential component of their ideal teaching practices and identities.

Participants suggested that being married might make being out easier, because of their perception that marriage legitimized relationships. Alyssa, bisexual, said, "I think if I was single, I probably wouldn't bring it up. But I think if was married, I think I would certainly have less of a problem talking about it. I feel like it might have more power behind the statement." Maintaining relationship status as a precursor for coming out was particularly problematic for Holly, who identified as asexual, "If I were to get married, some people would say that invalidates my sexuality. And that I'm actually just straight pretending to be on the spectrum or god knows what." Alyssa, bisexual, responded to Holly, "It's the same for bi people. You can be in a relationship with a woman for as long as you like, but as soon as you're in a relationship with a man again,

then you're not part of the [LGBT] community." For some, mentioning a same-gender spouse would constitute coming out, but for others this particular coming out strategy was impossible.

Kelly, lesbian, identified particular challenges for single individuals who identify as LGBTQA+, "That's a big problem I have when I think about coming out in schools and at my work, is that I'm not in a relationship with anybody. And I haven't been. People don't take [sexual orientation] as seriously or don't have as much belief about it if you are not [in a relationship]." Kelly's, Alyssa's, and Holly's points raise the problem of homonormativity (Duggan, 2002), that is the assumption that all queer people are (or wish to be) in long-term relationships with members of the same gender.

When asked about how much they think about coming out and the ways they will be out in their professional lives, Kate, who is bisexual, exclaimed, "A lot!!" All participants reported having thought about how out they want to be and talking about being, "nervous," "worried," and "awkward." Despite widespread interest in being out, there was significant fear. Samantha, lesbian, explained further, "You want to be honest and out, but there's always going to be those people that don't accept it." Professional coming out decisions had been complicated for some preservice teachers by negative responses, primarily from family, sending the message that non-heterosexuality is deviant. Rudy, bisexual, shared, "My mom is more accepting than my dad, but it also just makes me think what is it going to be like when I'm out in the real world and in a profession where it may come up." Holly, asexual, stated, "The first time my mom suspected that I was bisexual, she just kind of beat me, so I've been pretending to be as heterosexual as possible since then."

Participants made a distinction between coming out and being out. Samantha, lesbian, captured this in stating her desire "just [to] live rather than having a come out moment." Kelly, lesbian, suggested, "If someone asked, I would definitely not lie. But unless it's something that comes up or someone asks me, I would not be out." Being out was passive, relying on others to know about preservice teachers' sexual orientation or to ask. Coming out, on the other hand, was a transgressive (i.e. queer) act. In a follow up email, Alyssa, bisexual, shared, "I recognize the importance and significance of my nervousness and of the act of our coming out, not just for ourselves, but for our students, our community and our culture at large. Not being open with a community I intend to be an active participant in is something I cannot bear." Coming out and being out were complex matters that were central to participants' hopes, dreams, and fears related to becoming teachers.

### **Finding and Establishing Safe Spaces**

Normalization of heterosexuality and positioning LGBTQA+ identities as deviant caused participants to view some spaces as safe for individuals with non-normative sexual orientations and other spaces as unsafe. Rudy, bisexual, said, "Not to say I don't feel comfortable talking about my personal life, but just making sure that it's a safe space to do so." A recent survey of school climate for LGBTQ students found that 59.5% of respondents felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Gruong, 2018). This survey, like much of the current research, focused on safety for queer students in K-12 schools, not their queer teachers, yet participants suggested that teachers and preservice teachers have similar fears related to safety.

Participants felt that some schools would be safe environments for LGBTQA+ teachers to be out, but suggested that many were not safe. Their sentiments reflected findings that inservice LGBT teachers are greatly impacted by "schooling micro-cultures" (Ferroja & Hopkins, 2013), which include the extent to which diversity is valued in a school. Participants interpreted religious

schools and those in conservative areas as being unsafe. Doug, gay, explained, "I fear potential backlash from parents who are religious. I am so intent on teaching in urban environments, where there is such stigma about being LGBT within the Black and Latino communities. I would not want my job to be threatened." Similarly, Alyssa, bisexual, shared, "During my student teaching, my mentor had prayer meetings every morning in her class right before the students would come in, which led me to believe that she was a very conservative person. I was very afraid to come out to her because of that."

Participants also used laws regarding marriage equality and employment non-discrimination as indicators of safety for LGBTQA+ individuals. An additional indicator of safety was other out LGBTQA+ teachers in a school. Kelly, lesbian, explained, "If there are already teachers that are LGBTQ and already out, that will make it easier. But sometimes you can get a feel just for how conservative it is. And you feel like if you said something, you would be looked at differently. That would be your identifier for the rest of your time working there." When normalization of heterosexuality was already interrupted, participants felt safer. Similarly, inservice teachers feel safer coming out when there are other LGBTQA+ teachers at their schools (Bower-Phipps, 2017).

In terms of impact on their practices, participants talked about only seeking employment in schools and communities where they would feel safe being out. Rudy, bisexual, reflected, "I want to be out, more out. That's just what I want to do. So I feel like I would have to a bit more research about where I'm applying and the surrounding area." They also prioritized making their classrooms safe spaces for students. Holly, asexual, shared, "In high school I wasn't out, but I knew there were safe spaces. The GSA [Gay/Straight Alliance] was also a safe space, and all of that helped me to connect to my sexuality more and to feel that safety. I want all students to feel that good. They need a safe space just as much." Some felt that coming out was an important part of creating safe spaces. Overall, creating safe spaces was a matter of disrupting heteronormativity through embracing other possibilities for sexual orientation and gender expression.

### **Queer Teacher as "Perfect" Role Model?**

Participants talked about coming out and creating safe spaces through the strongly held belief that teachers are role models. For example, Kelly, a lesbian, shared, "I think I would always want to come out just for the students in my classroom. Just for anyone who is feeling the same way, so they know that there's other people and that they're safe." Participant suggested that the stakes were high to be a positive role model and not "deviant," yet they also suggested that queer role models could be particularly powerful. They felt that teachers were held to a different standard than other people because of being role models. Alyssa, bisexual, explained, "I think the culture around education has made us feel like teachers are expected to be even better, perfect human beings than the average regular person." When asked during a follow up interview what people expected of teachers, Doug, gay, responded, "To live perfect lives. Don't drink, don't do anything risqué, conform to society's view of normal adult." Doug's notion reflects King's (2004) experience of self-monitoring and policing as a gay educator. In anticipating being role models, some participants talked about keeping teaching identities and sexual identities separate, a strategy adopted by many inservice teachers (Endo, Reece-Miller, & Santavicca, 2010; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013). Rudy, bisexual, said, "It's almost like school and teaching is the only way people view teachers. It's like teachers don't have a life outside of school."

Participants feared that some parents would feel that LGBTQA+ identities were not positive role models for children. Matt, gay, described this as, "The fear of parents, that you're



imposing yourself on their children in your ideology and how you live your life and how that would influence their children.” Participants feared that non-normative sexual orientation would become “your identifier” in interacting with students and their families. Kelly, lesbian, explained, “You’re not a teacher to them, you’re just a gay person.” Doug, gay, advised, “I think in your professional environment, your identifier first and foremost should be your work. I think you should focus on your work at first.” Participants were aware that the separation of teaching and sexual identities only applied to non-heterosexual teachers. Mallozi (2014) suggested that teachers are told there is a “right kind of personal life” (p. 197) for teachers to have. Matt, gay, explained that this is unique to the teaching profession because teachers are role models, “It kind of does seem like inequality. Being a teacher, you’re held to such a different standard than if I were just an accountant. Because then if I was gay and my co-worker didn’t like it, I would be like, ‘Whatever. Okay, you do your thing, but we’re accountants.’”

In thinking about their classroom practices, participants’ belief in teachers as role model meant vigilance around waiting for the right moment to come out. Alyssa, bisexual, reflected, “I would want to be considered a good teacher. And then probably within a year or so depending on the community, I would bring it up. I would want to be proud of who I am. I just wouldn’t do it right away, so that you could be accepted on your merit first.” They were well aware that this was a dilemma not faced by heterosexual teachers. Kelly, lesbian, said, “I think queer teachers are even held to a higher standard. Because if you’re a straight teacher and you’re talking about your husband or your wife, no one’s questioning that. No one’s wondering if it’s inappropriate in the classroom for you to talk about that.” She continued, “At the same time it’s really personal. So there’s more risk of getting hurt.”

In viewing themselves as role models *because* they were sexual minorities, participants queered the notion of teacher as role model. Kelly, lesbian, talked about the importance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and asexual teachers as role models, because of the dearth of sexually diverse teachers, “I’ve been in a good 4 or 5 schools and school systems, and I’ve never seen a teacher that’s out. And it’s kind of crazy.” Matt, gay, suggested, “Being teachers in a power position that students look up to, gay teachers should be represented and students can identify with if they’re going through it.” In a follow up email, Alyssa, bisexual, shared her vision of herself as a queer role model.

I want to be a role model. I want to teach tolerance and acceptance. I want kids to know it's ok to be who you are and to love who you love, and I want future generations of LGBT teachers to feel nonchalant about sharing their romantic orientation and their non-traditional families with their schools. I am growing in confidence as a teacher and I am holding onto my faith that my passion for education will be recognized and that I will be loved by my students and accepted and respected by my peers no matter what.

Participants took their perceived responsibilities as role models seriously. While they viewed themselves as important role models owing to sexual orientation, they feared that colleagues, students, and students’ families would not.

### Discussion

The preservice teachers in this study experienced heteronormativity that shaped their anticipated professional practices. Participants were impacted by assumptions that they were heterosexual, and they sometimes experienced negative responses in sharing their sexual orientations. Further, the absence (or invisibility) of LGBTQA+ teachers in their own school experiences reinforced their interpretation of schools as heteronormative institutions and left them

feeling that they lacked examples of being a teacher and an LGBTQA+ individual. Even before entering their own classrooms, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and asexual preservice teachers felt the same sense of marginalization and of their identities being made invisible as experienced by inservice LGBT teachers (Ferjfolá & Hopkins, 2013).

Their experiences with heteronormativity established a duality in preservice teachers' anticipated professional practices, which included both participants' vision for teaching and the ways they anticipated this vision being muted by heteronormativity within schools. While they wanted to be out as teachers, participants were sometimes afraid to do so or were unable to envision being out unless they were partnered. Their experiences with heteronormativity caused preservice teachers to carefully weigh coming out decisions, an experience also shared by inservice LGBT teachers (Endo, Reece-Miller, & Santavicca, 2010; Gray, 2013). Like inservice teachers, they expected their decisions to be shaped by school contexts (Connell, 2012).

Heteronormativity forced preservice teachers to consider safety as they considered where they would feel physically and emotionally safe being out as teachers. Physical and psychological safety has also been a priority for inservice teachers in selecting employment (Bower-Phipps, 2017; Hardie, 2012). Participants committed to creating safe spaces for their own students in the midst of heteronormative environments, reflecting inservice LGBT teachers' assertions that they can "develop a curriculum and a classroom climate that will foster understanding and even generate social change among colleagues, parents, and students" (Melillo, 2003, p. 1) through disclosing their sexual orientation.

Participants planned to be role models, but they were not entirely sure how to do that in the face of the heteronormativity they had experienced. They viewed themselves as ideal role models, but they feared that students' families and school administrators would expect teachers to either be heterosexual or not to discuss or allude to their sexual orientation.

To some extent, participants had a queer vision: they wanted to be out, expanding notions of who can and should be a teacher; to create safe spaces in their classrooms as an antidote to the heteronormativity they had experienced; and to serve as role models not only as teachers but also as LGBTQA+ individuals. Despite this queer vision, heteronormativity prevented them from feeling that they could fully queer norms for teachers. They recognized the challenges in bringing together what they viewed as society's notion of a good teacher and their own sexual identities. Further, they seemed to think that there was an appropriate time and place for everything, particularly discussing non-normative sexualities.

### **Implications**

Perhaps what LGBTQA+ preservice teachers need to learn from teacher educators, instead of what the appropriate time and place is for any indicators or discussion of non-normative sexuality, is how to be freed from the notions of appropriateness, normalcy, and ordinariness. Teacher educators must continue to queer pedagogy and curriculum within teacher preparation and empower LGBTQA+ preservice teachers to engage in what DeJean (2007) described as "critical self-awareness and radical honesty" (p. 70). This begins by including discussions of sexual orientation, heterosexism, homophobia, and biphobia within teacher preparation programs (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008). Asexuality and bisexuality are particularly absent from teacher preparation, yet including these sexual orientations serves to queer the homo/hetero binary (Durães, Martins, & Borralho, 2016; Nathanson, 2009)

Zacko-Smith and Smith (2010) provide several examples of queering PK-12 pedagogy that can inform teacher educators' practices as well: including books that portray non-heterosexual

characters; disrupting the notion of certain colors, toys, and materials as intended for boys or girls; and avoiding language that reinforces hierarchical binaries of male-female, gay-straight. In extrapolating these few examples to teacher education, we can include queer literature in children's and young adult literature courses; name and disrupt binary gender stereotypes as we discuss young children's play; and critique language and messaging from schools that only acknowledge binary gender and heterosexual family structures. Another example of queering teacher education pedagogy is to guiding preservice teachers through naming the norms established through school practices and through the preservice teachers' own experiences and then queering those norms to create space for difference (Bower & Sature, 2011; Draper, Hernandez, Wimmer, & Rosborough, 2017).

Regardless of the specific practices, queering teacher education must address the structures that establish heteronormativity, making visible multiple genders and sexualities and inviting preservice teachers to reflect on their own complicity in heteronormativity and empowering preservice teachers to imagine possibilities within and beyond gender and sexuality (Vavrus, 2008). Not only does queering teacher preparation establish teacher education programs as safe spaces for sexually diverse individuals and prepare sexually diverse preservice teachers to interpret (and disrupt) the institutional structures that establish heteronormativity, but it also grows allies. Developing heterosexual preservice teachers as allies is essential to preparing them to work with diverse student populations (Clark, 2010).

### **Conditions of the Study**

Given the qualitative design of this study, the positionality of the researcher and certain conditions of the study shaped the findings. Namely, only one participant was an individual of color. This not only limited the stories told within these findings, but it also reinforced what some scholars have criticized as the centrality of whiteness within LGBTQIA+ and queer studies and communities (e.g. Duggan, 2002; Rosenburg, 2017; Ward, 2008). Likewise, teacher preparation tends to center whiteness and white perspectives (e.g. Miller & Endo, 2007; Sleeter & Thao, 2007). Individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ and have another marginalized identity, such as race, are likely to experience multiple forms of discrimination and harassment (Stones & Glazzard, 2019). Hearing the perspectives and experiences of LGBTQIA+ preservice teachers of color is essential.

An additional condition of the study was that participants had minimal experience in schools outside of their own experiences as students. Their understanding of how heteronormativity impacts teachers was based on their experiences as students and their conjecture rather than on lived experience as student teachers or teachers within schools. They have yet to be socialized into the profession (Lortie, 1975). Additional research could follow preservice teachers from their teacher preparation programs through teacher induction.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, participants in this study share a dream of teaching kids that, "It's ok to be who you are and to love who you love." Through empowering LGBTQIA+ preservice teachers, queering teacher education curriculum, and developing allies among straight preservice teachers and teacher educators, teacher education can support this dream.

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## Appendix A

### **Interpretive Focus Group Interview Protocol**

*The following questions will be asked prior to sharing data from the inservice teacher interviews:*

1. Please share your name, your major, your sexual identity, gender identity, and race/ethnicity.
2. What do you hope to teach? Where would your ideal teaching job be?
3. How would you describe your level of outness at this point?
4. How much time have you spent thinking about the ways in which you will be out in your professional life?
5. If you had to decide at this point, in what ways would you be out in your professional life?
6. In what ways, if any, do you think your coming out decisions will be impacted by where you teach?
7. What other factors might impact your levels of outness?
8. What have people said to you about how out you should be in your professional lives?

*The following questions will be asked after the data from teacher interviews are shared:*

1. What questions do you wish you could ask these teachers?
2. What do you think accounts for the variation between the teachers' levels of outness?
3. How do their stories shape your own thoughts about being out in the classroom?
4. What else would you like to say about these teachers or about being out in the classroom that I have not asked?
5. Would you be willing to participate in a follow up interview?

## Appendix B

### **Advice from Inservice LGBT Teachers**

It's not that you're a gay teacher. You're a teacher. If it gets brought up, go ahead and educate a student if you feel like it's suitable.

Make sure you know what protections you have in the state you're going to. I looked up my specific district and "fired for being gay." That might sound a little paranoid, but I found several Youtube videos of several educators, so I realized that it was a real possible threat to my employment. If you're still single, look into what kind of community there is. I end up driving to [nearest big city] for most of my LGBT community.

Whatever they decide to disclose about their identity, disclose or not disclose and for whatever reason, is completely valid and doesn't make them less queer. I think that sometimes people just need to hear that their decisions and identities are valid, because sometimes the world implies that they are not valid. But they always are.

I found it helpful to not just come right out. Get the lay of the land and see how things progressed from there. A lot of people had already met my wife by the time they were like, "Oh, you two are married and we like you, so it's okay." They have to decide they like you before they're okay with your lifestyle. You have to know the community you're serving. Make sure that you research the community. If they're not comfortable with you, you're probably not going to be comfortable there.

They have to be aware of their surroundings and take the temperature of the place. For each person, how out they are is a very personal decision. Some people might really need to be out and wouldn't be very comfortable in a situation where they couldn't be at least somewhat out, whereas some people don't need to be out in their professional life. I think just being aware of themselves and their surroundings would be the best advice I could give.

Try to make sure that your classroom is a safe space for anyone—students at school, other teachers. If you don't want to be out, make sure that your classroom is a safe space. And if you are out, make sure it's a safe space for LGBT people and everyone else. If you feel comfortable, try to take it up with administration, try to get anti-discrimination, anti-bullying programs pushed through.

Don't have a chip on your shoulder. There are a lot of bitter, bitter, agenda driven sexual minority individuals, but when you enter the classroom, you need to drop it. You can do your activism in so many other ways. Individuals who identify outside of the heteronormative slot have an interesting opportunity to impact some students in a way that a straight teacher would not be able to, but I would say be very, very, very, very careful. Because in a public K-12 education system, you are vulnerable in so many ways. Be careful who you become close with. Watch your back. Pick your friends carefully. If people can find things to use against you, they will do it.

Look carefully at the district's policies regarding people with differences, whether those are visible or invisible differences. I think that it's a lot harder to be out in districts that are more homogenous.



I wish I had some [advice], but I'm still in this position myself. Looking at it from an outside perspective, I want to be like, "Be you! You can be who you are and people will accept you, because they love you." But I think that's a little hypocritical, because I don't have the courage to come out to everyone.

If you're really strong in your identity and you know who you are and you know sharing that part of who you are with your children is a non-negotiable, you want to be sure that you do it in a way that's respectful of the school community. If you're really hoping to have that experience, talk to your cooperating teacher when you're student teaching. Then you can have a precursor conversation before you're part of the job market. If you're a person that needs a really strong community around you, you probably want to look at schools that are in urban settings, because there's going to be a larger community in that setting. If you find yourself in a place where you know you're the only person that identifies as LGBTQ and you feel really alone, you have to look at yourself as a pioneer in the work. Your voice is really important and the work you're doing is really important and you will impact people.

Remember that you can't tell your students to be proud of who they are if you can't be proud of yourself. Test the water a little bit. It's easier to come out to your co-workers first. You don't have to come out to students. It's a process. I'm making progress, and it's okay. It doesn't make you a bad teacher or a bad person if you're not totally comfortable being out. We live in a world that isn't perfect. They don't always accept us. But hopefully if you're in a good district that supports you, then hopefully you will be comfortable. I think it's also helpful to know that there's other LGBT people that work in the school as well.

I say go for it: be a teacher. I don't see how what they do outside of teaching should affect anything they do in the classroom.

Keep it quiet as long as you can. Let people see how good you are in the classroom. I feel like I always try way harder in the classroom than most, because I feel like I have to combat the fact that I am gay. Keep their mouth shut. Do their job. Don't let anybody in until you've proven yourself as a teacher. If I could take it back, I would have kept it all to myself, probably still today. Keep the private private. Lock up their social media. Sorry to be such a negative person.

## Appendix C

### Follow-up Interview Protocol

1. We talked about expectations for teachers. What do you think people expect of teachers? How does sexual orientation fit into that?
2. In what ways, if any, has sexual orientation been talked about in your education courses?
3. What, if anything, would you want education professors to say about sexual orientation?
4. Some people talked about feeling less free to be out when they perceived an environment to be conservative. How would you know that a particular school (other teachers, students' families, administrators) was a conservative environment?
5. We also talked about concerns teachers have in being out to students' families, in particular. In what ways, if any, have you experienced being told that your sexual orientation is not acceptable? How, if at all, have you pushed back against that message?
6. One of the next steps for this research is to share findings with education professors. What advice do you have for professors who want to support LGBTQIA teacher candidates?
7. What have I not asked that you would like me to know?

## Appendix D

### Reconstructed Life Stories

**Kelly.** I'm Kelly, I'm a junior. Collaborative ed [elementary and special education] and math are my majors. I'm a lesbian and female and white. I want to teach special education in the elementary school. I'm interested in teaching abroad. I'd like to teach English in a non-English speaking country like France. Since schools have so much control over their own setting, states have different laws, it's really going to matter where I go and what school I'm at, the level of outness I would have. Or the other way around. It will decide what schools I go to—if I can be out. I'm not very out. Mostly just close friends and a few family members [know]. I think about [how out I will be in the classroom] a lot. The schools I've interned in have had a lot of conservative teachers, so I haven't brought it up. Where I work now, they just assume I'm straight. They'll ask me questions about my boyfriend and stuff. I just kind of let it slide. It's a small room, so if I'm talking the kids can hear it. I don't think my sexuality is a thing the kids need to know. I think if someone asked, I would definitely not lie. But unless it's something that comes up or someone asks me, [I wouldn't say anything]. I think that's the most important thing, more than your sexuality or you being out, is making sure that your classroom is somewhere that all your students and people who aren't your students can come and talk. That's just above all, what I think is important.

**Samantha.** I'm Samantha. My major is elementary education. I'm a lesbian, I'm female, and I'm white. [I want to teach] little kids. I don't really know what yet. [I'd like to teach] somewhere in CT. Maybe in my hometown... I said I'd like to teach in my hometown, but it kind of makes me think, maybe it would be better to go somewhere and start of new, where you don't know anyone. You just are who you are and they just figure it out or it just is and just talk about it like it is. I'm out. There are people who aren't okay with it, but they know. School doesn't really know. My girlfriend doesn't go here. I've thought about [how out I will be in the classroom] a little bit. It's hard for me, because my parents don't accept it. I'm told in my house with my parents, I can't really talk about it. They say that they tolerate it, but they don't accept it. I'm constantly focusing on the family aspect and being out at home. It's hard. It's like inside you want to be honest and out and live, but there's always going to be those people that don't accept it. I think if my parents and my family were more accepting, I would be in a completely different situation. Even though they know, it's hard to think about what it's going to be like when I'm older and teaching. I would just live, I guess, and rather than having a come out moment like I did with my family, I would just let it be and if they know, they know. If not, there's no reason to make it known. It's just my life. I want people to just know. I don't want to have to, I don't want to say deal with it. But I just want it to be. I just want people to know, like people know whatever. : Unfortunately, in my situation, there is going to have to be a coming out. Because people aren't just going to know. If I want them to know, I'm going to have to say, "my girlfriend. My wife." And I wish that I didn't have to be like that. I'll just see how it is. I still have three more years of college. I look at myself, like when I was in high school three years ago and how much I have changed and progressed and how different I'm going to be in three years when I even start student teaching.

**Matt.** My name is Matt. I'm a special education master's student. I'm gay and male and white. I don't know what [I want to teach] yet, but my certification is K-12. I don't know if I actually want to teach or to further my education, so I don't know where the next year will take me. [Laughing] I have no question mark [about my sexual orientation], just being a very emotional

man. I've heard "tone yourself down" a couple of times. As far as my professional career, everything that's professional that I've already done, I've always been out, and never felt limited to talk about my sexuality. When I'm interacting with students, I don't feel like anyone discussing sexuality, personal life in that way would be appropriate. I don't feel any pressure to have a come out moment to them, because I don't feel like a straight teacher should be like, "Oh, well me and my girlfriend do this on the weekend." So I just haven't worried too much about it. I don't feel like I need to have a coming out moment with students, but if I was ever explaining a story and I was talking about my boyfriend, I wouldn't feel inhibited to say, "Oh, my boyfriend." Because I think, being teachers in a power position that students look up to, gay teachers should be represented and students can identify with if they're going through it. But like I said before, I don't think anyone should really have that kind of connection with their students where they're talking about too many personal issues, because that doesn't feel appropriate. I think no matter what, I'm just going to be out. It will be so much easier, and I just don't have it in me to even try to hide it. But I think, again, working with students, to be a role model yes, and to give information, yes. But I don't think to talk about my life in that way is appropriate for anyone. Teaching, you're there to teach and to get your job done and not to gossip about your social life. I think a lot with special ed, depending on the age of special ed and the ability, because I work with kids all across. I run into that problem. Years ago, when I was not as comfortable, it was easier just to gloss over and keep perpetuating the heteronormativity. It just felt like too detailed a conversation that shouldn't have been too deep, because of the students we were working with. So I wonder if going into student teaching myself, what that will be like. I feel like knowing the surroundings will allow me to know if I want to work there. I think exploring the state that I would go to, the district, all the way down to the school. Just testing the waters, just knowing my surroundings.

**Rudy.** My name is Rudy. I'm elementary ed major, also Liberal studies STEM and Spanish. I identify as bisexual, I'm a female and I'm black. [I want to teach] Just elementary school. I'm thinking more like 2nd or 3rd grade. I've had a lot of field placements in the upper grades, and I want to try something different. I'm thinking either CT or GA, so it's just a matter of being certified here and then transferring the certification there. In GA, They do not have equal rights for LGBT. Actually, my girlfriend and I were talking about it. We've been together for five years, so are thinking about getting engaged and getting married. I like warm weather, that's my main reason for moving to Georgia. But I'm more than willing to stay in Connecticut. I can put up with a little bit of snow or a lot of snow to be comfortable and happy with her. That's my goal. I'm completely out. My girlfriend used to go here, but now she doesn't. I've thought about [how out I will be in the classroom] a little. My mom is more accepting than my dad, but it also just makes me think what is it going to be like when I'm out in the real world and in a profession where it may come up. I'm trying to think about how I'm going to handle it. I want to be out, more out. That's just what I want to do. So I feel like I would have to a bit more research about where I'm applying and the surrounding area. I don't think that's something I want to hide. I am who I am. Accept it or you don't.

**Doug.** I'm Doug. I'm an elementary ed and political science major. I identify as gay, male, and white. I'm starting out as elementary, but I want to get my master's in science ed, so [I'd like to teach] completely science [in] New York City. [I'm] out. I've been with my boyfriend for seven years. I've thought about how it would impact my professional image, but I don't really care. I've been out since before high school, so I just can't imagine not being out. But I can understand why people would be resistant. I'm student teaching now, and my colleagues know. The students don't know. They all ask me questions about my personal life, and I always refer to "my friend" or "my

roommate.” I went into my [recent job] interview disclosing my orientation in response to a question about Diversity and Inclusiveness because I felt it was relevant. I feel that once my success as a teacher is established, I would be more comfortable disclosing to students, but I also fear potential backlash from parents who are religious and because I am so intent on teaching in urban environments where there is such stigma about being LGBT within the Black and Latino communities, I would not want my job to be threatened. I’m fine with being out, but I don’t want that to be my identifier, and I think that causes me to overcompensate in my work. And I’m a hard worker as it is, but I push myself so much more, so that people will look at me as a good teacher and a professional rather than the gay guy who works here.

**Alyssa.** Hi, I’m Alyssa. I am a white bi female. I’m a graduate student teacher. [I want to teach] elementary education. Right now I’m student teaching kindergarten and I love it. My dad lives in Seattle. I’d like to move closer to him. I’ve been with my girlfriend for three years. Most of the people who know us know [I’m bi], or anyone who friends me on Facebook. My cooperating teacher found out last weekend, when friended me on Facebook. [I think about how out I will be in the classroom] a lot!! I was nervous talking about it in school when I started as a graduate student here, because it felt like so many people in my class were very conservative, very straight. And certainly all of the teachers I’ve worked with seemed to be very conservative people. I have been nervous about bringing it up. I don’t know why it’s been a fear of mine, because I’ve had so many jobs in my life. And I’ve been out for a long time in every other aspect. For whatever reason, public schools it feels like something I should be worried about. And I don’t know if it’s because I don’t remember having any gay teachers as a child, any teachers in school that I ever knew. For me personally, it’s about how much of it do I bring out. Because I think it’s not visible on the surface. With some people you can see it the moment you look at them, mannerisms, things like that. I’ve never had any advice from my friends or my family to say what to share or what not to share [in the classroom], which leads to a lot of confusion. I used to wear a rainbow bracelet, and I switched, just because it didn’t go with every outfit. And I have an equal sign and a kid noticed it the other day and I just told him that I just really like equals. I like math a whole lot. I like when things balance out. But little things like that, I wonder what I would put up and what I would have to explain or talk about and what’s appropriate. I think it’s going to be a personal decision no matter what. And I trust myself to make the right decision when the time comes. I feel nervous about coming out because I have never known LGBT teachers in my education experience, because gay was an offensive word throughout my high school years, and because I assume that I am somehow breaking some unwritten ultra-conservative code of conduct that is unfairly expected of all teaching professionals. But I am, and always have been, someone who is honest and open and the thought of hiding the identity of my significant other and not being open with a community I intend to be an active participant in is something I cannot bear. I want to be a role model. I want to teach tolerance and acceptance. I want kids to know it’s ok to be who you are and to love who you love and I want future generations of LGBT teachers to feel nonchalant about sharing their romantic orientation and their non-traditional families with their schools. I am growing in confidence as a teacher and I am holding onto my faith that my passion for education will be recognized and that I will be loved by my students and accepted and respected by my peers no matter what.

**Holly.** I’m Holly. I’m a special education major and an applied mathematics major. I identify as asexual but pan-romantic. I’m female and I am white. I want to teach special ed at the high school level. I would like to teach somewhere in Europe eventually. I didn’t start coming out to anyone until college, because it was a new environment where I didn’t know anybody, so I could just be myself, versus when I was in high school. If I said anything, it would automatically get

back to my parents. I have identified as queer in general since eighth grade, because I didn't know the word for asexual, and I thought I was bisexual/lesbian. I went through the whole spectrum to find out I was pan-romantic. In high school, because I wasn't out, but I had the teachers and I knew there were safe spaces. And we had the GSA that was also a safe space, and all of that helped me to connect to my sexuality more and to feel that safety. But my mom, when she found out that it was rumored that I might have been a lesbian, she actually beat me. So I just stopped talking about it completely. I'm like, move as far away as possible and then start coming out, instead of if I worked in my hometown I probably wouldn't say anything at all. I don't really talk about [my sexual identity] much in my professional work, because most people don't know what asexuality is to begin with. So if I mention it, then I just get a waterfall of questions that go after it or they just tell me that asexual isn't a thing. In my high school, there was representation of different sexualities of teachers. A lot of teachers had pictures of their boyfriends or pictures of their girlfriends, so in my public school at least, it was represented that we had teachers to talk to, from the guidance counselors who were LGBTQ as well. Inside my classroom, I definitely want to have a safe space sticker and to make it at least known in the community that I'd be a safe teacher to talk to about sexuality, whether their my students or other students. I went through most of high school confused about my sexuality and thinking I was broken because I was asexual, thinking when do people start wanting to become sexual. Still hasn't hit, so I'm like, "This is never going to happen." But I want to make sure that students, whether they're special ed or my students, anybody's students know that my room is a safe space to come and talk to about these type of things.

### **Author Notes**

Laura Bower-Phipps, Ph.D.  
Southern Connecticut State University  
[bowerL2@southernct.edu](mailto:bowerL2@southernct.edu)

Laura Bower-Phipps is Professor of Curriculum and Learning in the College of Education at Southern Connecticut State University. Her research centers on diversity in teacher preparation, including candidates of color in teacher preparation programs, teachers' efforts to queer early childhood and elementary curriculum, teachers' diverse sexual and gender identities, and preparing teachers for diverse school contexts. Her most current research focuses on teachers' preferences for racial composition of schools and neighborhoods.



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