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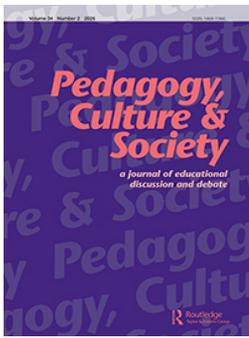
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Queering through a highly gendered profession: a multimedia autoethnography of a non-binary teacher

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ABSTRACT

This article explores and critiques the current status quo of queer teachers in the United States (US) while suggesting ways to build LGBTQ+ allyship to make school an equitable workplace for all teachers and educators. The study combined the two theories of intersectionality and ethics of care to present a nuanced understanding of queer teachers' experiences. Using multimedia autoethnographic methods including journaling, poetry, music elicitation, and photovoice, the third author documented their daily life as a queer teacher working at a US public middle school with complex feelings, thoughts, and sensations inside and outside of school as the workplace. The first and second authors, as 'critical friends', collaboratively coded and analysed the data. The findings exhibited various manifestations of queer identities in contexts typically shaped by cis-heteronormative expectations and institutional policies. It also unpacks challenges met by a queer teacher in navigating workplace culture.

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Queer teachers; safety and belonging; equitable workplace; agency; self-advocacy

Introduction

In the United States (US), sexual minority and gender non-conforming individuals have not enjoyed the same protections or experiences in law or the workforce as their cisgender and heterosexual peers; instead, they are exposed to a variety of social stressors, including stigma, discrimination, and bias events that contribute to mental health problems (S. E. Valentine and Shipherd 2018). In the field of education, LGBTQ+ issues are often marginalised, which perpetuates heteronormative practices in schools and exerts bodily as well as discursive repression on gender-minority teachers and students alike. Gorski, Davis, and Reiter (2013) found that LGBTQ+ concerns often are invisible in multicultural teacher education coursework in the US and that, when these concerns are covered, they generally are addressed in decontextualised ways that mask heteronormativity. Having an education degree does not necessarily protect LGBTQ+ teachers from experiencing homophobia and transphobia either. Eribon (2004) and Taylor et al. (2015) noted that the teaching profession

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lags behind other professional workplaces in acknowledging the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals. Knowing that 'a school that's a protective community for LGBTQ adults is a school that's going to be safe for kids' (Butler-Wall et al. 2016, 24), it is highly important to ensure a safe working environment for LGBTQ+ educators, especially amid the current political turmoil caused by the new administration's rollback on transgender rights and denial of their existence (Flowers and Trotta 2025).

This multimedia autoethnographic study explores and critiques the current status quo of queer teachers while suggesting ways to build LGBTQ+ allyship to make school an equitable workplace for all teachers and educators. It illuminates how a queer teacher, the third author, who has had six years of working in the US K-12 school system, carves out spaces of queer belonging in their classrooms and in their workplace. The research questions are as follows: 1) *How do intersections of identity influence the experience of a queer teacher at school?* And 2) *What are the factors that contribute to a queer teacher experiencing safety, belonging, and thriving at work?*

Through a close reading of the third author's reflective personal journal entries, photos, poems and their assemblage of songs, we seek to unpack how they learned to understand, resist and (re)shape educational practices and work experience in ways that attend to their intersectional lives. This article presents three narratives distilled from various encounters, events, and experiences recounted in the third author's journal to highlight the complexities, nuances and realities of a queer teacher in the US schooling system.

Attention to queer teachers' experiences highlights the power, suppression, uniqueness and navigation of queerness within an educational setting and offers policy makers, administrators and educators' insights and an opportunity to disrupt the cis-heteronormative projects, repressive norms, and prejudiced attitudes towards queer teachers. Following inspirational work of other scholars, the word queer in our study indicates not only those who identify themselves as LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queering/Questioning, among other genders and sexualities that are not explicitly mentioned in the acronym), but also people and practices that challenge normative ways of doing and thinking (Bucholtz and Hall 2004; Dervin 2024). In this article, both the acronym LGBTQ+ and the term queer allude to broader gendered and sexually diverse communities, thus are used interchangeably. The article sometimes references specific identities (e.g., trans) for clarity and self-identification purposes. We, however, respect and acknowledge that there is an ongoing discussion in acronyms and terms to fully reflect the diversity of genders and sexualities in our community.

Literature review

Queer teachers: discrimination and microaggressions

According to Ferfolja and Hopkins (2013), the question of who a queer teacher could be is individual and intimately tied to the teaching contexts. Despite recognition of the importance of addressing sexual diversity in education, scholars have raised concerns that schools continue to be sites of marginalisation of sexually diverse subjects, including teachers (Harding 2019; Mann 2021; Suárez 2022). Schools regulate sexuality and gender performances through curriculum, pedagogy, practice and policy where understandings of gender and sexuality are 'defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality'

and the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler 1991, 151). The heterosexist discourses lead to discriminating attitudes that link homosexuality and queerness with mental illness, disease, hypersexuality, and risks for child safety (Clarke 2006; Ferfolja 2014). This discrimination has 'a particularly marginalizing impact on LGBTQ+ teachers, who frequently become hyper-vigilant around the need to prove their normality within the schooling environment' and feel the need to hide their sexuality and gender identity (Ferfolja and Hopkins 2013, 312). Queer knowledge or knowledge of a queer identity can be discarded as taboo or inappropriate knowledge for children at school (Ferfolja and Hopkins 2013). As a result, queer teachers experienced distinct adversities arising at the intersection of their sexual and professional identities (Taylor-Cornwell, van Leent, and Brömdal 2024).

Homophobic language targeting queer individuals, including teachers, is extensive at school. Researchers (Ioverno et al. 2022; Lilienthal et al. 2018) have noted that verbal remarks to tease and harass those who do not identify with or behave within hetero-centric norms often go unchallenged. As observed by Elipe et al. (2023), addressing such bullying behaviours towards both LGBTQ+ students and educators is not a priority of many educational institutions, and that explicit discussions concerning homophobia and transphobia in contemporary classrooms often highlight disconcerting statistics about bullying, disadvantage, and suicide. This intimidating negativity reinforces the victimisation of the LGBTQ+ community, discouraging students to engage with meaningful discussion about gender diversity and the development of empathy and inclusivity.

Queer teachers' sense of identity and queer pedagogy

Claiming a queer identity at the school can be considered an identity work which includes publicly bringing full intersecting identities into relationships with colleagues and students (Ubaque-Casallas and Castañeda-Peña 2021). This work, however, runs the risk of being undermined because of the misconception that it is unprofessional and emotional and should be left out of classroom contexts (Coleman 2023). A reflection of one of the authors who is also a queer teacher in Unwin et al.'s study (2024) highlights the expectation that queer educators should sever their lived experience of being queer from their teaching practices. Mizzi (2013) referenced the concept of heteroprofessionalism which is defined as a 'context of fear [that] characterises the relationship between professionalism and otherness, whereby heteronormative discourses are constructed with the intention to distance and silence human agency' (1605). It means teachers must adhere to a view of professionalism that regards queerness as inherently deviant or wrong and thus needs to be silenced. As Ferfolja and Hopkins (2013) posited in their work, being out as a queer teacher is not as simple as being either openly queer or closeted. In many cases, teachers choose to neither deny nor present their queer identity publicly to embody the role of teacher (Ferfolja 2014).

However, Luhmann (1998) argued that queer pedagogy explores the process of how identities are constructed; how the risk of exposing how the self is learned and unlearned; and how self-critical practices align with current social (in)justices. Derry (2011) and Wescott (2018) suggested that when educators model pedagogies founded in support, openness, and vulnerability, they foster a positive culture where students can experience a greater connectedness to their education. Scholars (Coia and Taylor 2009; Cutler 2023; Lewellyn 2023; Unwin et al. 2024), therefore, have called for changes in redefining

professionalism to include queer identities in both preservice and in-service teacher training, though recognising it is a challenging and complex task.

Theoretical framework

Intersectionality

This study employs intersectionality as its primary theoretical framework to analyse the multiple, overlapping identity-based challenges encountered by a queer teacher within their professional context. Originally conceptualised by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), intersectionality emerged as a critical response to the limitations of single-axis frameworks in legal and feminist theory. Crenshaw (1989) demonstrated how systems of oppression – particularly racism and sexism – do not function independently but intersect to produce unique forms of marginalisation, especially for Black women. Since then, intersectionality has developed into a multidimensional analytic and methodological framework that has been adopted across disciplines.

Building upon Crenshaw's foundational work, Collins et al. (2021) have conceptualised intersectionality as a form of critical praxis, one that enables researchers and activists to explore how individuals marginalised by race, class, gender, and other axes of identity generate knowledge that sustains resistance, resilience, and survival. Collins et al. (2021) described intersectionality as functioning in three distinct but complementary ways: as a metaphor, a heuristic device, and a paradigm. As a metaphor, it illustrates how various systems of power intersect at the level of individual experience; as a heuristic, it provides a tool for analysing the complexity of social life; and as a paradigm, it offers a guiding theoretical orientation for sustained critical inquiry.

According to Collins et al. (2021), six 'core substantive constructs' underpin intersectional analysis: relationality, power, social inequality, social context, complexity, and social justice. These concepts orient intersectionality towards a social justice agenda and ensure its grounding in the everyday realities of structurally marginalised communities. The authors further outline four foundational principles for conducting intersectionally informed work: (1) categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, and ability are interdependent and mutually constitutive; (2) interlocking systems of power produce complex and dynamic forms of social inequality; (3) individuals' social positions within these systems shape their lived experiences and interpretations of the social world; and (4) addressing social issues – whether locally or globally – requires intersectional analysis (Collins et al. 2021).

Other scholars have significantly expanded intersectionality's scope and application. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) emphasised that intersectionality is not only an analytic tool but also a political intervention. They cautioned against the dilution of intersectionality into a generic diversity discourse and argued for maintaining its critical edge by foregrounding structural power and systemic transformation. Bilge (2013) similarly warned of the risk of depoliticising intersectionality in academic contexts, advocating instead for its continued grounding in Black feminist intellectual and activist traditions.

Applied to this study, intersectionality offers a rigorous framework for analysing how the queer teacher's identity is both constructed and contested within institutional and sociocultural structures. The teacher's body becomes a site through which normative

discourses, professional expectations, and identity-based power relations converge. These systems are not additive but mutually reinforcing, shaping the ways in which the teacher is perceived, engaged, and regulated within the school setting. At the same time, intersectionality highlights the agentic possibilities within these constraints, drawing attention to how the teacher enacts resistance, reclaims identity, and generates counter-narratives from their situated position.

Ethics of care

In 'Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education', Noddings (1984) articulated a relational account of ethics, grounded in the premise that human beings are ontologically constituted through relationships. Rather than existing as isolated individuals, persons are embedded in networks of relationality that shape their development and sense of self. As Noddings wrote, 'I am not naturally alone. I am naturally in a relation from which I derive nourishment and guidance. My very individuality is defined in a set of relations. This is my basic reality' (Noddings 1984, 51). From this foundational claim, four core principles of the ethics of care are derived.

The first of these, *Relational ontology*, emphasises that ethical maturity arises not from individual autonomy but from reciprocal, ongoing interdependence between the 'one-caring' and the 'cared-for'. Noddings insisted, 'caring does not reside entirely in the attitude and intentions of the carer. We must ask about the effects on the cared-for. If A claims to care for B, but B denies that A cares, then the relation between A and B is not one of caring' (Noddings 2018, 227). Considered the biggest contribution of an ethic of care, this emphasis on the relation and the role of both participants in the caring relationship suggests that both individuals are ethically shaped through their sustained engagement with one another, affirming the ethical significance of mutual dependence.

A second key concept, *Attention as engrossment*, foregrounds the role of attentive presence as essential to caring. Noddings (1984) maintained that care begins with receptivity to the other, a mode of attention described as 'engrossment'. This type of attention, while not necessarily pervasive or intense in the caregiver's life, must nonetheless be genuine and present: 'It need not be intense or pervasive in the life of the one-caring, but it must occur' (Noddings 1984, 17). Engrossment, as conceptualised by Noddings, differs fundamentally from the cognitive act of perspective-taking. It entails sustained effort, moral discipline, and deliberate commitment. It demands focused attention on the person before us, rooted in a deep respect for the unique nature of each individual and situation.

The third principle, *Primacy of the particular*, challenges the traditional moral emphasis on abstract justification and universal principles. Noddings (1984) argued that ethical action should not be derived from an external set of moral rules or validated through rational justification. 'As one-caring', Noddings (1984) wrote, 'I am not seeking justification for my action' (95). Instead, the moral aim is the experience of *completion*, which emerges when the cared-for feels genuinely cared for. This experience, in turn, brings a sense of fulfilment to the one-caring: 'I am not justified but somehow fulfilled and completed in my own life and in the lives of those I have thus influenced' (95). Noddings (1984) further cautioned that adherence to rigid principles may lead individuals to moral arrogance or self-righteousness. Those who believe they possess superior values may marginalise or

devalue others, particularly those whose perspectives differ. In response to such dangers, Noddings (1984) underscored the importance of contextual understanding and warns against prescriptive moral judgements, noting that the one-caring must resist asserting that 'you must do what I must do' (5).

The final tenet, *Motivational displacement*, addresses the ethical transformation that occurs when the one-caring redirects motivational energy towards the needs and purposes of the cared-for. According to Noddings, 'My motive energy flows toward the other and [...] toward his ends. I do not relinquish myself, [...] but I allow my motive energy to be shared; I put it at the service of the other' (Noddings 1984, 33). This motivational shift represents more than a spontaneous emotional response; it signifies a conscious ethical commitment to care. Full care, in Noddings' framework, requires not only emotional engagement but also practical responsibility – whether through direct action or thoughtful deliberation about how to support the other, including referring them to appropriate sources of help.

Noddings' ethics of care presents a relational and context-sensitive model of moral life in which ethical action is grounded not in abstract reasoning, principles, or virtues, but in responsiveness to the needs of others and a sense of responsibility embedded in particular relationships (Bergmark 2019). Through the concepts of relational ontology, engrossed attention, particularity, and motivational displacement, Noddings (1984) redefined ethics as an intersubjective practice shaped by care, presence, and mutual transformation.

The combined use of intersectionality and ethics of care shows the authors' efforts in addressing the unique experiences and challenges faced by a queer teacher in a US K-12 public school (ages 5 to 18) amid the recent rise in homophobia and cisgenderism under the new presidential administration. Intersectionality provides the tools to examine how overlapping identities intersect to shape the experiences of a queer teacher; critique the role of power structures in shaping an individual's experiences; and identify social inequalities through policies, curricula, or practices that do not affirm or recognise queer identities. Ethics of care frames the focus of the article on relationality; highlights a moral obligation to care for vulnerable individuals; and acknowledges the impacts of emotional labour on queer teachers' professional and personal lives. By utilising both frameworks in our data analysis, the authors intended to present a nuanced understanding of queer teachers' experiences, address systemic barriers and propose recommendations that are both intersectionally and empathically informed to benefit the safety, sense of belonging, and general well-being of queer teachers.

Methodology

Autoethnography is research, writing, story and method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social (Ellis 2004). This approach positions the researcher's own experiences as legitimate data and sites of inquiry, aiming to illuminate the ways in which individual lives are shaped by, and contribute to, larger cultural discourses and institutional structures. According to Chang (2008), autoethnography facilitates cultural understanding by bridging the gap between the personal and the collective. It encourages critical reflection on identity, power, and positionality, enabling the researcher to interrogate how cultural norms, social roles, and systemic inequities

manifest in everyday life. Autoethnographic writing is often characterised by rich, evocative storytelling that disrupts traditional notions of objectivity and neutrality in research, emphasising instead the value of emotional resonance, vulnerability, and reflexivity (T. E. Adams, Jones, and Ellis 2015). Sparkes (2024) suggested that ethical autoethnography begins with sustained reflexivity about positionality and treats formal guidelines as starting points. Ultimately, the author posited, ethics needs to be approached as a contested, context-dependent terrain requiring principled, informed judgement that rejects rigid 'shoulds' in favour of an 'it depends' shaped by time, context, culture, and purpose (Sparkes 2024, 111). Along this line, Edwards (2021) illustrated where guidance falls short in autoethnographic research and proposed a fourth dimension of the 'ethic of the self' along with procedural, situational and relational ethics to 'enhance the ethic of respect in autoethnography' (1).

Using multimedia autoethnographic methods including journaling, poetry, music elicitation, and photovoice, the third author documented their daily life as a queer teacher working at a public middle school with complex feelings, thoughts, and sensations inside and outside of school as the workplace. Luhmann (1998) argued that queer theory and pedagogy think about how to 'deconstruct binaries central to Western modes of meaning-making, learning, teaching, and doing politics ... to subvert the process of normalization' (p. 150). In this autoethnographic piece, we also queer traditional research practice by engaging with multiple sources of arts-based data, or 'daptaphacts' (Renold and Timperley 2024, 922), and engage in a reflexive, dialogic process between a queer teacher and two heteronormative researchers to explore the topic of inquiry and subvert norms for writing in academic research. Arts-based approach is popular in queer research because it foregrounds embodied, affective, and creative forms of expression that resist normative constraints and make visible marginalised experiences often silenced in traditional research paradigms (R. B. Adams 2024; Denton and Cain 2023; Marnell 2024; Panozzo 2024).

This article is not a combination of three separate voices but is a blended, meaning-making, thought-processing research about the third researcher's experience (Anzaldúa and Keating 2002). The authors, however, are in different social and institutional hierarchy positions. The third author, identified as they/them, is a Hispanic nonbinary educator working in a public school in a US Southern state. The first author is a cis-gendered female, Vietnamese immigrant professor studying and working in the US for the past thirteen years. The second author is a cis-gendered female, Vietnamese transnational academic working in UK higher education. Both the first and second authors have been working as teacher educators and researching teacher education in international contexts for years (Le and Phan 2025; Le, Dubroc, and Skinner 2025; Phan and Pham 2023) and cared about the experiences of teachers who are vulnerable or placed in disadvantaged positions.

To generate data for this autoethnographic study, the third author began journaling for over four months during a school year, inviting the other authors to become 'critical friends' by asking questions about their experiences as a queer person spanning from childhood to adulthood, especially as they became an educator. The journal entries recorded the third author's everyday happenings, memory construction of past events that influenced their meaning making of current events and encounters, their thoughts and emotions, as well as their plans of future responses. Throughout the process, the first and second authors practiced care while helping the third author recount their

experience and making meaning of the events and encounters by open-coding. The authors frequently exchanged messages with one another to co-analyse the journal entries and co-construct the narratives from the data, which includes 25 mixed-media journal entries and poetry (including 23 photos and five songs) generated by the third author. The reflective narratives presented in the narratives section are articulated through the individual voice of the third author as a queer teacher, while the analysis and discussion section represents the collective voice of a queer teacher and their allies, the two other researchers.

Ethical approval was granted by the second author's institution (Protocol IRB-24-102-EDCI-OL). Because the third author's recollections and subjective experiences reference other individuals, all non-identifiable persons are presented under general pronouns, and those with close personal ties to the third author were consulted and offered a pseudonym as well as the opportunity to review and provide input on the manuscript. All artefacts (e.g., documents, images, and screenshots) were de-identified by covering personal names and other direct identifiers prior to analysis and publication.

The narratives

In this section, we present three narratives, retold by the third author, that emerged most prominently from their reflective journal entries.

The Ms, the Mx, the mix – the queer(ed) pedagogy

Pronouns, which function as a fundamental affirmation of identity for many queer teachers, have long been a contested issue and increasingly serve as a site of tension and regulation within school environments – particularly in the period leading up to the 2024 US elections. As a teacher, my identity is constantly filtered through institutional expectations that tie professional legitimacy to gendered roles. I recalled my first teaching through substituting, where I just went by my first name. Some students would default to 'Ms. [name]', which at the time felt uncomfortable, so I would correct them to use just my first name without an honorific. When I became a full-time teacher, I was instructed by admins to use honorifics and go by last name because that was considered more professional. At this point, I briefly considered adopting the honorific *Mx.*, as it better reflected my connection to gender-neutral language. However, I quickly dismissed the idea due to concerns about the complex political implications and the term's contentious nature within an educational context.

Even when students display some level of curiosity about my gender identity, the structures of the school system make it challenging to engage in meaningful discussion. I remember when several students asked, 'Are you a boy or a girl?', I wanted to say something that reflected the truth, to open a conversation about how gender is not just a simple binary. But I also knew that honesty came with risks. Admitting the truth about my gender identity could mean drawing unwanted attention from parents who might question or challenge my presence in the classroom. It could lead to administrative troubles, forcing me into conversations about whether my identity was appropriate in a school setting. There was also the risk of students repeating our discussion at home, where a simple, innocent exchange could be distorted into controversy. So, I gave my usual response. 'You call me Ms. [name], so don't worry about it'. (Journal entry, Week 1)

This response to microaggressions from the unsolicited inquiries reflected an act of self-censorship, revealing an underlying apprehension towards self-disclosure. It was not just about self-preservation but also a reflection of the institution's failure to create space for gender-diverse educators. This tension between identity and policy is one that many LGBTQ+ teachers must navigate daily, an observation noted in my journal:

In K-12 education, how teachers are perceived is often inseparable from gender. The expectation that students and colleagues alike refer to teachers as Mr., Ms., or Mrs. reinforces binary gender norms that leave little room for non-binary identities to exist. The only widely accepted escape from these rigid labels comes through academic achievement; earning a doctorate provides an opportunity to use Dr., a title that removes gender from professional identity. (Journal entry, Week 1)

The layered negotiations of personal and professional identities reminded me of a song, in which the titular character realised that their power lied in the ability to change:

I can make a promise,
I can make a plan.
I can make a difference,
I can take a stand.
I can make an effort,
If I only understand,
That I,
I can make a change!
(Change, Zach Callison)

The song resonated with my journey to self-acceptance as a non-binary educator. Aware that I might not be able to change the institutional structure overnight, I felt capable of taking a stand in the classroom by protecting and affirming students and making space for them to explore their identities without judgement.

I feel not having a strong connection to the gender binary allows me to let my students be themselves, uninhibited by social structures of gender. I also call out my students and colleagues when they try to force someone into a role. For example, a student was laughing at another student for liking pink. I immediately called them out, saying colors are just colors and that it would be 'lame' not to like a color because of other people. Another student agreed and said colors are from light refracting. Anyway, what does it matter? The student that initially made fun of the other student and became interested in how colors occurred.

Another moment was when a student confided in me, saying, 'I'm gay. I don't know if you're ok with that'. I responded, 'You're fine exactly as you are, and you're my student no matter what. There's nothing I need to be okay with because you're already okay'. After that, the students became more comfortable in my classroom and even came to talk about issues they were facing with other students. That moment reminded me of how deeply the presence of a supportive adult can impact a young person's sense of safety and belonging. (Journal entry, Week 1)

The reality of K-12 schools within this current climate is that LGBTQ+ educators must navigate a school system that demands their silence (Henderson 2022). Any deviation from this expectation could result in ostracisation or even jeopardise my employment. This struggle went beyond the classroom. Staff meetings, professional development sessions, and parent-teacher conferences all posed risks of accidental self-disclosure. As

a non-binary teacher, I navigated a school system where LGBTQ+ educators must often weigh the risks of visibility against the need for self-preservation. There are many institutional constraints, which are especially apparent following restrictive legislation, both state and federal. For example, Louisiana's ACT No. 681 (HB 122), also known as the 'Let Kids Be Kids' law, prohibits public teachers and employees from discussing their own sexual orientation or gender identity with students. At the federal level, the executive order titled 'Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government' (2025) mandates a strict binary definition of sex, erasing recognition of transgender and non-binary identities in federal policies. These legislative actions further reinforce silencing LGBTQ+ educators, making it increasingly challenging to create inclusive spaces while also maintaining personal authenticity.

These moments illustrated a complex tension that I navigated between authenticity and safety. While I sometimes shield parts of my identity, I also find quiet ways to affirm students and remain authentic. My queer pedagogy does not always announce itself loudly, but it exists in the choices I make, and affirmations I offer, as well as the space I create for myself and my students to simply be.

Body doesn't tell my whole story, but it doesn't lie either!

In my journal, I created a poem about my marked body:

BodyMods

My body is a temple,
A sacred space of my own design.
Not built by rules or bound by tradition.
I will adorn my temple as I see fit,
Honoring it with art, expression, and meaning divine.

Let every mark and every choice I make,
Be a testament to the life I create.

My art has no Binary;
This temple stands untamed,
A reflection of me- whole, evolving, free.
(Journal entry, Week 4)

I remember the first time a student pointed at my arms and said, 'Miss, you have some hairy arms. Women don't have that'. I had heard comments like this before about my moustache, sideburns, arms, and legs. As a mixed Hispanic individual with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), my experience of gender has always shaped my body in ways beyond my control. My higher testosterone levels mean that my weight distribution, muscle tone, and hair growth do not align neatly with expectations of femininity.

My experiences as a queer educator living with PCOS illuminate how multiple identity markers – gender, sexuality, embodiment, and health – intersect in ways that shape my daily negotiations of visibility, belonging, and resistance within educational spaces. When I began teaching in a rural setting, I felt compelled to conceal aspects of my body that did

not align with dominant gender norms. I shaved before school, waxed, and wore long sleeves even in the oppressive heat.

One day, a student casually said, 'Hey, I have hairy arms like yours too!'. On a physiological level, I felt estranged from narrowly defined norms of womanhood – norms that insisted women must be hairless, petite, and delicately proportioned. These normative standards, often racialised and gendered through the lens of White femininity, failed to accommodate my lived reality. On the relational ethics level, this interaction can be viewed as a turning point – where I as the teacher, through attentive listening and emotional openness, could offer students an alternative model of embodiment and self-acceptance. Rather than reinforcing conformity, I saw an opportunity to cultivate an affirming environment in which deviation from dominant norms was not only accepted but modelled. I started talking about how sometimes people's physical body goes through different processes of change and can exert non-binary features. Through this recognition, I began to resist gendered expectations and reassert agency over my body.

This agency manifested most explicitly when I received my first tattoo in college. Though small, this act of body modification represented a profound reclaiming of the body as a site of expression and resistance. In the absence of language to articulate my complex relationship to gender at the time, tattoos became a medium of identity formation – each piece functioning as a visual narrative of my interests, lived experiences, and evolving sense of self.

When I entered the teaching profession, I quickly learned how institutions dictated what was considered professional or appropriate. At the beginning of my teaching experience, I would cover my tattoos, especially around students and parents. As I grew into my role as an educator and became more confident, I began to challenge these constraints. One day, I rolled up my sleeves during recess duty, revealing my tattoo sleeves. Students immediately noticed. They started asking me questions, which I no longer evaded.

What do your tattoos mean?

They mean a lot of different things. Some are from shows and movies that I like, while others are just there because they look nice and some have very deep meanings.

Did they hurt?

Yes, they hurt really bad. Different parts hurt worse than others

When did you get them?

I started when I was in college and have not stopped.

To my surprise, once the questions were answered, students did not show any judgement about my tattoos, other than feeling fascinated by their meanings. Claiming my body as a site of self-expression and resistance has allowed me to reclaim space in a profession that tends to police presentation. This expression of resistance in a place that doesn't always see you connects with the lyrics from 'City on a Hill' by Mon Rovia: 'Tried to make yourself seen through a field of green, but it's overgrown'. It's about feeling forgotten in the crowd and yearning to exist in a way that cannot be ignored. My self-expression acts as an intentional pushback against that silence. It is a way of saying, 'I was here. I am here'.

A quiet solidarity, loud in meaning

I remember the first time I met another educator who did not perfectly align with the gender binary. Until then, I had felt isolated in my experience, moving through the profession in silence. I finally had teachers who understood what it meant to be assigned female at birth yet experience gender in a way that didn't align with societal expectations.

For once, I wasn't navigating alone but with peers who truly understood the weight of these experiences. In that space, gender was not something to defend but something that simply existed.

At my current school, there's a quiet but powerful solidarity among queer educators. Our school is really good about supporting and making sure queer teachers feel comfortable. We have several trans teachers, and our principal always refers to them by their name and pronoun. It might seem like a small gesture, but it signals an affirming culture in a professional environment that so often reinforces binary expectations. (Journal entry, Week 3)

Despite these institutional challenges, I found moments of resilience and affirmation, often through the unspoken connections of queer educators, who, like me, navigate the profession with caution. At my current school, I experience a stronger sense of belonging compared to previous environments. Teaching in an urban setting, I have encountered more colleagues who identify as queer, creating an atmosphere of mutual affirmations and shared experiences. (Journal entry, Week 5)

The first time I walked into my current school, I felt something different. There was more racial and cultural diversity among my colleagues. I also saw teachers with tattoos, piercings, and professional aesthetics that deviated from the rigid standards I had previously encountered. There were teachers who wore bold, gender-nonconforming outfits and a general atmosphere that valued individuality over conformity. I had spent years policing my appearance, making sure my clothing choices weren't too masculine or too androgynous, fearing that straying too far from traditional expectations would lead to subtle but real professional consequences. But here, professional aesthetics weren't rigidly defined. I saw teachers who looked like me, teachers who challenged gender norms in the same way I wanted to.

My colleagues and I began a weekly gathering known as 'Chow Yum Fridays', which evolved into an intentional space of affirmations and solidarity among queer educators. We could exist authentically within this space, free from fear of judgement or institutional policing, as like-minded people surrounded us. We looked forward to these gatherings, where we could discuss our challenges and decompress from a demanding week. This allowed us a community and a place where we could be honest with our struggles. We shared many of the same students and could talk with one another when we faced problems, enabling collaborative problem-solving rooted in care and trust. Importantly, this space fostered critical dialogue about our pedagogical practices. Many of us are highly critical of the current political system, and Chow Yum Fridays became a space where we could talk about how to subvert normative structures and do what is best for our students and ourselves.

'Chow Yum Fridays' became a fixture, but sometimes we tried new places and invited new faces. A meaningful moment of allyship came from the casual affirming support I experienced during a night out with my colleagues. After a long, emotionally heavy

week at work, filled with testing stress, incomplete tasks, and conversations about our English Learner students' fears around deportation, I was mentally drained. Gathering with my co-workers at Overpass Merchant and later Pelican to Mars shifted that weight. These hangouts were emotional checkpoints. At Overpass, we vented about work and the current political climate. Later, at Pelican, surrounded by the joy of an unexpected Lunar New Year celebration, we shared food, talked about games, and shifted from stressing about work and politics to enjoying our existence and finding joy in the mundane.

Outside of my specific circle of colleagues, I also find that my current school offers support and recognition from the administration team. At the end of a seemingly uneventful month, I received a card (Figure 1) and recognition during the announcements for 'Teacher of the Month', along with a little cash award. It was signed by the entire administration team. This recognition helps in affirming my presence within the school. This school has allowed me to be myself more so than any other school. That can be scary. I don't cover my tattoos or plugs and I dress androgynously and present in a way that is comfortable. Receiving this card shows that beyond my gender presentation, I am recognised as not only a teacher, but a good teacher.

The connections with both queer and heteronormative educators have been vital to my survival and growth. In this community, I find reflection, connection, and strategy. We resist isolation by affirming each other's truths, and we get recognised as the professionals that we are. This solidarity not only sustains me in an ever-changing political landscape but also strengthens my commitment to building affirming spaces in education.

Analysis and discussion

The above narratives all converged to answer the research questions: 1) *How do intersections of identity influence the experience of a queer teacher at school?* And 2) *What are the factors that contribute to a queer teacher experiencing safety, belonging, and thriving at work?* They exhibited various manifestations of queer identities and experiences in contexts typically shaped by cis-heteronormative expectations and institutional policies. These included navigating binary language systems, confronting assumptions about gender presentation, and developing queer pedagogy within a gendered profession.

Navigating identities through the binary language systems

The structure of the teaching profession is deeply gendered, shaping not only how educators are perceived but also the expectations placed upon them. For non-binary teachers, managing this landscape often means choosing between visibility and self-preservation.

In the narrative, the third author acknowledged that 'honesty came with risks' due to the hetero-cis-centric nature of educational spaces. As a result, they tolerated the policing of their body through persistent misgendering and the incorrect use of their titles, paralleling experiences recounted by Unwin et al. (2024). The author grappled with a dilemma: whether to correct their misgendering to open a conversation about gender, risking discomfort, or to conform to the expectations of professionalism (Mizzi 2013). This internal conflict reveals the author's attentiveness to *engrossment* and *particularity* (Noddings 1984), especially as a teacher navigating care ethics. By

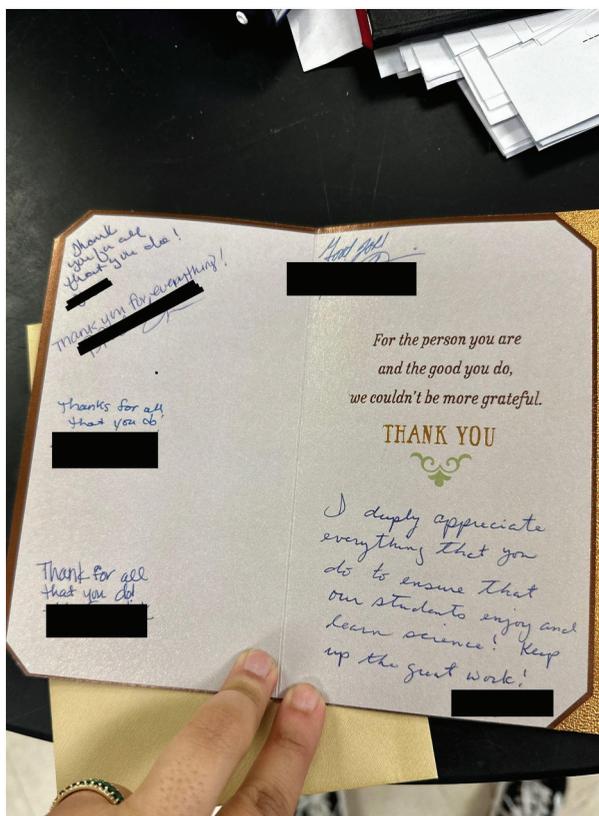


Figure 1. Peers' support and recognition for teacher of the Month.

choosing to 'see and feel with the other' (Noddings 1984, 30), the author empathised with students who were uncertain about their teacher's gender. Although their preferred pronouns were not acknowledged, they found fulfilment in allowing their students to be 'uninhibited by social structures of gender', thereby living out Noddings' (1984) vision of care: 'somehow fulfilled and completed in my own life and in the lives of those I have thus influenced' (95). Choosing, as the lyrics suggest, to 'take a moment and find yourself', the third author engaged in a protective, self-affirming practice, not by denying their gender fluidity or conforming to cis-heteroprofessionalism, but by performing an alternative act of resistance which is enacting queer pedagogy in subtle but powerful ways. They challenged binary gender norms within school culture by encouraging inclusive thinking (e.g., reimagining colour associations) and affirming a student's queer identity. These actions reflected a deep ethical commitment to care, particularly for vulnerable students, such as their non-binary students. Their reflection on 'how deeply the presence of a supportive adult can impact a young person's sense of safety and belonging' underscores their dedication to care through overt and intentional acts on behalf of the cared-for (Noddings 1984).

As R. C. Valentine (2023) observed, 'queer bodies, bodies that simply do not fit normative narratives, are often talked about and are shaped by knowledge' (166). This

dynamic is evident in the third author's experience, as their students' curiosity about their gender was informed by hegemonic gender norms. In response, the author abandoned the use of the Mx title in favour of 'Ms' – an act intended to simplify their identity, but which simultaneously represented conformity to cis-heteronormative expectations and a suppression of self-identification. Flores (2014) emphasised the need for educators to be mindful of legislation and policy when making pedagogical choices around queer inclusion. In the author's experience, awareness of policies such as Louisiana's ACT No. 681 (Louisiana House of Representatives 2023) led them to compartmentalise their identity and suppress their queer presentation, even through something as personal as pronoun usage. This act of self-silencing reflects a conscious display of their role as a professional, burdened by the existential questions posed by Beauchamp and Thomas (2011): 'Who am I?', 'Who am I as a teacher?', and 'What does this identity mean for how I teach?' This form of identity management, however, contrasts sharply with the stance documented in Uba'sque-Casallas and Castañeda-Peña (2021) study, wherein some Colombian English teachers embraced identity disclosure to their students through the assertion 'I'm here and I am queer', framing this openness as a form of epistemological and ontological defiance. This contrast highlights the author's intersectional experience: they are secure in their gender identity yet constrained by professional norms and the US legal frameworks that demand compliance.

Confronting assumptions about gender presentation

The third author's experience highlights the pervasive, everyday cisgender and hetero-centric practices that are deeply embedded in educational institutions. There are norms that often compel queer educators to reshape or suppress their identities to conform to dominant expectations. The third author's experiences highlight that gender presentation in educational settings as workplaces is not merely a matter of individual expression, but one shaped by institutional expectations that govern how teachers should dress, behave, and perform professionalism. Schools, as historically gendered spaces, reinforce strict binaries through dress codes, honorifics, and expectations of appearance that align with societal norms. For educators who exist outside these binaries, the pressure to conform can be both intense and isolating. In this context, difference is minimised, and conformity is maximised (Roberts and Labuski 2023). These experiences reflect the absence of a discourse to address non-binary teachers that would enable them to fully embrace their queerness while fostering student understanding and respect for diverse identities. As Ferfolja and Hopkins (2013) argued, schools continue to 'preserve biological determinist and essentialist discourses that validate and regulate gendered and sexual norms' (313), thereby limiting the space for authentic queer expression.

Within these constraints, the third author engaged in what might be understood as acts of *soft resistance* – quietly complying with normative professional expectations while simultaneously *loudly living* their queerness through embodied expressions that subverted binary constructions of gender (Burkholder and Keehn 2025, 215). This dual strategy involved masking their queer agency through norm-aligned behaviours yet intentionally using the body as a site of resistance, signalling identity through performative gestures and presence. Such acts of 'softly resisted – loudly lived' identity recall the work of scholars who have emphasised the complex and layered processes through which

LGBTQ+ educators navigate the reconciliation of professional roles with personal, embodied identities (Coia and Taylor 2009; Cutler 2023). Building on this literature, we suggest that such embodied negotiations constitute a form of *queer agency*, and perhaps even a form of *queer capital* or *strategic navigation*, wherein resilience is not always overt but operates through nuanced, context-sensitive acts of presence, defiance, and authenticity.

The ability to express gender freely is also tied to privilege. Queer educators who work in progressive or urban schools with diverse staff may have more freedom in how they present themselves than those in rural conservative or private institutions. Ultimately, gender presentation in education is not simply a matter of personal choice but a notation between self-expression and institutional survival. The stakes of gender nonconformity in teaching highlight how deeply entrenched binary norms remain in the field.

Developing queer pedagogy

As an educator, the third author has developed queer pedagogy in their everyday teaching. One such example is their willingness to model vulnerability by discussing their tattoos with students, a practice that invited curiosity, challenged assumptions, and opened space for conversations about identity. In doing so, they embodied what Noddings (1984) termed as engrossment, or the ability to see and feel with others, to be present with the complexities of identity, and to create space where students may also begin to imagine themselves beyond the limits of normative expectations. Tattooing, as a personal and embodied act, became not only a means of self-expression but also a political and ethical form of self-care. It served as an investment in authenticity that radiated outward into their pedagogy, modelling courage, reflection, and relational care.

Nielsen and Alderson (2014) suggest that awareness of educators' vulnerability and authenticity will encourage students' authenticity and comfortability in the classroom. In a similar vein, Matute et al. (2020) propose that vulnerability pedagogy approach whereby educators are open with their gender and sexuality will empower queerness in education, and that supporting the identities of educators will improve their well-being and pedagogical practices. The third author's consistent efforts to affirm students, both through explicit reassurance and subtle embodied gestures, represent an enactment of queer and relational ethics of care (Noddings 1984). This practice created a space in which students could feel seen and valued without needing to conform to dominant gender or sexual norms. In this sense, the author's approach illustrates the intersection of queer pedagogy and the ethics of care through a praxis grounded in attentiveness, responsiveness, and intentional relationality.

Engaging in queer conversations with students enabled the author, as a queer teacher, to identify and critically deconstruct heteronormative discourses embedded within their own teaching. This process contributes to broader goals of social justice in education by challenging normative structures and affirming diverse identities. Currently, many educators in the US grow increasingly hesitant about incorporating queer-inclusive discourse in their classrooms, especially in the context of shifting governmental policies and the persistent framing of queerness as taboo. Florida's House Bill 1557 (Florida Legislature 2022), widely referred to as the 'Don't Say Gay' bill, explicitly prohibits classroom discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels or in particular forms and establishes as public policy the position that attributing pronouns to individuals that

do not align with their assigned sex is false (National Education Association 2023). However, under Federal civil rights laws, schools and employers may not discriminate against or harass staff or students based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Echoing Güney (2023), we argue that queer critical literacies should be embedded in teacher education and professional development, which will equip educators with the tools to become agents of change. Such educators are capable of recognising, challenging, and transforming dominant heteronormative narratives to cultivate safer and more inclusive learning environments for students and staff of all sexual and gender identities.

In addition, queer pedagogy, when fostered through a community of practice created by intersectional commonalities, becomes a dynamic, relational process rooted in shared inquiry, support, and resistance to normative educational structures. By feeling inclusive and developing collegiality, queer educators can collectively engage in meaning-making, challenge dominant discourses, and co-construct inclusive pedagogical approaches and inclusive space that affirm diverse identities. Within these communities and social spaces, vulnerability is shared, and experiences of marginalisation are not isolated but transformed into sources of collective strength and innovation that could reinforce the implementation of queer pedagogy in educational settings, which shifts the focus away from individual struggles to be recognised but more on diversity, inclusivity and equity. This sense of community and belonging that the third author cultivated with their colleagues itself is manifestations of ethics of care among colleagues. Ultimately, queer pedagogy, embraced and sustained by a community of practice within the school setting, is not only a method of teaching but a mode of solidarity and transformation within and beyond the classroom, between teachers and students and among teachers themselves.

Conclusion

This autoethnography explores the challenges faced by a queer teacher in navigating workplace culture, including experiences of discrimination, microaggressions, and the fear of stigmatisation. These challenges often surfaced in routine interactions such as being misgendered by colleagues or students, and in the ongoing pressure to conform to institutional norms that rarely accommodate gender diversity. While we illuminate the marginalisation encountered by the third author, we do not skew towards a deficit approach whereby queer teachers are subject to oppression and personal and professional challenges. Instead, this article presents a more nuanced account of a queer educator who, despite structural barriers, engages in acts of soft resilience and exercises agency as a form of queer capital by mobilising identity and experience as a resource for community-building and inclusive practice. These acts include cultivating supportive networks among peer educators, affirming students' identities, and modelling respectful engagement with LGBTQ+ perspectives. Through such practices, the queer teacher not only resists the silencing effects of institutional heteronormativity but also actively fosters affirming and inclusive learning environments. This autoethnography resonates with previous studies which documented how LGBTQ+ teachers enact resistance through visibility, strategic disclosure, and pedagogy. Brett (2024) showed that 'visible' LGBT+ teachers navigate surveillance and risk while leveraging visibility to contest heteronormativity and provide relational support. Llewellyn (2023) framed LGB teacher identity as simultaneously

professional, personal, and political in that their lived experience became a resource for agency within institutional constraints. Lastly, Reimers (2020) theorised queer identifications as pedagogical resources that disrupt desexualised heteronormativity and proposed classroom and curricular interventions that reframe sexuality as educative rather than problematic.

By employing multimedia and multimodal autoethnographic expression, this paper hopes to contribute to the literature by providing a nuanced understanding of queer teachers' lived experiences in nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression to empower and strengthen their voice. It advocates for institutional measures that ensure the safety, belonging, and flourishing of gender-diverse educators. It positions them not as marginal figures, but as integral, empowered members of the educational community. Rather than seeking a single, overt 'effect', our analysis foregrounds nuanced, situated patterns such as the contingencies, tensions, and trade-offs through which a queer teacher exercised agency under constraints. In detailing complexity and contradiction, we attempt to avoid homogenising LGBTQ+ experiences and reduce harm from overgeneralisation. In short, nuance enables findings to be ethically sound and actionable in queer education.

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