

Exploring LGBTQ+ teacher professional identity through the power threat meaning framework

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Abstract

In addition to the mounting stresses associated with teaching in the UK resulting from decades of neoliberal reform (Ball, 2021), lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) teachers experience a range of challenges to their professional identity from institutions that perpetuate the gender binary and hegemonic heteronormativity. Consequently, there is an urgent need for a deeper understanding of how these teachers can be better supported to thrive in education settings. To begin to address this, this pilot study employs the Power, Threat, Meaning Framework (PTMF) with five LGBTQ+ teachers. The main findings from this study are that teachers experience power as a form of self-surveillance and policing but also positively, as a tool to reclaim space for positive representation. Threats came principally from media and parents and impacted participants' sense of inclusion/exclusion in practice. Finally, participants made meaning of their experience through channelling their LGBTQ+ activism into EDI leadership roles, reclaiming space as a role model and using visual tokens to prompt 'micro-moments' of connection. The results of this study demonstrate the potential of the PTMF for future research to support LGBTQ+ teachers in practice and that the rigid nature of the framework may benefit from a more holistic approach to data analysis.

KEYWORDS

LGBTQ+, power, PTMF, teacher identity

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

LGBTQ+ teachers in the UK face extra challenges to their professional identity due to institutional norms that reinforce the gender binary and heteronormativity, on top of the stresses caused by decades of neoliberal education reforms.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

This pilot study employs the Power, Threat, Meaning Framework (PTMF) with five LGBTQ+ teachers. The findings reveal that teachers experience power both negatively, as self-surveillance and policing, and positively, as a means to reclaim space for positive representation. The PTMF can help LGBTQ+ teachers strengthen and positively shape their professional identity.

INTRODUCTION

The challenges facing teacher professional identity are well researched and highlight the increasing alignment of the education system and the needs of the economic market (Giroux, 2014; Reay, 2017) which has resulted in an increase in datafication, standardisation and managerialism (Ball, 2021; Smyth, 2011). These factors contribute to teaching becoming de-professionalised over time (Hall & McGinity, 2015). Additional to these pressures, LGBTQ+ teachers experience a cis-heteronormative education system which reinforces the gender binary and hinders the implementation of robust LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula and policy (Carlile, 2020; Johnson, 2022). Consequently, this pilot study argues that LGBTQ+ teachers face additional challenges in negotiating their professional identity formation and need much more support and understanding of what they need to thrive and to ensure schools are safe and supportive places for them. This pilot study aims to make the case that the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF; Johnstone & Boyle, 2018b) can be used as a fresh lens to critically analyse the experience of LGBTQ+ teacher professional identity formation and help us to understand how heteronormativity, cis-normativity and neoliberalism impact their professional teacher identity formation. A further aim of this study is to support LGBTQ+ teachers to develop a more holistic understanding of their professional identity formation and become more attuned to their own lives and those of their students and ultimately to develop hopeful (rather than deficit) narratives through exploration of the meaning they attribute to their experience.

LGBTQ+ TEACHER PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION

For the past few decades, teacher professionals in the UK have found themselves subjected to an ever-increasing range of judgements, performative measures and targets (Ball, 2021; Giroux, 2014) as the education system has aligned more with the needs of the economy than over care, human relationships and preparation for democratic citizenship (Gravett, 2022). Educating for economic prosperity has cannibalised older notions of education as a means for transformative social change and social justice (Smyth, 2011) even as most teachers still enter the profession wanting to enact social change (Marsh, 2015).

LGBTQ+ teachers entering this challenging working environment must navigate additional layers of complexity and stress resulting from how they negotiate their sexualities and gender identities in traditionally cis-heteronormative institutions. Although Section 28 was fully repealed in 2003, which meant that teachers were no longer prohibited from talking about their LGBTQ+ identities, sensationalist media and moral panic among teachers regarding LGBTQ+ teachers, issues, history and inclusive education continue to perpetuate a climate of fear (Lee, 2019). The work of Michel Foucault, which is foundational to queer theory, can support an understanding of how LGBTQ+ teacher professionals experience educational institutions. Foucault explores the interrelationship of sexuality, knowledge and power (Foucault, 1977, 1979). For many teachers, education systems can feel hierarchical, restrictive and spaces of limited agency (e.g. Ball, 2021; Giroux, 2014). However, Foucault, reminds us that rather than considering power in wholly negative terms, or as something oppressive, power is relational and something that all possess (Foucault, 1979), meaning that individuals are not just subjected to top-down power but can enact power from the grassroots up. This has implications for how LGBTQ+ teachers enact their teacher professional identity. Additionally, Foucault's work on surveillance and his concept of the panopticon support our understanding of how teachers' self-police their practice under the gaze of a perceived other. This idea has been developed by Johnson (2023) and Brett (2024a, 2024b) through exploring how LGBTQ+ teachers and allies often unconsciously perpetuate cis-heteronormativity through a form of panoptic self-surveillance and self-censorship (Lee, 2019), meaning that LGBTQ+ teachers are forced to 'mange' their sexualities at work (Ferfolja, 2009). Foucault's work contrasts with that of Bourdieu (1987), who sees power as somewhat more deterministic being culturally or symbolically through the entanglement of habitus, field and symbolic power (Christensen, 2023).

Heteronormativity, a term first coined by Michael Warner (1991), explains how institutions and social structures perpetuate heterosexuality as the norm and everything else as deviant (Donelson & Rogers, 2004). Likewise, cis-normativity refers to how those same institutions uphold rigid gender binaries and erase space for those who do not easily fit or wish to challenge those binaries (Mackenzie & Talbott, 2018). These two concepts help explain how LGBTQ+ teacher professional identities have been subjected to forms of social control (Foucault, 1979) over time. Evidently, schools, as ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 1971) reinforce the hegemonic status quo, playing an active role in reproducing heteronormativity (Gray et al., 2016) and reinforcing the gender binary (Johnson & Mughal, 2024; McBride, 2021). Furthermore, this impacts the parameters around how teachers can talk, act and dress (Connell, 2015). Moreover, opportunities to talk about daily lives and relationships are more complicated for LGBTQ+ teachers and indicative of a 'heterosexual privilege' (Connell, 2015).

In England, although the teaching profession is underwritten by a set of Teachers' Standards (Department for Education, 2011), the concept and expectations of 'professionalism' are often ill-defined, which creates the potential for marginalisation (Mizzi, 2016, p. 137) for those without heterosexual or cis-gender privilege. Mizzi coined the term 'hetero-professionalism' to capture the friction that LGB teachers can experience, as their identities threaten to reveal the silent expectations that professionalism and heteronormativity are built upon. Mizzi's term captures the unequal expectations that can discriminate against LGBTQ+ teachers, for example, being implicitly, or explicitly, told not to discuss a same-sex partner with students (Brett, 2022, 2024a, 2024b). The Teachers' Standards are used to define the minimum level of practice expected of trainees and teachers; however, the Core Content and Early Career Frameworks (Department for Education, 2019a, 2019b) and the updated Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (Department for Education, 2024) require no statutory training or discussion of professional identity. With an estimated 5% of the teaching profession identifying as LGB+ (ONS, 2023), and a burgeoning literature highlighting the

challenges these teachers face (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Brett, 2024a; Gray et al., 2016; Johnson, 2023), it can be argued that sending LGBTQ+ teachers into schools without appropriate training or support is negligent. Consequently, a deeper understanding of how LGBTQ+ teachers can be supported in developing their professional identity is urgent and overdue.

THE POWER THREAT MEANING FRAMEWORK

The Power Threat Meaning Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c) is a unique theoretical framework that has been created as an alternative to understanding emotional and psychological distress as a meaning making response to aversive situations (Boyle & Johnstone, 2020; Johnstone et al., 2019). The PTMF (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c) has its roots in clinical practice and in clinical psychology as a means of understanding patient distress owing to negative operations of power and the threat it poses, including the invoked threat responses. According to the PTMF, individuals go through a process of ascribing meaning to and making sense of power operations and threat responses that create an understandable narrative of distress and behaviours in context. The PTMF is beginning to be applied to contexts outside of clinical practice, including education; for example, Bodfield and Culshaw (2024a, 2024b) have demonstrated ways in which the PTMF can be applied to education and understood in reference to power operations. Furthermore, there has been an initial application of the PTMF to the practice of educational psychologists (Milligan, 2022) and an exploration of the need to educate trainee teachers on the framework as a means of understanding trauma and distress in student behaviour and wellbeing (O'Toole, 2019).

Like in clinical practice, the PTMF provides a lens to examine the impact of the interrelationships of power dynamics, threats and meaning within educational practice (Boyle, 2022). One such area is teacher identity within education, where tension between identity and professionalism can create malaise, where the 'struggle over the teacher's soul' (Ball, 2003, p. 216) can compromise a sense of belonging (Kachchhap & Horo, 2021). By acknowledging the role of power, how it can create a threat to one's autonomy or identity, and in turn ascribing meaning to such experiences, teachers can better understand how their identity, professionalism and practice relate to their role as an educator, and in turn how the ecological influences of the education environment advocate for them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Price & McCallum, 2015). The PTMF enables teachers to explore their own identity as part of their role as educators by reflecting upon the power dynamics at play such as their interactions with peers, students, the school community and the wider education system. Such reflections can cultivate a deeper sense of self-awareness and in turn create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all involved.

While there has been some application of the PTMF to education in general (Bodfield & Culshaw, 2024a, 2024b; Boyle, 2022; Milligan, 2022; O'Toole, 2019), this pilot study undertakes a new, innovative direction where it seeks to examine the role of LGBTQ+ teacher professional identity in education. It is anticipated that the PTMF may support LGBTQ+ teachers by providing a framework to address the unique challenges they may face. By recognising and validating the impact of discrimination, systemic barriers, stigma and marginalisation often experienced by LGBTQ+ teachers, the PTMF may work to empower LGBTQ+ teachers to advocate for and celebrate their identity, and create more inclusive and affirming environments for themselves, their school community and the wider education field.

However, there are some limitations within the PTMF and its application to the education system, including existing critiques from its use in clinical practice. Firstly, it is important to note its original, narrow scope which focused solely on explaining psychological distress

and subsequently primarily focuses on negative operations of power and threat responses. Furthermore, the PTMF has been criticised for failing to provide a true alternative to psychological distress as a form of mental illness, that there is little reflection upon the stance that the PTMF takes towards mental distress and finally that the meaning aspect is ultimately behavioural in nature and reductionist (Morgan, 2023). Furthermore, Rashed (2023) adds that although the PTMF was designed to circumvent the master narrative of disability and illness that comes with diagnosis and labels, the PTMF is, in itself, yet another ascribed master narrative. Although these are valid philosophical points raised by Morgan (2023) and Rashed (2023), the authors contend that the PTMF is a useful framework to apply in this exploratory work owing to its focus on meaning making and its formulaic approach to understanding power, responses and interpretation within events. Indeed, part of the reason why this framework is perhaps useful specifically for this is because the application is not to diagnosis or distress but instead wider and to a general interpretation of events.

METHODOLOGY

It is important to note the underlying epistemology and ontology of the PTMF as the framework underpinning the context upon which this project rests. As the study is entirely a qualitative piece of research, one would assume a constructivist or relativist methodological approach. However, the PTMF has been suggested to be oriented within critical realism as the PTMF challenges traditional psychiatric positivism (Pilgrim, 2022). Critical realism originated in the work of Bhaskar (1975), positing that different forms of reality exist within the world, and is often used as an underpinning epistemological and ontological theory within mixed-methods research. Within research, critical realism has been defined as

a philosophy of science that is founded upon a priori or necessary truths about the nature of the world. Critical realism maintains that progress is possible because the intransitive dimension of reality (enduring structures and processes) provides a point of reference, against which theories can be tested

(McEvoy, 2006, p. 69).

According to Bhaskar (1975; 1986), reality is an iceberg and oriented within three levels, which are; the 'empirical' which sits at the apex of the iceberg and is the reality in which events and objects can be measured but are interpreted and defined by human experience and the human lens. The second level is that of the 'actual' in which events and objects occur without human experience and finally the third level is the 'real' in which causal mechanisms exist. Causal mechanisms at this level are the properties of an object or structure to produce an event, such as those appearing on the empirical level (Sayer, 2000).

Maxwell and Mittapalli (2010) emphasise that critical realism focuses on context, the incompleteness of theories and the impossibility of complete objectivity, and that critical realism allows causal inferences to be made. This project is attempting to understand the 'real' events that happened to our participants and their processing of these events in relation to the sense they made of their experiences and how this informed their cognitions, affect and behaviour in response.

Ethical considerations

As the pilot study explores topics such as gender and sexuality which might be considered sensitive or distressing, it was important that they were handled sensitively and ethically.

Aspects that supported ethical guidelines included confidentiality such as the anonymisation of teacher identities by ascribing pseudonyms when reporting on the data collected through the focus group. At the point of recruitment, participants were informed that they could decline to answer any questions they found distressing and that they had the right to pause or leave the study at any time with no repercussions. The risk of participation was deemed no higher than those encountered in daily life. Furthermore, participants were provided with a participant information sheet, and each provided informed consent ahead of taking part in the pilot study. Additionally, participants were debriefed upon cessation of the focus group where signposting to professional agencies was available if required. The pilot study was conducted in accordance with typical ethical guidelines including BERA (2024) and ethical approval was obtained from the University of Derby.

Sampling

Accessing marginalised groups can provide challenges for researchers (Cohen et al., 2013). However, two of the researchers had extensive experience in researching and working with LGBTQ+ teachers, and therefore had access to an existing network of suitable participants. As this was a pilot study that was largely designed to test the research instruments, a purposive sampling method was used, where five participants who were known to the research team were invited to take part. This sampling method allowed us to choose ‘knowledgeable people’ (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 157), who would be willing to share their rich experiences, as well as be patient as we ran a pilot that had the potential to experience unforeseen challenges. The participants were chosen as they represented a range of LGBTQ+ identities, teaching experience, and school contexts, as illustrated in Table 1.

METHOD

Research that claims to be empowering or emancipatory needs to be carefully examined as can often be considered ‘grandiose or at best naïve’ (Troyna, 1994). However, a key intention of this research was to develop positive narratives, empower LGBTQ+ teachers as professionals, and allow them to feel part of a network of other LGBTQ+ teachers. The researchers in this project have first-hand experience of the transformational power, for both researcher and participant, of taking place in LGBTQ+ research. Guyan (2022, p. 60) highlights how:

When research is well-designed and does not involve leading questions or planting thoughts in the heads of participants, the collection of data about LGBTQ people can make participants feel recognized in ways that initiate monumental changes in their everyday lives.

TABLE 1 Focus group participants.

Pseudonym	Gender identity	Pronouns	Sexuality	School and context	Number of years teaching
Chris	Transgender male	He/him	Didn't share	Catholic secondary	7
Jenny	Cisgender female	She/they	Lesbian	Primary	5
William	Cisgender male	He/him	Gay	Secondary	10
Terry	Cisgender male	He/him	Gay	Catholic secondary	32
Timmy	Cisgender male	He/they	Gay	Secondary	3

As Guyan argues, data collection methods can inform and shape how LGBTQ+ participants make sense of their own identities. Aware of the impact LGBTQ+ research can have on participants, it was important for us to go above the minimum ethical expectations for research and to ensure that those taking part found the experience valuable. We therefore designed a method that would allow participants to critically engage with their experiences as an LGBTQ+ professional, with the opportunity to explore these in the supportive and empowering environment of a focus group.

Prior to taking part in the focus group, participants were asked to reflect on specific incidents, moments, or times that had helped shape their professional identity as an LGBTQ+ teacher, with a balance of positive, negative or neutral experiences. During the focus group, participants shared their examples and the significance of these. Although participants understood that the PTMF underpinned the methodological approach, they were not required to have an understanding of the model. A set of questions was created using the PTMF principals to guide and develop the conversation; however, in many cases the themes naturally revealed themselves through the participant's narratives, and the PTMF played a more significant role in the data analysis stage. The focus group was informal and approached with the aim of creating a sense of community among the participants. Participants felt empowered as their experiences were empathetically and tacitly understood by others in the group. One participant later described the enormous catharsis she had felt in discussing the challenges she had faced as an LGBTQ+ teacher for the first time, highlighting the value of the PTMF meaning-making process.

Transcripts were coded and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to interpret and analyse the data. Given that this research focused on the novel application of an existing framework to a new context and method, a deductive approach to analysis was chosen with the existing themes selected being 'power', 'threat' and 'meaning' to align with the PTMF and clearly outline the suitability and implications of the framework for understanding narratives from the focus group.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As this pilot research project applies the experience of LGBTQ+ teachers in relation to the PTMF, analysis of the focus group transcript involved coding into themes under the categories of 'power', 'threat' and 'meaning'. The first theme of power found teachers experiencing both disciplinary power as well as space to reclaim power. Threats were described as relating to media, parents and a feeling of exclusion but also allyship and network building as a threat response. Finally, the theme of meaning is explored through participants' role as EDI leads, role models and their use of visual tokens to foster LGBTQ+ inclusivity. It is important to note that although the authors have tried to differentiate and present the findings in a linear manner for the purposes of the written format, these constructs are all related and intertwined. Therefore, there will be natural overlap and progression between the forms and the narratives.

Power

Some of the participants described how the imagined perceptions of others impacted their disclosure or non-disclosure of their LGBTQ+ identities in schools. For Jenny, the religious conservative nature of the parental body meant that she felt unsafe being open about her LGBTQ+ identity and worried about the assumptions parents would make about her sex life.

Others, like Timmy, played out scenarios in their minds related to the perceived ramifications of disclosure of their gender identity:

I can't lie that it wasn't something that was on my mind afterwards. I was thinking, oh Lord, like, what's gonna happen if someone goes home and mentions that today, and then all of a sudden, we know we've got phone calls coming in and, you know, the potential might have to be a conversation, etc with the headteacher.

This sense of self-surveillance impacted what they perceived they could and could not share about their identities in the school space. This perception of surveillance and being seen was directly linked to later threats and a feeling of fear and apprehension which was often apparent and elaborated upon immediately by participants. Indeed, in reference to being seen as an LGBTQ+ teacher, Timmy reported:

I was thinking, okay, you need to brace yourself here... And they just looked up at me so innocently and they just went ... 'Are you a member of the LGBT?' Like as if it was some kind of 90s pop band ... And just thinking about it, I was just like, so taken aback by it ... and so sort of ... weirdly happy about the way they did ask the question.

Timmy's experience reflects that of many LGBTQ+ professionals who self-police their identities only to find positive reactions upon disclosure and conversation with students. This could be described as a form of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977) where participants exhibit a form of panoptic self-surveillance regarding their non-normative gender and sexualities (Brett, 2024a; Johnson, 2023) whereby the largely pervasive nature of heteronorms (Warner, 1991) impacts what they choose to disclose (or not) within the school space. They imagine the reaction of a perceived other and act accordingly; for Jenny and Timmy this was around the perceived actions of conservative parents perhaps reflecting wider media attention towards the No Outsiders¹ protests (Ferguson, 2019).

Many LGBTQ+ teachers experience schools as unsafe, challenging places for a variety of reasons; consequently, a deficit mindset can develop whereby they internalise this sense of marginalisation and come to see themselves as problematic. As teaching has become increasingly aligned with the needs of the market (e.g. Ball, 2021; Giroux, 2014), teaching has become increasingly standardised, eroding spaces for critical reflection, meaning that teaching has become a more deterministic profession. The PTMF helps move from the individual to a focus on how wider structures perpetuate normative behaviours. Re-privileging critical reflection to enhance teacher agency can lead to the development of critical awareness as teachers identify how wider structures operate to maintain social norms that benefit those with power. Whilst this is helpful for all teachers, for LGBTQ+ teachers, critical reflection through the use of the PTMF can be transformative in revealing the illusory, fragile nature of hegemony.

Reclamation and positive power

For some of the participants, there was a focus on reclamation of power and the experience of positive power through both being able to operationalise positive power and experiencing positive power from other individuals. Indeed, this poses a counter narrative to the PTMF which tends to heavily focus on the negative operationalisation of power, but it is this reclamation of power and positive power that forms parts of the hopeful narratives

seen in meaning. These moments of reclamation tend to come from LGBTQ+ teachers finding themselves in positions where they could wield their own power in a way that felt positive and meaningful to themselves. For example, Timmy referenced a situation in which he acknowledged his LGBTQ+ identity to a student and reflected upon this saying:

they might have a friend who could be or potentially might be in the future, be part of our community as well. So why would I hold back from people seeing potential role models?

Timmy spoke about this experience as a queer teacher claiming space in a school in which they studied and experienced negative experiences as empowering owing to their perceived use of power to obtain a platform for positive representation:

my number one quick win moment for me as a queer educator especially standing in that exact same school where you know ... 16 years I've been in the school now knowing that the school has not always been the most comfortable of spaces for me and I reclaimed that in a moment four years ago, and I'm so proud of myself for doing that.

Timmy's comments infer an awareness of areas of his life where he lost power when social pressures or fear reduced his ability to feel 'comfortable' as both a student and a teacher. This resonates with Foucault's writings on the domination of power (Foucault, 1982) through accepted norms and cites that when power is understood as such, the possibility of freedom or agency increases. Timmy uses his experiences as an opportunity to actualise as a positive role model for both him and others; such acts of reclamation of power encapsulate the intent of the PTMF in general where its overarching aim is to help individuals, 'reclaim a greater degree of responsibility and control over their lives' (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018a, p. 18). These are examples of LGBTQ+ teachers starting to reclaim agency and disrupt spaces. Use of the PTMF can further support them in articulating how their teacher professional identity is impacted by the wider structures of power in which they teach.

Threat

Participants explored how media and parents were experienced as threats to their LGBTQ+ teacher professional identity. As Chris supported the enactment of LGBTQ+ inclusion in his practice, he experienced threats from the local Catholic media:

The journalist tried to start a petition to remove the Catholic status of the school. A parent removed their child. You know the vast majority of parents were supportive, but it was really like it was picked up and it was kind of like widespread. And I was like, this is going to be a real fight if I choose to stay here and transition.

For Chris, this threat was enough to pause his transition at the school and contributed to his moving to another school:

So, I did get a few comments, really it was very rare. But I got a few. And when I reported them, I just felt like it wasn't being dealt with in the same way that other discriminatory behaviour was and I think that's because they just didn't know how to do it.

Evidently, even small gestures of allyship had a powerful impact on the LGBTQ+ teachers professional identity formation. Furthermore, participants experienced threat as a form of exclusion. Jenny reflected upon her inability to speak openly about her sexuality within school as being a catalyst to her feeling uncomfortable in her local area:

And also, I lived quite close to the school where I taught. And very, very deliberately avoided being anywhere near the school in my personal time, if I was with someone that could identify me as gay. So yes, I think it made things slightly more uncomfortable, I guess.

Such measures may be seen as defending oneself against attributions of judgement or shame but at the 'high price of taking on a devalued identity' (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018a, p. 16). Interestingly, Jenny describes how her discomfort in being out within the school community was not to protect herself but was instead owing to the threat of believing (through conversations with peers) that doing so would result in parents removing children from her class:

The moment I said this, and I was pretty certain that it would actually be quite a high percentage. I thought it might have been as much as a third or 2/3 of the class.

The threat that Jenny experienced resulted in a twofold effect where she sacrificed the devaluing of core aspects of her self-concept and identity, including social exclusion (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018a) to ensure that her role as a teacher with the children she taught was unaffected. Jenny experienced the panoptic gaze of parents uniquely as she worked in a primary school where close relationships and daily interactions with parents are both common and expected.

For many participants, allyship became a key source of threat response but developing that allyship often fell onto the shoulders of the LGBTQ+ teachers, Chris described how:

I think part of the difficulty is there's not enough training ... they don't need permission, but [the allies are] actually just too fearful to say ... what they're going to say in case someone comes back at them and they get themselves into trouble.

In terms of actualising LGBTQ+ teacher professional identity, the participants spoke of LGBTQ+ colleagues, allies and networks from which they drew support in being able to explore their LGBTQ+ identities within their education contexts. For William and Jenny, having other out members of staff was fundamental in them feeling comfortable as LGBTQ+ people in schools. William explained how:

When I first started teaching, I definitely wasn't the only out person in school ... so I feel like I wasn't in a space where I couldn't feel comfortable to be out, certainly with staff.

Even though Jenny found it difficult to talk about her lesbian identity with parents and her pupils, being in a school environment with four other members of staff (including the deputy head) who all identified as LGBTQ+ provided some sense of solidarity in an otherwise LGBTQ+ hostile environment. Several members of staff referred to being part of a union or wider LGBTQ+ support group/network from which they drew strength both in terms of provision (Terry) and support at difficult moments (Jenny and Terry). Additionally, support from leadership was highlighted as important for the participants to feel safe in their school contexts and how public signs of allyship impacted participants.

The threats identified by participants within the pilot study were focused within the socially constructed context and that of their personal and professional identity as an LGBTQ+ individual and LGBTQ+ teacher. The identification of the impact of power relations on meanings of threat was not always consciously identified, which resonates with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence (1987) where the magnitude of threat is reinforced through the perpetual need to prove or evidence oneself (Bodfield & Culshaw, 2024a). Such is also evident in the PTMF, where the threat can emerge from a continuum of invalidation (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018a) through having feelings and beliefs dismissed or having the views of others imposed upon you (Boyle & Johnstone, 2020, p. 62). Interestingly, while the participants described experiences of threat, their later experiences were not of repression but instead of resistance, where many of the teachers used their identity to support and liberate others and as such conveying a message of hope and resilience (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018a). This echoes the Foucauldian view that power is not always oppressive but instead where power exists, there too exists resistance (Foucault, 1979).

MEANING

One of the principal ways participants derived meaning of their experience was through the role of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) leadership in schools. This work was often embraced as a way to transfer their LGBTQ+ inclusive activism into policy and practice. For Timmy, this role provided a deep sense of professional satisfaction:

I think that you know the amount of staff that have come up to me and ... they've had small questions which maybe they never would have thought to have asked or they may have thought I don't really want to ask this like in a work room with my colleagues who maybe don't understand ... and I love that. I love the fact that they feel like they can approach me.

For Chris, this represented a wider 'cultural shift' towards LGBTQ+ inclusion, as EDI initiatives are given a greater platform in terms of school practice. However, while most participants welcomed this role, others saw the difficulties inherent in having wider responsibility for EDI leadership describing it as 'daunting' and 'lonely' (Chris), time consuming and tokenistic, 'I did feel a little bit like I was being asked because of that [being LGBTQ+]'. Through the EDI leadership participants described a sense of value, satisfaction and even 'moral purpose' (Chris) in expanding their LGBTQ+ activism within their school contexts. In some ways, they drew upon established neoliberal tools of accountability, data management and performativity (Ball, 2021; Giroux, 2014) to disrupt hetero and cis-normativity and actualise social justice-oriented pedagogy, bringing it back from the periphery of the education system (Smyth, 2011). The establishment of the role legitimises their work and offers opportunities for the 'repetition' and 'ritual' (Butler, 1999:xv) needed to disrupt hetero and cis-norms. However, missing from accounts so far was the role of the student and how they might be invited into this work through partnership work and a process of co-construction (Shor, 1992) of EDI teaching and learning experiences. Furthermore, participants hinted at the weight associated with this role, which often falls on the shoulders of minority teachers (William, 2015) and can add extra pressure within highly stressful working environments (Ball, 2021) and contribute to minority stress (Lee, 2019).

Additionally, participants derived meaning from moments of connection fostered by physical symbols of LGBTQ+ identity in classrooms, and participants made various references to rainbow watches, Covid masks, mugs and badges that all served as visual tokens of inclusion for the children and young people in their care. Terry described a year 10 student noticing the red ribbon he wore each year on World AIDS day:

[after class] she made this comment to me, 'Yeah, we saw you were wearing that ribbon. Thank you.' They actually recognise that in that little moment, and it was at that point I realised how powerful those little symbols are for our students.

These objects provoked conversations that may have been difficult to have in the day-to-day context of the curriculum and are a vital sign of solidarity and allyship between teachers and students. For participants, these visual tokens in class served as points of connection between themselves, their LGBTQ+ inclusive work and students. Lanyards, ribbons, masks and mugs all provide 'micro-moments' of connection (Gannon et al., 2019) that foster inclusivity. As Bennett (2010: 6) has argued, objects possess 'thing power' and describes the 'curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle'. These symbols are powerful ways to foster allyship between teachers and young people within exclusionary cis-heteronormative spaces.

A further form of meaning for participants stemmed from being an LGBTQ+ role model to children and as such being a 'course correction' to the exclusion they felt in their own education (often under the spectre of Section 28). For Timmy, physically teaching at the school he grew up in was an opportunity to 'reclaim everything that was bad about [my] previous experience in this school', and ultimately being the queer teacher needed by his younger self.

A key theme of meaning making among participants was the reclamation of space. Timmy and Chris had both returned to work at the school which they had attended as students. Motivated by the lack of visibility and support they had received when exploring their sexual and gender identities as young people (power), they now wished to be a visible role model for others (meaning). Being an LGBTQ+ role model was a core tenet of their teacher identity and had shaped their career progression, with both holding responsibilities for EDI. William had also held EDI responsibility and reflected on returning to a school where he had previously worked, now wishing to be an LGBTQ+ role model, which he had felt unable to do the first time. William was acutely aware of the unequal power operations of heteronormativity, and at the start of his career was happy not to discuss his personal life, but later realised that his silence only upheld the heteronorms that restricted him:

Oh, I'm making it usual, because if I were straight, I wouldn't openly go around promoting my straightness and talking about my straightness all the time.

William recognised that in an environment where cis-gender heterosexuality is assumed, alternative narratives are required to challenge the power of heteronormativity and to 'usualise' (Sanders, 2021) LGBTQ+ visibility. William described how his confidence had grown throughout his career, giving examples including a senior leader who had spoken openly about his trans son, and feeling empowered listening to other LGBTQ+ teachers share their stories on the Pride & Progress podcast. William reflected on the change in his professional identity by comparing his approach to LGBTQ+ visibility when returning to his former school. Shortly after returning, William gave an assembly during pride month discussing Section 28. Later a year 11 student came to find him and handed him an envelope:

[the student] came up to me and handed me this envelope with a postcard and a rainbow badge in it, basically saying that there are points when he'd been at school in the past five years when I can't remember the exact wording, but it was something along the lines of [it] wasn't always such a nice place to be a gay child. And how glad he was that just to see me and me sharing my story with them.

William's example demonstrates the power of small acts which can create moments of 'de-grounding', where the consent required to uphold heteronormativity is briefly disorganised

(Atkinson & DePalma, 2009), allowing for alternative and disruptive counter narratives. However, opportunities to disrupt are often small and fleeting, where the discourses that uphold heteronormativity are quickly reinscribed and 'sedimented meaning' (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009) threatens to quickly reorganise the consent required to maintain the dominance of hegemonic norms.

For many of the teachers, taking part in the focus group provided them with an opportunity to make meaning of their experiences. The participants reflected on the transformational power of their identities, where they were able to create disruptive opportunities that provided vital visibility for students and colleagues. The focus group also allowed the participants to create connections with other LGBTQ+ teachers, and to develop an intentionality and motivation for the LGBTQ+ inclusion work they wished to develop in the future. The combination of the PTMF and the focus group fostered the development of both an individual and collective critical consciousness orientated towards understanding how wider structures perpetuate marginalisation among LGBTQ+ teacher professionals. For the researchers and participants, the value of taking part in the research was both cathartic and potentially mobilising. In discussing the structures of power that made the LGBTQ+ teachers feel constrained, the fragility of power and norms were unveiled, allowing them to be questioned, which provides both the foundations and the drive to engage in emancipatory praxis.

CONCLUSION

While limited by the small sample size, this research presents a novel approach to understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ teachers in relation to their professional identity through the application of the PTMF (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018b). The narratives reveal that experiences of power and threat are ubiquitous among LGBTQ+ teachers. The emancipatory feelings that the participants described after taking part in the research speak to the lack of training, support or community that LGBTQ+ teachers so often experience. The research acutely highlights the need for a clear emphasis on equity, rather than equality, for LGBTQ+ teachers, an emphasis that addresses the additional challenges these teachers are going to face within the profession. These additional supports must be reflected through the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework, as well as the Teacher Standards, to ensure consistency for all LGBTQ+ teachers. The challenges that each participant described in assimilating their personal and professional identity in the workplace highlight the need for a clearer understanding and definition of professionalism from the Department for Education; a definition that recognises that assumptions of professionalism are usually focussed on the cis-gender, heterosexual citizen. Professionalism was a clear theme within our initial focus group and will be a focus of our PTMF research going forward, which we hope can inform future reforms to teacher frameworks and guidance.

From our initial application, there are several recommendations and limitations to explore in further research. Firstly, the use of power, threat and meaning as orienting headings within the research provided a useful structure to explore the experience of the LGBTQ+ teachers. However, it also presented a somewhat rigid system in which to order themes, particularly given the interrelated nature between the factors of the PTMF and the ways in which these factors were introduced in the accounts provided by the LGBTQ+ teachers. The research team would recommend that future researchers might further consider a more holistic approach to the framework's application to data which threads through the framework in a more organic and responsive manner. A further limitation to the framework was in its distinct focus on negative power and threat responses which fails to capture contexts and situations where positive power and broader responses are in operation as these were unrelated to the scope of the original framework. However, some of the sample directly referenced

positive power operations and responses that were not typical of 'threat' responses in their narratives and reflections. Indeed, although tokenistic and potentially negatively construed, the story of Timmy taking on EDI lead due to his LGBTQ+ identity is an example of positive ideological power in action and space reclamation. Therefore, we would recommend that future use of the PTMF makes a conscious effort to explore positive power operations in addition to negative power operations and broadly looks at 'responses' to these operations without specific emphasis on threat response. Moreover, there may be power in sharing the PTMF with participants before focus groups, as a tool not for clinical diagnosis, but rather to support meaning making in practice.

Applying the use of the PTMF in the context of a focus group allowed participants to engage in a process of reflection and analysis of their experiences. This process appeared to involve an element of cognitive reappraisal, as the researchers asked participants follow up questions related to their experiences of power, their perceptions of the threat responses and the meaning ascribed. Cognitive reappraisal, with its origins in cognitive behavioural therapy, is a form of cognitive restructuring in which cognitive and linguistic processes are used to reframe or reinterpret information into an understanding that evokes less discomfort (Clark, 2022). Indeed, Jenny expressed the emancipatory nature of the exercise as one in which her reflection and unpicking of the experiences allowed her to derive a new hopeful narrative and meaning from the events and change her reflection and memory of the events. Finally, there have been limited applications of the PTMF within education, particularly exploring constructions of teacher identity. We hope this pilot provides an initial blueprint for further exploratory practices that equip LGBTQ+ teachers with cognitive and linguistic processes, and access to networks of support that allow them to flourish within the profession.

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ENDNOTE

¹ The No Outsiders protests, which took place across cities in the UK in 2019, were undertaken by religious conservative parents unhappy with efforts made by primary schools to develop LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculums drawing upon (but not limited to) the schemes of work designed by the 'No Outsiders' charity. This represented a still unresolved tension between two sets of protected characteristics relating to sexual orientation and religion.

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