

Article

Breaking the Façade: Exploring the Identity Formation and Navigation of Queer Early-Career Teachers

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Abstract

There is a growing body of research examining the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) teachers in schools. However, limited empirical attention has been given to those in the early stages of their careers, particularly within the UK context, where historical and legislative dynamics continue to shape school cultures. This article addresses this gap by exploring how queer early-career teachers (QECTs) construct and navigate their personal and professional identities within heteronormative and cisnormative school environments. Drawing on a qualitative narrative inquiry with three UK-based QECTs, the study analyses written biographical narratives and semi-structured interviews using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings identify three interconnected processes shaping identity navigation: preventative barriers (including anticipated judgement, self-surveillance, and performative regulation), community as a site of affirmation and restoration, and a negotiated sense of freedom understood as context-dependent agency rather than full disclosure. The study argues that identity formation for QECTs is not a linear progression towards authenticity, but an ongoing negotiation shaped by power, precarity, and relational safety. In doing so, it extends existing research by foregrounding early-career status as a critical factor in queer teacher identity work and contributes a conceptual framing of “negotiated authenticity” within professional contexts. The article concludes by considering implications for professional sustainability, belonging, and inclusive school cultures.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ teachers; early-career teachers; identity; belonging; heteronormativity; cisnormativity

1. Introduction

The UK education system is often perceived as progressive in its commitments to diversity and inclusion, supported by legislative protections and policy frameworks designed to promote equality in schools (UK Government 2010; Department for Education 2019). However, the lived experiences of queer teachers suggest a more complex and at times contradictory reality. While inclusive rhetoric has become increasingly commonplace within educational policy and discourse, the enduring legacy of heteronormative and cisnormative values continues to shape school cultures and professional expectations (DePalma and Atkinson 2009; Henderson 2019; Lee 2020).

The tension between policy discourse and everyday practice has prompted growing investigation into the barriers faced by LGBTQ+ educators in expressing their identities (Ferfolja and Hopkins 2013; Neary 2013; Rudoe 2018). More recent work has begun to attend to specific sub-groups, including queer teachers in leadership roles (Lee 2020) and



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pre-service teachers (Tompkins et al. 2019; Maher and Toledo 2021; Glazzard and Thomas 2026). However, queer early-career teachers (hereafter referred to as QECTs) remain underrepresented within empirical research, despite occupying a particularly vulnerable position within the sector. The early-career phase is widely recognised as a period characterised by intensive identity work, professional insecurity, and exposure to institutional power (Hong et al. 2017; Perryman and Calvert 2020). For queer teachers, this period coincides with navigating sexual and/or gender identity within school contexts historically shaped by silence, surveillance, and forms of moral regulation (Harris et al. 2022). The intersection of queerness and early-career status therefore warrants focused investigation.

This article presents findings from a narrative inquiry study exploring how QECTs construct and navigate their personal and professional identities within UK schools. Framed by queer theory and drawing on biographical narratives and semi-structured interviews with three queer early-career teachers, the study centres participant voice to illuminate the interplay between individual agency and structural constraint. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on identity, belonging, and inclusion in early-career teaching.

While existing research has examined the experiences of LGBTQ+ teachers and, separately, the identity development of early-career teachers, these bodies of work have largely developed in parallel. Studies of queer educators have tended to focus on established professionals, while research on early-career teachers rarely foregrounds sexual or gender identity as a meaningful dimension of experience. As a result, limited attention has been given to how early-career status and queer identity intersect to shape professional identity formation. This absence is analytically significant, particularly within the UK context, where historical legacies such as Section 28 of the [Local Government Act \(1988\)](#) continue to inform contemporary school cultures. In response to these gaps, this study is guided by the following research question: How do queer early-career teachers construct and navigate their personal and professional identities within UK school contexts?

This article makes two key contributions. First, it provides empirical insight into the experiences of queer early-career teachers, a group that remains underrepresented in existing research. Second, it develops a conceptual understanding of identity navigation as a process of negotiated authenticity, in which individuals make context-dependent decisions about visibility, performance, and self-expression within professional environments shaped by power and precarity.

2. Literature Review

This article sits at the intersection of three bodies of literature: research on queer identities in education, scholarship on early-career teacher (ECT) experience, and broader theoretical work on identity, performativity, and power. While each of these areas is well established in isolation, they are rarely brought into sustained dialogue. As a result, limited attention has been given to how queer early-career teachers construct and navigate their identities within school contexts shaped by heteronormativity and cisnormativity. This review synthesises literature across these three strands to situate the present study and clarify the conceptual and empirical space it seeks to address.

2.1. *Queer Identities and Hetero/Cisnormativity in School*

Schools have been widely theorised as heteronormative and cisnormative institutions, in which being heterosexual and cisgender is positioned as natural and neutral (DePalma and Atkinson 2009; Johnson 2024). Within these environments, queer identities are often rendered invisible or constructed as inappropriate, risky, or incompatible with professional teaching identities. Despite legislative protections afforded to LGBTQ+ teachers under the Equality Act ([UK Government 2010](#)), research consistently highlights a disjuncture between

inclusive policy rhetoric and everyday school practice (Ferfolja and Hopkins 2013; Neary 2013; Rudoe 2018).

Within such contexts, research documents how queer teachers manage visibility in school spaces (Formby 2013; Brett 2024), often engaging in strategic self-censorship to align with dominant expectations of professionalism and age-appropriateness (Vicars 2006; Gray 2013). Such practices are not always responses to explicit discrimination but are often shaped by subtle forms of regulation (Johnson 2024), including assumptions of heterosexuality, silence around LGBTQ+ issues, and the framing of queerness as a private matter (Francis and Reygan 2016; Stones and Glazzard 2020). As Henderson (2019) argues, queerness in schools is simultaneously excluded and unavoidable, producing ongoing identity negotiation for queer educators.

In the UK context, these dynamics are further shaped by the legacy of LGBTQ+ exclusionary practices and policies. This includes Section 28 of the *Local Government Act* (1988), which, despite its repeal over two decades ago, continues to influence attitudes towards queer visibility in schools, fostering uncertainty around what is permissible and reinforcing cultures of caution and self-surveillance (Greenland and Nunney 2008; Monk 2011; Stones and Glazzard 2020). This legacy has contributed to the persistent association of queerness with risk, particularly in relation to children and safeguarding discourses, leading some LGBTQ+ teachers to justify, sanitise, or conceal aspects of their identity to maintain professional legitimacy.

While this literature provides important insight into the structural conditions shaping queer teachers' experiences, it often treats queer educators as a relatively homogeneous group. Differences related to career stage, institutional power, and professional security are rarely foregrounded, leaving the experiences of queer teachers in the early stages of their careers under-theorised.

2.2. Early-Career Teachers, Identity, and Professional Vulnerability

The early years of teaching are widely recognised as a period of heightened professional challenge, characterised by intensive identity work, emotional labour, and exposure to institutional power dynamics (Hong et al. 2017; Perryman and Calvert 2020). During this phase, teachers are required to establish credibility, navigate evaluation and surveillance, and reconcile personal values with the cultures and expectations of their schools. Within this context, professional identity is understood as dynamic and relational, shaped through ongoing negotiation rather than as a fixed or stable outcome (Alsup 2006; Rodgers and Scott 2008).

A substantial body of research links early-career teacher identity to experiences of agency, resilience, and retention. Teachers who develop a coherent and affirmed sense of professional identity are more likely to adapt to challenge, sustain motivation, and remain in the profession (Day 2018; Ruohotie-Lyhty 2018; Melzak et al. 2025). Conversely, identity dissonance, limited support, and restricted agency have been associated with stress, burnout, and attrition (Perryman and Calvert 2020). Crucially, this work increasingly recognises that identity formation is shaped not only by individual dispositions but by relational, organisational, and cultural conditions within schools.

However, early-career teachers are often discussed as a relatively uniform group, with limited attention given to how minoritised identities intersect with early-career status to intensify professional vulnerability. While some studies acknowledge that minority teachers may face additional pressures, there is limited focused analysis of how sexual and gender minority identities shape the identity work of ECTs, leaving the voices of queer early-career teachers largely absent from both teacher identity and retention literature.

2.3. Identity, Performativity, and Power

To understand how QECTs construct and navigate identity, it is necessary to engage with theoretical work on identity, performativity, and power. Rather than viewing identity as a stable or internal essence, contemporary perspectives emphasise its relational and performative nature, particularly within professional settings.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework conceptualises identity as something performed in interaction with others, with individuals managing impressions to align with social expectations and secure legitimacy. This is especially evident in schools, where professionalism is closely tied to normative assumptions about gender, sexuality, and authority. Butler's (1990) theory of performativity foregrounds the ways in which identities, particularly gendered identities, are constituted through repeated acts that both reproduce and, at times, disrupt dominant norms. From this perspective, identity is not simply expressed but continuously produced under conditions of constraint.

Power is central to these processes. Drawing on Foucauldian understandings, power is viewed not only as repressive but as productive, shaping what is intelligible, acceptable, and possible within particular institutional contexts (Foucault 1978). In schools, heteronormative and cisnormative power relations regulate which identities are rendered legitimate and professional. For queer teachers, and particularly those early in their careers, such regulation can intensify self-surveillance and encourage strategic conformity as a means of professional survival. Taken together, these perspectives offer a conceptual lens for understanding QECT identity as situated, negotiated, and contingent, shaped through the ongoing interplay of individual agency and structural constraint.

2.4. Queer Early-Career Teachers at the Intersection

Existing literature demonstrates that both queer teachers and early-career teachers occupy vulnerable positions within school power structures. However, these bodies of work have largely developed in parallel. Research on queer teachers has tended to focus on established professionals, further highlighting the importance of role and positionality in LGBTQ+ teacher research. At the same time, studies of early-career teachers rarely attend to sexual or gender identity as a meaningful dimension of experience. The intersection of queerness and early-career status therefore represents a critical, yet under-examined, site of professional vulnerability. By foregrounding the narratives of queer early-career teachers, the study responds to this absence and contributes to debates on identity, power, and professional becoming. In doing so, it offers insight into how historical legacies, institutional cultures, and community belonging shape the identity formation and navigation of QECTs within contemporary UK schools.

3. Methods

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to explore how queer early-career teachers (ECTs) construct and navigate their intersecting personal and professional identities within UK schools. Narrative inquiry was selected for its emphasis on storytelling as a process of meaning-making and identity articulation, particularly for marginalised groups whose experiences are often silenced or simplified within dominant research paradigms (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The study was informed by post-structural and queer theoretical perspectives, foregrounding multiplicity, context, and participant voice.

Three participants were recruited via a public call shared on social media. Eligibility criteria required participants to: (1) identify as queer (non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender), (2) be in their second to fifth year of full-time teaching, and (3) work in a UK Early Years, Primary, or Secondary setting. Maximum variation purposive sampling

was used to ensure diversity in gender identity, sexuality, and school phase. All participants self-identified as white, non-disabled, and aged between 25 and 34. While this reflects a limitation in demographic diversity, variation in school context and queer identity was prioritised. The sample size reflects the depth-oriented nature of narrative inquiry, which prioritises rich, contextualised accounts over breadth or generalisability (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The aim of the study was not to produce representative claims, but to explore the complexity of identity formation and navigation in detail. Each participant contributed both a written narrative and an in-depth interview, generating a substantial dataset that enabled nuanced, multi-layered analysis. As such, the findings are presented as interpretive insights rather than generalisable conclusions, offering conceptual rather than statistical transferability.

Data were collected through a two-stage process consisting of written biographical narratives followed by semi-structured interviews. Participants were invited to produce a personal narrative reflecting on their identity formation and teaching experiences using open-ended prompts aligned with the research questions. These narratives informed the structure of subsequent one-to-one interviews, which were conducted online and lasted between 45 and 70 min. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis involved reflexive thematic analysis conducted across the combined datasets within a crystallisation framework (Ellingson 2009). This approach recognises the coexistence of multiple, partial, and situated truths, aligning with the study's narrative inquiry design. Analysis was iterative and inductive, beginning with a close reading of participants' written narratives and interview transcripts to identify patterns, tensions, and recurring points of significance. Initial codes were generated from the data and subsequently refined through ongoing engagement with both the empirical material and the study's theoretical framework. While themes were developed across cases, care was taken to retain the integrity of individual narratives. The analysis therefore moves between narrative coherence and cross-case thematic interpretation, allowing for both shared experiences and points of divergence to be explored. The three themes presented in the findings—preventative barriers, community, and freedom—were developed through this iterative process, capturing both structural influences and individual experiences across the dataset.

Reflexivity was central to the analytical process, and it was crucial to remain attentive to how my positionality shaped interpretation, particularly in relation to recognising, privileging, or resonating with certain narratives. Rather than seeking objectivity, the analysis aimed for transparency and depth, foregrounding participant voice while acknowledging the interpretive nature of meaning-making. To support credibility, data were revisited multiple times throughout the analytical process, and emerging themes were checked against the full dataset to ensure they reflected the range and complexity of participants' accounts. Participants were also given the opportunity to engage in member checking by reviewing and amending their narratives and transcripts prior to analysis.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Sunderland's Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent and were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage. Given the sensitivity of discussing queer identity within professional contexts, particular care was taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were offered the opportunity to review and amend their written narratives and interview transcripts prior to inclusion.

4. Findings

Analysis of the biographical narratives and interview data revealed three interconnected themes shaping how queer early-career teachers (ECTs) construct and navigate their identities within UK schools: preventative barriers, the role of community, and the freedom

to exist as a queer teacher. These themes cut across participants' personal and professional experiences, highlighting both the constraints imposed by hetero/cisnormative school cultures and the strategies used to negotiate identity in the early stages of teaching.

The themes presented here were generated through reflexive thematic analysis of participants' written narratives and interview data. While informed by the study's theoretical framework, themes were developed inductively through iterative engagement with the data, allowing patterns of meaning to emerge across and within participants' accounts. The findings therefore reflect both shared experiences and points of divergence, rather than seeking uniformity across cases.

4.1. Preventative Barriers

Participants put forward a range of psychological and contextual barriers that they believed constrained their ability to express or integrate queer identity within school settings. These barriers were not typically experienced through overt or explicit discrimination, but through more subtle and anticipatory forms of regulation. Across the data, preventative barriers emerged as operating at multiple levels, including internalised expectations, institutional norms, and broader socio-historical influences. Although participants entered the profession long after the repeal of Section 28, its legacy remained present in their accounts, shaping perceptions of what was considered permissible within schools.

For Heather, these barriers were closely tied to uncertainty surrounding the legitimacy of her identity, shaped not only by heteronormative expectations but also by perceived norms within queer communities. Reflecting on her experience of coming to terms with her sexuality, she explained:

"I was sort of really scared that I didn't meet the cut-off... that I wasn't enough of a gay person to be able to claim that identity."

This highlights how identity negotiation is not only externally regulated, but also shaped by internalised expectations of authenticity and belonging. In Heather's case, the barrier was not simply whether she could be openly lesbian within a school context, but whether she was able to claim that identity at all. This sense of needing to justify or authenticate queerness extended into her professional life, where disclosure became a calculated and potentially risky act, rather than a personal choice.

These anticipatory dynamics were further reinforced by contextual experiences within school environments. Heather described an incident in which, after disclosing her engagement to a woman, she was told by a headteacher that a previous teacher had been dismissed for discussing homosexuality with students. Although not directed at her explicitly, this interaction produced a clear message regarding the perceived risks of queer visibility. Such experiences demonstrate how indirect forms of discrimination can function as preventative barriers, shaping behaviour through implication rather than direct prohibition. The result is a heightened awareness of risk, in which individuals are required to anticipate potential consequences and regulate themselves accordingly.

This process of self-regulation was consistently described across participants' accounts. Steve articulated this as an ongoing process of monitoring how his identity might be perceived by others:

"You're always kind of assessing other people's perceptions... thinking, how is this going to land?"

Here, identity navigation becomes an active and continuous process of appraisal, in which decisions about visibility are shaped by anticipated reactions rather than by immediate experiences. This reflects a form of internalised surveillance, where individuals regulate their own behaviour in response to perceived norms and expectations.

Performativity pressures were particularly pronounced for participants navigating gender identity. Steve described feeling compelled to conform to dominant expectations of masculinity in order to be recognised as legitimate within a professional role, while River spoke of the exhaustion associated with maintaining a gendered performance in school space:

“This impacted how I expressed myself, how I spoke, what I wore, and the kind of conversations I had with colleagues. It also impacted the conversations I had with children and young people.”

In this account, identity is not simply managed but actively reconfigured in response to institutional expectations. River describes “re-folding” their identity to align with what was understood to be acceptable within educational contexts, highlighting the extent to which professional norms can shape both the visible and relational aspects of self.

This process was not without consequence. River further reflected on the cumulative impact of sustained identity suppression, describing a point at which the tension between personal and professional identity became untenable:

“I thought genuinely I’m going to have to leave teaching because I can’t live the majority of my life pretending to be this idea of a teacher that I’m not. . . I thought I can’t be a teacher anymore there’s no space in education for people like me. . .”

This account illustrates how preventative barriers extend beyond momentary acts of self-censorship and can shape longer-term perceptions of belonging and professional sustainability. In this sense, barriers are not only restrictive but potentially exclusionary, influencing whether individuals feel able to remain within the profession.

Across participants’ narratives, preventative barriers were rarely linked to singular events. Instead, they were sustained through a combination of silence, ambiguity, and historically embedded norms within school cultures. The legacy of Section 28, although no longer in force, continued to shape participants’ perceptions of what was permissible, contributing to an environment in which queerness was understood as conditionally acceptable rather than fully legitimate. Taken together, these findings suggest that preventative barriers operate through a complex interplay of internalised expectations, institutional messaging, and socio-historical context. Rather than being imposed directly, they function through anticipation, shaping how queer early-career teachers understand risk, regulate visibility, and negotiate their professional identities.

4.2. Role of Community

In contrast to the preventative barriers described above, participants frequently identified community as a critical source of support, validation, and identity affirmation. Community was understood broadly, encompassing personal relationships, queer networks, and, in some cases, connections with colleagues and other educators. Across the data, these spaces functioned not only as sites of belonging but as environments in which identity could be expressed with reduced need for self-monitoring and negotiation.

For River, engagement with queer community played a particularly significant role in reshaping their perception of what was possible within education. Reflecting on their early experiences of isolation and lack of representation, they described a pivotal shift following connections with other queer teachers:

“I’ve connected with other queer teachers which has been really important for me to see that there is room in some educational spaces not all of them but in some for people like us.”

This highlights the importance of visibility and representation, not only as symbolic inclusion but as a material condition that informs professional imagination. Prior to these

connections, River described experiencing educational spaces as fundamentally incompatible with their identity, to the extent that they considered leaving the profession altogether. The presence of other queer educators disrupted this perception, enabling a re-evaluation of belonging and possibility. Similarly, Heather emphasised the role of community during her teacher training, where engagement with other queer trainees provided both validation and guidance. When navigating decisions around identity disclosure in school placements, she turned first to her peers:

“All of us [trainees] . . . wanted to be authentic. . . to answer those questions honestly.”

In this context, communities function as spaces for collective sense-making, where individuals can negotiate shared uncertainties and develop strategies for navigating professional expectations. The presence of a supportive peer network enabled Heather to move towards greater openness, suggesting that identity expression is not solely an individual decision but one shaped through relational dynamics.

Beyond peer support, participants also described how communities extended into their broader professional and personal lives, influencing how they navigated identity within school contexts. Steve explained that being authentic and honest with staff and students has allowed him to feel more comfortable in his identity:

“[Their positive responses] affirms that I’m not the only person that’s fighting for change which means you do feel more comfortable in your identity.”

He further reflected:

“People reaching out does affirm that. . . a majority of people do want to understand and help and make things better for other people like me.”

These accounts position community not simply as emotional support, but as a source of collective agency. The sense of shared purpose and recognition enabled participants to situate their experiences within a wider movement, reducing isolation and reinforcing legitimacy. Importantly, participants also described how communities outside of school shaped their capacity to navigate identity within it. Experiences of affirmation and belonging in external spaces appeared to strengthen participants’ confidence in making decisions about visibility and self-expression in professional contexts. In this sense, communities function as a resource that extends beyond their immediate context, informing how individuals engage with institutional environments that are often perceived as less supportive.

However, access to such communities was uneven, and support within school contexts was rarely described as systematic or embedded. While some participants identified supportive colleagues, these relationships were typically individual rather than indicative of wider institutional cultures. As a result, affirmation was often something that had to be actively sought rather than reliably provided. Participants also recognised that their own visibility and engagement with the community had implications beyond their individual experiences. Heather reflected on the responsibility she felt to be visible as a queer educator:

“I think you have a responsibility to be a visible queer person in the world. . . students have come to me with expressions of their own sexuality [and] that tells me they don’t have other safe spaces to do that because I’m not their teacher.”

Similarly, Steve described how visible markers of identity, such as pride symbols and open conversations, created moments of recognition for students:

“I have a pride flag hanging up in my classroom. . . I wear a rainbow lanyard and pronoun badges. . . one of the kids came up to me. . . I really feel like I’m being seen for the first time because I’ve never seen one of those in school before.”

These accounts illustrate how community is not only experienced but also enacted. Participants positioned themselves as part of a broader network of visibility and support, contributing to the creation of more inclusive environments for others.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the community operates as both a site of belonging and a mechanism of resistance. While preventative barriers constrain identity expression within school contexts, the community provides the relational conditions through which participants are able to affirm, sustain, and, at times, extend their identities into professional spaces. However, the reliance on informal and external networks also highlights the limitations of institutional provision, raising questions about the extent to which schools themselves facilitate or hinder meaningful belonging.

4.3. Freedom to Exist as a Queer Teacher

Across participants' narratives, moments of freedom to exist as a queer teacher were present, but these were neither stable nor absolute. Rather than being equated with full disclosure or complete authenticity, freedom was understood as the ability to make agentic decisions about self-presentation within specific contexts. As such, freedom emerged not as an endpoint, but as an ongoing and negotiated process shaped by relational, institutional, and personal factors.

For Steve, this involved releasing the pressure to meet others' expectations of what a transgender teacher should be:

"I think I've stopped trying to be what other people think I should be. . . that's where the freedom came from."

Freedom, here, is not framed as the absence of constraint, but as a reorientation of agency that involves relinquishing the need to conform to dominant expectations and instead prioritising forms of self-expression that feel internally coherent. However, this process did not occur in isolation, nor was it universally accessible across all contexts.

Participants consistently emphasised that freedom was situational and contingent. Decisions about whether, when, and how to express aspects of identity were shaped by school culture, perceived safety, and positionality within the institution. As discussed in the previous sections, preventative barriers, and access to the community both played a significant role in shaping these decisions. Freedom, therefore, cannot be understood independently of constraint, but rather as something that emerges in relation to it.

For River, the possibility of experiencing freedom was closely connected to earlier experiences of restriction and identity suppression. Having described "re-folding" their identity to align with perceived professional expectations, River's later reflections indicate a shift towards greater confidence and self-expression. In their written narrative, they note the realisation of:

"The immense power that teachers have to break the cycle of shame."

This highlights how freedom is not only experienced at an individual level but also understood in relation to others. For River, the ability to exist more openly as a queer teacher is tied to a broader sense of responsibility and potential impact, particularly in creating more inclusive environments for students.

Similarly, Heather's reflections illustrate how freedom can be connected to visibility and representation. In her written narrative, she states:

"If me, a typically feminine presenting woman, can be an obvious lesbian, I hope that it can help other women realise their identity sooner."

In this account, freedom is not solely about personal authenticity, but about the capacity to exist visibly in ways that challenge dominant assumptions and support others.

This suggests that freedom is relational, extending beyond the individual to influence wider social and professional dynamics.

However, it is important to recognise that these moments of freedom were often described as situational and fragile. Participants did not suggest that they could be fully themselves in all contexts, but rather that they had developed strategies for navigating when and how authenticity could be expressed. As such, authenticity was not conceptualised as an all-or-nothing state, but as a managed and context-dependent process.

Taken together, these themes illustrate that identity navigation for queer early-career teachers is shaped by the interplay of constraint, support, and agency. Preventative barriers highlight the regulatory conditions of school environments, while the community offers spaces of affirmation that enable participants to sustain a sense of self. The notion of freedom underscores that authenticity is not fully realised, but continually negotiated within these intersecting dynamics.

5. Discussion

Building on the theme of preventative barriers, the findings reinforce the understanding of identity as performative and context-dependent. They illustrate that identity formation for QECTs is neither linear nor solely individual but is shaped through ongoing negotiation within heteronormative and cisnormative institutional contexts. By foregrounding participant narratives, this study highlights how identity work during the early years of teaching is deeply relational, performative, and bound up with power. This aligns with Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management, in which individuals actively regulate how they are perceived by others within social contexts. In the case of QECTs, these performances are not simply interpersonal, but are shaped by institutional expectations of professionalism and legitimacy. Together, these findings extend existing research by conceptualising identity navigation in early-career teaching as a process of negotiated authenticity, shaped by the interplay of performativity, power, and relational belonging.

Across the findings, participants described schools as spaces in which queerness is conditionally tolerated rather than actively affirmed. Although inclusive policies exist, the everyday realities of school life continue to be shaped by unspoken norms that position cis-heterosexual identities as the default. This supports existing research that identifies a persistent gap between policy rhetoric and lived experience for queer teachers (Ferfolja and Hopkins 2013; Neary 2013; Rudoe 2018), while extending it by demonstrating how this gap is intensified during the early stages of a teaching career.

5.1. Identity, Performativity, and Professional Legitimacy

The findings reinforce the understanding of identity as performative and context-dependent, aligning with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical conception of self and Butler's (1990) theory of performativity. Participants' accounts illustrate how professional identity is produced through repeated acts that align with dominant expectations of what a teacher should look like, sound like, and represent. For QECTs, these performances were not neutral but strategic, shaped by a need to secure legitimacy within environments where deviation from the norm was perceived as risky.

Participants described engaging in heightened self-surveillance, particularly in relation to disclosure, appearance, and language. This echoes Goffman's notion of impression management, whereby individuals seek to control how they are perceived by others in order to maintain a viable social identity. However, unlike more established teachers, ECTs possess limited institutional capital, making the stakes of such performances particularly high. The early-career phase therefore emerges as a period in which performativity is not only expected but also intensified.

For gender-diverse participants, performativity was especially salient. Their narratives highlight how gender expression was frequently shaped by anticipated perceptions rather than personal comfort, reinforcing Butler's (1990) argument that gender is constituted through repeated acts under regulatory norms. These findings suggest that hetero/cisnormative school cultures do not merely constrain queer identity but actively produce particular forms of professional subjectivity.

5.2. Power, Precarity, and the Early-Career Position

Extending the preventative barriers identified in the findings, power operated through silence, ambiguity, and the anticipation of judgement within participants' accounts. Drawing on Foucauldian understandings of power as diffuse and productive (Foucault 1978), the findings illustrate how school cultures regulate what is intelligible and acceptable without the need for explicit enforcement. Participants' decisions to self-censor or manage visibility were shaped by an awareness of being observed, evaluated, and positioned within institutional hierarchies. As Foucault (1978, p. 95) argues, "where there is power, there is resistance," highlighting the relational and productive nature of power within these contexts.

Early-career status intensified these dynamics. Participants' narratives suggest that being new to the profession amplified feelings of vulnerability and reduced perceived agency. This aligns with research positioning early-career teaching as a period of professional precarity, characterised by heightened exposure to surveillance and evaluation (Hong et al. 2017; Perryman and Calvert 2020). For QECTs, this professional vulnerability intersected with sexual and gender minority status, compounding the risks associated with authenticity.

Importantly, participants did not describe power as inescapable. Rather, they demonstrated moments of resistance, agency, and re-negotiation, particularly through relationships and community. This supports Foucauldian assertions that where there is power, there is also resistance, while highlighting the uneven conditions under which such resistance becomes possible.

5.3. Community, Belonging, and Queer Freedom

Reflecting the theme of community, across the data, participants highlighted the importance of relational networks in shaping their sense of belonging and identity, and acting as a central counterweight to the preventative barriers experienced in school contexts. Participants consistently described queer community as enabling reflection, validation, and a sense of belonging that was often absent within professional spaces. These findings align with existing literature emphasising the importance of relational support for teacher identity development and resilience (Day and Gu 2010), while extending it by foregrounding queer-specific forms of community.

This directly connects to the theme of freedom, where participants' sense of agency was shaped not in isolation, but through the presence of affirming relationships and communities. Rather than framing authenticity as full disclosure or visibility, participants defined freedom as the ability to make agentic choices about self-presentation. This reframing challenges simplistic narratives of "being out" as the endpoint of queer identity work and instead positions authenticity as negotiated, situational, and ongoing.

This notion of freedom resonates with queer theoretical perspectives that reject fixed or linear models of identity. Participants' accounts suggest that freedom is not located outside of structure but is enacted within constraint, through selective resistance and relational safety. However, the fragility of this freedom underscores the limitations of relying on individual or informal sources of support in the absence of systemic change.

5.4. Implications for Early-Career Teachers and Sustainability

Collectively, the themes of preventative barriers, community, and negotiated freedom highlight the complex and relational nature of identity navigation for queer early-career teachers. Although teacher retention was not a primary focus of this study, the findings raise important questions about the relationship between identity, belonging, and professional sustainability. Participants' accounts suggest that sustained identity dissonance, coupled with limited institutional support, may contribute to feelings of alienation during the early years of teaching. This aligns with research linking identity coherence, agency, and resilience to retention (Day 2018; Ruohotie-Lyhty 2018).

By foregrounding QECT experiences, this study highlights the need for more intersectional approaches to understanding early-career attrition. Rather than locating responsibility solely within individual resilience, the findings point to the role of school cultures and leadership in shaping conditions of belonging. Inclusive policy, without corresponding cultural and relational change, appears insufficient in addressing the everyday realities faced by QECTs.

6. Conclusions

This study explored how queer early-career teachers (QECTs) construct and navigate their intersecting personal and professional identities within UK schools. Drawing on narrative inquiry and queer theoretical perspectives, the findings demonstrate that identity formation for QECTs is a relational and ongoing process shaped by heteronormative and cisnormative school cultures, early-career precarity, and the availability of affirming communities. By centring participant voice, this article contributes empirical insight into a group that has remained largely absent from existing research.

The findings show that, despite legislative protections and inclusive policy rhetoric, schools continue to function as spaces in which queerness is conditionally tolerated rather than actively affirmed. For QECTs, the early-career phase intensified the pressures associated with identity navigation, amplifying self-surveillance, performativity, and strategic silence. Identity was not experienced as something that could be fully expressed or resolved but as something continually negotiated in relation to perceived risk and professional legitimacy. This extends existing research on queer teachers by foregrounding early-career status as a critical factor shaping identity work.

At the same time, the study highlights the importance of community in enabling a freedom to exist as queer teachers within and beyond school contexts. Rather than equating authenticity with full disclosure or visibility, participants framed freedom as the capacity to make agentic choices about self-presentation. This challenges linear narratives of "coming out" and instead positions queer authenticity as situational, relational, and contingent. However, the fragility of this freedom underscores the limitations of relying on informal or individual sources of support in the absence of wider cultural change within schools.

While teacher retention was not the primary focus of the study, the findings raise important questions about the relationship between identity, belonging, and professional sustainability during the early years of teaching. Participants' narratives suggest that prolonged identity dissonance and conditional belonging may contribute to feelings of alienation, pointing to the need for more intersectional approaches to understanding early-career attrition. Inclusive policy alone appears insufficient without corresponding attention to school cultures and leadership practices that shape everyday experiences of belonging.

This study is limited by its small sample size and lack of demographic diversity, particularly in relation to race and disability. However, narrative inquiry prioritises depth and meaning over representativeness, and the findings should be understood as offering insight into particular lived experiences rather than universal claims. Future research

would benefit from exploring QECT identity across more diverse contexts and through longitudinal designs.

By foregrounding the narratives of queer early-career teachers, this study demonstrates how professional identity is shaped at the intersection of power, precarity, and belonging, underscoring the need to understand early-career teaching not only as a technical process but as a deeply social and political one.

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