



This is a peer-reviewed, final published version of the following unpublished document and is licensed under All Rights Reserved license:

**Bullingham, Rachael ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1940-3008>, Bingle, B. and Shire, J. (2019) An Overview of the Experiences of Openly Gay and Lesbian Teachers in a Period of Declining Homophobia: Focus on Climate, Activism and Teaching Environment. In: Gender and Education Conference, 25-27/06/2019, Portsmouth. (Unpublished)**

Official URL: <http://www2.port.ac.uk/school-of-education-and-childhood-studies/research/2019-gender--education-conference/>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/8097>

#### **Disclaimer**

The University of Gloucestershire has obtained warranties from all depositors as to their title in the material deposited and as to their right to deposit such material.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation or warranties of commercial utility, title, or fitness for a particular purpose or any other warranty, express or implied in respect of any material deposited.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation that the use of the materials will not infringe any patent, copyright, trademark or other property or proprietary rights.

The University of Gloucestershire accepts no liability for any infringement of intellectual property rights in any material deposited but will remove such material from public view pending investigation in the event of an allegation of any such infringement.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR TEXT.



# “I am what I am...”

Examining the experiences of  
openly gay and lesbian  
teachers in a period of declining  
homophobia

Dr. Rachael Bullingham, University of Worcester

Dr. Branwen Bingle, University of Greenwich

Jo Shire, Independent Researchers

# Previous Research

- Countries
  - Australia (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013)
  - England (Gray, 2013) - data from 2008
  - Ireland (Neary, 2012; Fahie, 2016)
  - America (Connell, 2015)
- Subject specific
  - Physical Education teachers (Sykes, 2009; Edwards et al., 2014)
  - Music teachers (Palkki, 2015).
- Edwards et al., (2014) state, 'One such knowledge gap is in understanding the lived experiences of lesbian and gay teachers working in schools following the abolition of Section 28' (p. 3).

# Cultural Change



# Participant Overview

	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Years teaching	Types of school	Subject Area	Leadership position
Participant 1	30	Male	White British	3 years	Secondary, Private	P.E	No
Participant 2	31	Female	White British	2 years	Primary School	Primary	No.
Participant 3	34	Male	White British	14 years	Multi-academy, secondary, comprehensive	English	Yes – SLT (Dept)
Participant 4	24	Male	White British	3 years	Primary school	Primary	No.
Participant 5	39	Male	White European	15 years	Secondary, independent	English	Yes – Head of 6th
Participant 6	30	Female	White British	8 years	Secondary, faith school	P.E	Yes - pastoral
Participant 7	26	Female	White British	4 years	Secondary, comprehensive, academy	P.E, DT	Yes – pastoral
Participant 8	44	Female	White British	16 years	Secondary	P.E	Yes – pastoral
Participant 9	23	Female	Traveller British	2 years	Primary, faith school	Primary	No
Participant 10	46	Female	White British	22 years	Primary, faith school	Primary	No
Participant 11	54	Female	White British	15 years*	Secondary/FE	Business	No
Participant 12	46	Female	White British	21 years*	Secondary	P.E.	Yes – SLT (Asst)



# Climates

Hostile

- Section 28
- Homophobic

Conditionally  
tolerant

- Glass closet
- Don't ask, don't tell
- Edwards et al. 2014  
- teachers

Open and  
inclusive

- McCormack  
2011 – students



# Climates - Hostile

Participant 1: “It was probably more that it had come to a head because just some of the language that was being used in and around the office was a little bit uncomfortable”

# Climates – Conditionally Tolerant

Participant 5: “I didn't make a point of coming out to them it's just that they became aware that that's what it was and it wasn't a secret so, erm, and that's pretty much how it went for 9 years of my first post where it was something that colleagues knew about but the pupils did not erm because of the kind of, the **unspoken expectation I felt upon me not to disclose that**”

Participant 8: “I think the students are aware but **they don't necessarily talk about it** like they would talk about any other members of staff's private life“



# Climates – Conditionally Tolerant Faith Schools

Participant 6: “something we've been a **bit slack** in this school and again it's because it being a catholic school is that we don't have any LGBT support groups or anything like that, which you know in terms of my personal values it's disappointing because I know a lot of people in the school **would benefit from that kind of support and openness**”

Participant 9: “I think...I'm P.S.H.E. lead as well now I think it was a big consideration when I was doing all that and I remember I've had TA's who...we did a lesson last year and we were talking about different types of families and it was never going to be "I'm going to tell you all about gay families" it was just "we're going to have a conversation about different types of families and you might have a mum and a dad, and you might have one mum, you might have a dad, you might have 2 dads, 2 mums, and the **TA made a huge thing about the fact that we'd talked about it and it was disgusting** and why are we talking about it in primary school, they don't need to know that yet but I still taught it this year and I'm not guna not teach it and I'm quite head strong about the fact that I'm not going to not do it”

Participant 10: “I haven't come out to the pupils in this tiny little school because it's a Christian school and it's very small and **I have a very strong feeling that my head teacher would really rather I didn't and keep it a little bit on the quiet.** And she is very religious, she's a friend but she's very religious and I think that she fears that parents will withdraw their children from our school”

# Climates- Changing Climate

Participant 1: “I think just slightly, it’s just more awareness of it”

Participant 4: “They're supportive for every colleague and actually I think I realise how much less of an issue it is now”

Participant 5: “I made the decision that I was going to be more out and more open”

# Climates- Open and Inclusive

Participant 2: “it was no issue and hasn't been, we're still very good friends and colleagues it's all been very positive”

Participant 3: ” I think we do have a disproportionate amount of LGBT identifying staff at our school possibly due to my influence....it's just completely normal within the culture at our school”

Participant 7: “when I was in my training I was very closed because I was in a bit of an unknown environment whereas I feel safe and supported here and at my school at the moment”

Participant 11: “I think the educational environment, particularly state education is much more pc because you're setting an example to kids and therefore I think it is a easier environment to be openly gay in I would think there are other walks of life where it might take a bit longer for you to feel comfortable or for one to feel comfortable”

# Activism - Personal

Participant 2: “I'd been on a **Stonewall conference whilst I was at uni** and I bought back all of these amazing resources and went and shared it with **my school that I was training** at and they just turned around and went "this is a church school, we don't have that here"

Participant 5: “I had recently before my PGCE, spent 2 years training for the catholic priesthood and I decided that that was not a healthy way for me to go and that I did not want to be on my own and I also realised that **I wasn't prepared to hide my sexuality or feel that I should be made to hide it so I made a conscious decision** when I started my first teaching job that it was something that as people got to know me they would come to know about”

# Activism – Professional

Participant 5: So when we had our inspection...“we don't know very much about this, help” and I said “yes, I'd be absolutely delighted to put something together for you”...so having been given that green light I was then dedicated as the school's LGBT lead and I've been working very closely with Stonewall and since to put LGBT awareness and inclusion very much on the radar of school and to integrate it into our policies and practice”

Participant 3: “I know some teachers...they've even done assemblies and things and its a little bit narcissistic, if that's not too cruel really... there is a certain degree of narcissism I suppose but it makes it more about kind of like gay people are normal, visible...I do so many assemblies and things like that I'm trying to think of a year group that don't know I'm gay...There is still a little bit of self consciousness it's almost like I want... its not that narcissistic, I think the self-consciousness is born of not feeling afraid but actually feeling quite proud and actually wanting people to know because I say it's not all about the gayness but it's still a fundamental part of my identity and it's certainly not something I try to hide and maybe I do try to make it a bit more obvious occasionally”

# Activism – ‘Quiet Riot’

Participant 1: “It was actually via our WhatsApp group...I don't know whether there were rumours, it was quite confusing of how it all came about really but I just basically that's how I did it on that group because there were a few things happening at that time so the easiest way to do it was too for me was just put it on the group one evening and **let everyone digest it for the next day**”

Participant 2: “I know that one senior management, who is actually my line manager, is very religious **so it was more of a gentler conversation** with her rather than having a laugh and you know 'my god she's ridiculously fit' type conversation...She was probably the one person that I felt that that conversation had to be had I suppose”



# Support - Staff

Participant 1: “**Yes absolutely**. The heads of year that have asked me to do assemblies have been fully behind it. We made it our...we had an anti-bullying week back in November or December where it was announced by the head that the Focus of that anti-bullying week was homophobic bullying and **they couldn't be more supportive**”

Participant 3: “So the person I teach with most, we have a couple of shared groups, he's gay as well and we have a really **strong bond**”

Participant 4: ”I think it really showed me that that support is out there because...originally when it happened I kind of just brushed it off...But actually as soon as I mentioned it it was dealt with straight away and actually I think it even took them by surprise how seriously it was dealt with”

Participant 5: “the **vast majority of my colleagues** too have been absolutely superb”

# Support - Headteachers

Participant 2: “we definitely have a good relationship but I know he'd have my back, definitely”

Participant 6: “my head teacher's always supportive”

Participant 7: “If a parent complains or a kid you know complains about you know me or my sexuality then I think I'd be backed, well I know I'd be backed”

Participant 9: “she said "well I don't want you ever to feel like that as a member of staff ever, no parent should say that to you and actually you were within your rights to snap back and you know what we would have supported you”

Participant 11: I wasn't at all worried about that because I knew that the, that the way the atmosphere was in the staff room I knew it wouldn't be an issue say if a parent rang up to complain I'd get support from the senior management team”

# Unsupported

Participant 10: “**No, really unresponsive**. Really negative, Really really negative. Really self-protective and also when I got married, a straight colleague had got married shortly before and her marriage was announced in the newsletter and mine wasn't, and I went, and I said 'that's absolutely not okay' and she cried and said she was really sorry and she put it in the next week, but I don't believe her for a second that she forgot. I think she chickened out. She did put it in, yeah she flipping well did put it in because there was no way that was not going in. I was livid. I was really upset. **No I don't feel very supported actually**”

# Impact on Teaching - Confidence

Participant 7: “I think the kids are more open and confident to talk about and know they can speak to me. I mean I'm quite an open person about anything really, especially, well anything, yeah, they can talk to me about anything, they know they can.”

Participant 8: “However I do feel that also that the ability to be confident to come out in front of kids or to talk to other members of staff gives them the ability to have confidence if they have those sorts of feelings and they see you probably being a little bit more as you say of a trailblazer in terms of saying, you know 'it's alright, I'm happy with myself’”

# Impact on Teaching – Celebrating Difference

Participant 9: “As a teacher I’m very open we talk about anything and there's no question you can't ask in my classroom and I'll always answer”

Participant 10: “I’m very aware of difference in my children, I think that makes me a better teacher.”

Participant 4: “I always saw myself as different at school if anything I am more aware and more supportive to children who might have those differences or might not quite be fitting in with the other children, so if anything it makes me more aware.”

# Impact on Pupils – Relationships

Participant 1: “If anything they’re probably a **little bit more engaged and actually talkative** and they’ve just been very positive with it all.”

Participant 6: “Perhaps I’ve **built better relationships** with some because they know, you know because they don't have a support group you know. Certain kids come to extra-curricular clubs because you know they **feel a connection** with me simply because, you know, maybe they're going through their own identity issues...especially girls who maybe are questioning their own sexuality, **maybe tend to build a stronger relationship with me**”

Participant 3: “I think I'm a **much better teacher** than I ever have been before...I think that **openness** does help to build trust.. I am a lot warmer in my teaching because **I can be completely 100% honest**”

Participant 7: “Yeah, I think **when I was at school I was crying out for somebody to speak to** and there was an openly gay...well not openly gay, there was a teacher that I would associate as being a lesbian to be honest...**So now as a teacher I want to kind of rectify that** and allow kids that are feeling confused or a little bit unsure or want to have a chat about it to actually have that person”



# General Conclusion

## Positives

- Teachers are coming out
- Pupils are coming out
- Positively affecting teaching
- From hostile to conditionally tolerant/open and inclusive

## Negatives

- Climate – hostile, conditionally tolerant, open and inclusive
- Reverse relative deprivation
- Fear of reprisal - subject specific
- Public vs private on going debate

- Anderson, E., Magrath, R. & Bullingham, R. (2016) *Out in Sport*. London: Routledge.
- Connell, C. 2014, *School's Out*, University of California Press.
- Edwards, L.L., Brown, D.H.K. & Smith, L. 2016, "'We are getting there slowly': lesbian teacher experiences in the post-Section 28 environment", *Sport, Education and Society*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 299-318.
- Gray, E. M. (2013). Coming out as a lesbian, gay or bisexual teacher: negotiating private and professional worlds. *Sex Education*, 13(6), 702–714. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2013.807789>
- Griffin, P. (1998). *Strong women, deep closets*. Leeds: Human Kinetics.
- Fahie, D. (2016). 'Spectacularly exposed and vulnerable - how Irish equality legislation subverted the personal and professional security of lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers. *Sexualities*, 19(4), 393–411. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460715604331>
- Ferfolja, T., & Hopkins, L. (2013). The complexities of workplace experience for lesbian and gay teachers. *Critical Studies in Education*, 54(3), 311–324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2013.794743>
- McCormack, M. 2011, "The declining significance of homophobia for male students in three sixth forms in the south of England", *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 337-353.
- Neary, A. (2013). Lesbian and gay teachers' experiences of "coming out" in Irish schools. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 34(4), 583–602. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2012.72228>
- McCormack, M. 2011, "Mapping the Terrain of Homosexually-Themed Language", *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 58, no. 5, pp. 664-679.
- Palkki, J. (2015). "Negotiating the closet door" : The lived experiences of two gay music teachers. *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 26(2015), 1–36.
- Stonewall. 2014. "The Teachers Report 2014." Stonewall. Accessed July 2017. <http://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/teachersreport2014.pdf>.
- Stonewall. 2017. "The School Report 2017." Stonewall. Accessed July 2017. [http://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/the\\_school\\_report\\_2017.pdf](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/the_school_report_2017.pdf)
- Sykes, H. (1996). Constr ( i )( u ) cting Lesbian Identities in Physical Education : Feminist and Poststructural Approaches to Researching Sexuality. *Quest*, 48(i), 459–469.
- [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/721704/LGBT-survey-research-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/721704/LGBT-survey-research-report.pdf)