


From the margins to the mainstream: LGBTQ+ professionals' lived experiences in the education workplace

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Brown, A. (2024). From the margins to the mainstream: LGBTQ+ professionals' lived experiences in the education workplace. *African Journal of Career Development*, 6(2), a156. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajcd.v6i2.156>

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In recent years, the dialogue surrounding inclusivity within South African educational environments has gained significant traction, particularly in relation to the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ+) educators and students. The necessity for safe, enabling, and inclusive workplace environments in schools and institutions of higher learning is increasingly recognised as vital not only for the well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals but also for the overall health of educational institutions. As all employees in educational settings play a crucial role in fostering inclusive learning environments, it is imperative that they themselves are supported and protected within their professional contexts (Brown, 2024).

Research indicates that educators advocating for gender and sexuality diversity often face systemic challenges that manifest in various forms of backlash and discrimination, impacting their professional identities and job satisfaction. Baker and Lucas (2017) highlight that LGBTQ+ educators and support staff in educational settings frequently encounter a hostile climate characterised by microaggressions and overt discrimination, leading to significant mental health challenges and career instability. This aligns with Maji et al. (2024), who emphasise the pervasive nature of workplace discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, observing that such experiences contribute to heightened stress and diminished job satisfaction, ultimately affecting their effectiveness in the classroom. The systemic barriers to LGBTQ+ inclusivity in educational settings are often rooted in broader societal norms that perpetuate heteronormativity and cisnormativity. White et al. (2018) discuss how these norms create a culture of silence around LGBTQ+ identities within educational institutions, resulting in a lack of policy frameworks that support queer educators. This silence not only undermines the well-being of LGBTQ+ staff but also deprives students of role models who can affirm their identities and foster an inclusive learning environment. There is a pressing need for institutional policies that affirm the rights of LGBTQ+ employees and students in educational settings, facilitating a safer and more supportive workplace (Brown, 2024).

Moreover, studies show that employees who identify as LGBTQ+ often navigate complex identity management strategies to cope with the challenges of their work environments. For instance, research by Cui (2022) reveals that many LGBTQ+ educators feel compelled to conceal their identities to avoid potential backlash, which not only affects their personal well-being but also hinders their ability to authentically engage with students on issues of diversity and inclusion. This phenomenon underscores the urgent need for educational institutions to implement robust support systems, including mentorship programmes and professional development opportunities that specifically address the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ educators (Lee, 2023).

The implications of fostering inclusive workplaces extend beyond individual well-being; they are integral to creating a transformative educational experience for all students. Educators and administrative staff in educational settings who feel cared for in their identities are more likely to engage in teaching practices and support that promote equity and inclusion. Research conducted by Fantus and Newman (2021) indicates that inclusive educational environments not only benefit LGBTQ+ employees in education settings but also enhance the learning experiences of all students by fostering a climate of respect and understanding. Thus, the call for inclusive policies, training programmes, and supportive networks is not merely a matter of equity but is essential for the holistic development of educational communities.

Note: Special Collection: Care and Support for Queering the Role of Educators in the Workplace.

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Creating sustainable change through inclusive practices

Educational institutions must actively work to dismantle the heteronormative frameworks that marginalise LGBTQ+ staff. This requires comprehensive inclusion strategies, including anti-discriminatory policies, safe reporting mechanisms, and continuous dialogue on gender and sexual diversity (Mizzi, 2022). Furthermore, it is crucial for educational leaders to engage with and amplify the voices of LGBTQ+ staff, fostering a culture where difference is not merely tolerated but celebrated as a source of strength. The integration of LGBTQ+ inclusion within educational workplaces aligns with broader efforts to enhance equity and well-being across sectors. Thus, the well-being of educators and other staff is intrinsically linked to the creation of educational spaces that affirm all identities.

This special issue brings together a collection of thought-provoking articles that explore diverse perspectives on queering educational workplaces. It addresses the critical gaps in the existing literature and institutional practices regarding the support and inclusion of LGBTQ+ educators and support staff. The overarching theme emphasises the importance of creating inclusive, supportive spaces where personal identities are affirmed, professional development is nurtured, and systemic barriers are critically examined. By highlighting the experiences of queer, gender-diverse, and sexuality-diverse educators and support staff, I seek to amplify their voices and advocate for necessary reforms in educational policy and practice. As educational institutions endeavour to create environments that are safe and inclusive for all, it is vital to recognise and address the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ employees. This special issue aims not only to critique the existing barriers but also to celebrate successful initiatives that promote queer inclusion within educational settings. By fostering a collective discourse on care and support for LGBTQ+ educators and support staff, we hope to contribute to a more equitable and affirming educational landscape where all individuals can thrive.

In her study, J. Rossouw (2024) examines the tensions Life Orientation educators experience when balancing personal religious beliefs with their professional responsibility to teach inclusive sexuality education, revealing how deeply personal values can shape pedagogical practices.

E.R. Awarab and A. Brown's (2024) article investigates the complexities Namibian Life Skills teachers face while navigating sexuality education amid cultural and legal ambiguities. This work underscores the intersectional challenges of policy implementation in conservative contexts.

B.M. Diale's (2024) case study offers a nuanced look into the dual career and gender transition of a transgender educator, addressing the need for comprehensive workplace support policies tailored to marginalised identities.

Similarly, L.M. Ubisi's (2024) article shifts focus to hostel carers in residential schools for the visually impaired, exploring the role of non-traditional educators in providing comprehensive sexuality education and highlighting gaps in support structures for this essential group.

O. Kagola (2024) presents the case of a same-sex desiring male teacher working in a traditionally feminised Foundation Phase, offering insights into positive inclusive practices that foster belonging. This article challenges conventional gender norms and reinforces the value of diversity in early childhood education settings.

A. Brown's (2024) autoethnography reflects on the use of self-disclosure as a pedagogical tool, illustrating how LGBTQ+ educators can disrupt heteronormative assumptions to create more inclusive classrooms, despite the risks involved.

S.N. Maseko's (2024) article delves into the experiences of queer educators in high school environments, focusing on the delicate balance between advocacy and assimilation. It provides critical recommendations for improving support systems to ensure these educators thrive while navigating complex professional spaces.

R. Venketsamy, Z. Hu, and N. Naicker (2024) examine the experiences of queer Foundation Phase teachers, uncovering how discrimination impacts well-being and job performance, while advocating for improved institutional practices to support LGBTQ+ educators.

Altogether, these articles offer a comprehensive exploration of the intersection of personal identity, professional responsibility, and institutional dynamics in education. They provide valuable insights into the importance of fostering care, support, and diversity in educational workplaces, advancing the discourse on queering educational environments for both educators and students alike.

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