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Complexity Amidst Diversity: Exploring the Lives of LGBTQ International Educators

La complexité au sein de la diversité : une exploration de la vie des éducateurs LGBTQ internationaux

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Abstract

This paper analyzes findings from research with 23 lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) international educators and their experiences working in non-Western countries. This study documents the participants' struggles, challenges, and triumphs of teaching overseas. In-depth interviews, as the data collection method, focus on changes made to thrive in the new country context and barriers to job success. The data reveals four key themes: (1) shifting identities in the new location; (2) seeking to belong; (3) strong work ethic as personal security; and (4) LGBTQ initiatives and student engagement. The authors introduce the notion of "belongingscapes" to suggest that while LGBTQ international educators faced a series of hetero/cisnormative borders, their sense of belonging to the workplace and to the community fluctuated. Recommendations for international educational administrators conclude the paper.

Résumé

Cet article analyse les résultats d'une recherche effectuée auprès de 23 éducatrices et d'éducateurs internationaux lesbiennes, gais, bisexuels, trans et queer (LGBTQ) pour en savoir plus sur leur expérience de travail dans des pays non-occidentaux. Cette étude documente les difficultés, les défis et les victoires de l'enseignement à l'étranger. Des entrevues de fond, comme méthode de recueil de données, se concentrent sur les changements apportés pour s'épanouir dans le contexte du nouveau pays et les obstacles au succès professionnel rencontrés. Les données révèlent quatre thèmes clés : (1) le déplacement de l'identité dans le nouveau pays; (2) la recherche de l'appartenance; (3) la sécurité personnelle au moyen d'une solide éthique de travail; et (4) les initiatives LGBTQ et l'engagement des étudiants. Les auteurs introduisent la notion de « paysage d'appartenance » pour suggérer que, alors que les éducateurs internationaux LGBTQ ont fait face à des frontières hétéro/cisnormatives, leur sentiment d'appartenance au lieu de travail et à la communauté fluctuaient. L'article se conclue par une série de recommandations à l'intention des administrateurs universitaires internationaux.

Keywords: transnational sexualities, international schools, LGBTQ educators, borderscapes
Mots clés : sexualités transnationales, écoles internationales, éducateurs LGBTQ, paysages frontières

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Introduction

Teaching has become a globalized profession and Western educators now have a myriad of opportunities to teach in non-Western countries. Western educators generally originate from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Western Europe, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand. Non-Western countries are often situated within Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central and South America. Known hereafter as “international educators,” these teachers work in language schools, international schools, or offshore campuses or programs of Western universities. These educational organizations attract mostly wealthy students by employing international teachers and engaging a Western curriculum to legitimize students’ academic performance¹. A Western credential, which can be a secondary school diploma from an international school, bolsters chances for students to access higher education or employment markets in the West. International educators who work for these organizations choose to leave their home countries for a multitude of reasons, including professional gain, cross-cultural experiences (Reid et al., 2014), better work and life conditions (Lin et al., 2008), debt repayment (Rey et al., 2020), or as a spousal hire to an expatriate partner (Hayden & Thompson, 2011). Some teachers maintain a global career for a large amount of their professional lives, whereas some return to their home country after a short period overseas that could reflect, for example, a single year contract.

Upon arrival in a destination country, international educators can experience several issues. They can experience personal challenges, which include low self-esteem, loneliness, and low self-confidence (Boshier & Huang, 2007). There can also be social challenges, which may include lack of social acceptance and support by colleagues and struggles in language ability (Coulter & Abney, 2009), and professional challenges, such as uncertain job expectations and stability (Arber & Pitt, 2017). Such challenges can result in absenteeism, isolation, stress, de-skilling, demotivation, increased vulnerability to workplace abuse and toxic work conditions, and early job departure (Duckworth et al., 2005; Hayden & Thompson, 2011; Reid et al., 2014). Another challenge is that international educators may struggle to obtain a sense of belonging in their schools as a result of living in countries where there is social marginalization or a denial of human rights. We focus this paper on international teachers who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) to illustrate this point.

Working as LGBTQ international educators is not a recent phenomenon. For example, New Zealander Rewi Alley, who identified as a gay man, worked as an educator in China from 1927 and throughout his entire life (Alley, 2008). Maud Russell was a lesbian American who also worked in China as an educator and activist in the women’s movement intermittently from 1917 to 1978 (Mungello, 2012). Robert Hill (2013), who is an American gay male educator, shared his experience with homophobia in Jamaica and encouraged educators to build strategic alliances and partnerships along sexual orientation and gender identity lines. These examples evidence some long-standing interest from LGBTQ international educators to work in non-Western countries.

The business priorities of international schools present an interesting complexity for LGBTQ international educators. On the one hand, in light of negative physical and emotional impacts of keeping sexual orientation and gender identity a “secret,” LGBTQ international educators should have the right to express *all* aspects of their identities in whatever contexts and take full advantage of employment opportunities overseas to the same degree as heterosexual and cisgender (non-transgender) counterparts. On the other hand, questions of sexual orientation or gender identity are highly political and the consequences of introducing articulations of these identities around the world, especially from a Western perspective, can be dangerous and contentious (Hill, 2013). The

¹ We acknowledge the problematic neoliberal underpinnings of these international education systems, though it is beyond the scope of this paper to address this issue. This overarching influence will be taken up specifically in subsequent analyses of our data.

issue is made more complex by the fact that “LGBTQ” is not a homogenized identity group. There are different social expectations towards, and negotiation tactics specific to, each subset identity; these tactics are also influenced by personal agency and other intersecting elements of identity such as racialized and socioeconomic positions. Duke (2007) suggested that LGBTQ educators are among the most minoritized within the LGBTQ community due to working in heteronormative schools that view their sexuality and gender difference as “immoral.” If we accept Duke’s notion about LGBTQ educators being among the most marginalized, we suggest that LGBTQ international educators are among the most vulnerable in this subgroup considering how they may not have accessible supports, networks, and protections in international contexts. There are currently 67 United Nations Member States that criminalize consensual same-sex sexual acts (Mendos et al., 2020), including countries which actively recruit international teachers, such as Kenya, Bhutan, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates. International LGBTQ educators who teach in countries with homo/transphobic laws can be at grave risk from state-sanctioned violence and social prejudice (Hayden & Thompson, 2011).

Over the past decade, there have been increased reports of violence, imprisonment, and job termination of international educators due to assumptions of homosexuality (e.g., Hill, 2013; Martin, 2012). For instance, an international school in Hong Kong banned gay teachers from being employed there due to a highly discriminatory “morality code” (Parry, 2014). Driven by the need to develop strategies and create safer work situations for LGBTQ staff members, the purpose of this research was to understand how LGBTQ international educators navigate their sexuality and gender difference in their non-Western workplaces and communities.

The research questions that centred this study were (1) What is the nature of the relationship LGBTQ international educators have with their workplaces and communities overseas? (2) How do various contexts (nation, community, employment) influence LGBTQ international educators’ adjustments, practices, and relationships? This study expanded the extant literature on LGBTQ educators beyond analyzing their Western work situations and explored how the burgeoning international teacher market has affected LGBTQ educators. We further contribute to new insights in the field by applying the theoretical concept of “borderscapes” (Brambilla, 2015) considered here from the standpoint of narratives of belonging and redefining integration experiences (Crul & Schneider, 2010) of LGBTQ educators. Subsequent sections review the literature, delineate the study methodology, analyze study findings, and suggest recommendations.

Theoretical Lens and Literature Review

Borderscapes, as defined by Brambilla (2015), is a theoretical concept that informs our understandings of identities and border-crossing. Brambilla viewed borders beyond territorial lines and political institutions and considered sociocultural processes as borders, known as *borderscapes*. *Borderscapes* theory considers the changing historical, political, and social contexts and “goes beyond the issue of the complexity of borders to embrace ethical and normative issues of in/exclusion” (Brambilla, p. 18). The normative underpinnings of borders, according to Brambilla, allow for “*hegemonic borderscapes* [original emphasis],” which critiqued the “ethical, legal and empirical premises and arguments used to justify particular cognitive and experience regimes on which border policies are articulated” (p. 20). Concomitantly, borders contain various resistances, or “*counter-hegemonic borderscapes* [original emphasis]” (p. 20), against social hegemony and social regulation. Forms of resistances can include adaptation, accommodation, or contestation of the hierarchical and binary nature of border-crossing, such as deliberately problematizing included/excluded identities. As Crul and Schneider (2010) also underscored from their research in

the European context, “participation in social organizations and belonging to local communities ... is strongly dependent on the integration context” (p. 1249).

Within an LGBTQ context, there can be hetero/cisnormative boundaries that lead to social and systemic exclusion of people with non-normative sexualities and genders. Sexual subjectivities are not produced by social movements or identity politics alone, but also through relationships with educational, governmental, or social organizations. LGBTQ international educators function as a case example by which to explore *borderscapes* and integration narratives, and, as Brambilla (2015) and Crul and Schneider (2010) suggested, problematize borders and mainstream narratives of belonging, illustrate paradoxes and complexities, deconstruct essentialisms, and articulate various perspectives about borders.

Some of the recent literature on international educators has provided critical perspectives that underscores the relevance of *borderscapes* theory. International educators must be able to deconstruct their positionality, namely the conditions that shape and stabilize one’s position and privilege, given their experiences with teaching Western curricula in non-Western spaces (English, 2005; Tarc & Mishra Tarc, 2015). Tarc and Mishra Tarc (2015) asserted that international schools in non-Western countries are forming a new social class, which means a division of society articulated through certain social or economic status. This class involves international teachers who “invisibly and perhaps unwittingly facilitate social group-making” (p. 42) while socially and materially benefitting from this division. Deconstructing positionality is significant because elements of colonialism, belonging, and competition favour Western education in non-Western spaces, and local students and staff may be unable to share their knowledge or backgrounds if they are not considered “credible” or “worthy” to Western education (Arber, 2014). Identity struggles are significant when teaching overseas because although neoliberal international education systems prize Western knowledge and Western identities, certain minoritized groups, such as those who identify as LGBTQ, may be subject to different forms of marginalization and discrimination (Arber & Pitt, 2017; Jubas, 2017).

Scarce research focuses on how LGBTQ international educators mitigate legal or social persecution in a destination country and negotiate sexual and/or gender differences (Mizzi, 2015). A review of the literature on LGBTQ educators reveals rare considerations of transnational mobility, with the dominant research situated within Western contexts. Available literature notes that international teaching situations often mirror a broader heteronormative society, which assumes heterosexuality onto unmarked sexualities (Meadows, 2018; Nelson, 2004). Unmarked sexuality merges “heterosexuality” and “family,” thereby limiting any space to welcome LGBTQ perspectives, same-sex desire, or homosocial relationships. This liminal space for gender and sexual diversity results in equity and safety concerns for LGBTQ educators working internationally (Hill, 2013; Jubas, 2017; Mizzi, 2013). As a result, Halicioglu (2015) stated that LGBTQ international educators “may find themselves marooned in a sea of heterosexual, marital morality, which can cause understandable stress” (p. 251). Mizzi et al. (2016) called into question the failure to recognize and protect community workers when they attempt to strengthen LGBTQ groups across the globe. This failure results in “death threats, violent acts, imprisonment, police intimidation, and other fear tactics” (p. 109) aimed towards LGBTQ-inclusive community workers.

Personal agency is reflected in a few studies of LGBTQ international educators by way of choosing (not) to share knowledge about sexual or gender diversity or to self-disclose in the classroom (Mizzi, 2013; Nelson, 2004) and engaging in community LGBTQ activism as a means to stave off social isolation (Boshier & Huang, 2007; Hill, 2013; Mizzi et al., 2016). Expressions of human agency are not without risk. Neumann (2018) and Meadows (2018) described a culture of

resistance when introducing positive sexual orientation and gender identity programming for students at international schools. Meadows explained,

as an outsider, it is difficult to argue with a local about how to best address a social or educational issue on their turf. Perhaps, for this reason, the international community has been reluctant to vigorously intervene and enforce guidelines on behalf of GSM [gender and sexual minority] students. (p. 298)

Meadows referred to this reluctance as “context paralysis,” which stifles activism and action on sexual and gender minority issues due to staunch moral codes.

In sum, the current research addresses shortcomings in the literature by considering how heteronormative discourses interact with LGBTQ international educators, and how these educators negotiate their sexuality and gender differences in their workplaces. We next describe the methodology and the methods used in our study.

Methodology and Methods

Using qualitative, grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), this research asked generative questions to help guide the research, collect data, develop linkages between theory and data, and verify and summarize the research. Following Thomson’s (2011) size recommendation for grounded theory, we recruited 23 LGBTQ international educators from various sexuality and gender backgrounds and nationalities. Study participants were living in 14 non-Western countries across the globe. We protected participant anonymity by using pseudonyms. We also did not identify certain countries and instead grouped them according to their geographic regions because there are so few international schools in some non-Western countries. While there are currently some governments that are supportive of LGBTQ identities, these regimes can change with the political tide and therefore once again become anti-LGBTQ (see Collins, 2019, for a compelling discussion of the regression of human rights among ASEAN countries).

Study participants held paid positions as educators within international schools. In these positions, participants taught lessons to students, maintained a supportive learning environment, responded to administrative demands and policies, evaluated students, engaged community partners and parents, supported extracurricular activities, and undertook professional development. Selection criteria for this study were: self-identification as an LGBTQ international educator, confirmation of work in a non-Western country as an international educator (teaching English or a certain subject), and current employment abroad for at least 1 year. The following chart describes the study participant demographics and notes whether at the time of the research they had disclosed their LGBTQ identity at work, in no particular order.

Table 1

Name	Country of Origin	Destination	Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation	Educational Context	Out at Work
Stephen	Canada	Southeast Asia	Cisgender, Gay Man	Elementary	
Louisa	USA	China	Cisgender, Lesbian	Elementary-Secundary	✓
Francesca	Canada	China	Cisgender, Lesbian	Secondary	✓
Daniel	Canada	Brazil	Cisgender, Gay Man	Elementary	✓

Peter ²	Canada	Southeast Asia	Transgender (Female-to-Male) Queer	Elementary	✓
Rick	USA	China	Cisgender, Gay Man	Postsecondary	
Jose	Spain	Southeast Asia	Cisgender, Gay Man	Elementary-Secondary	
Jeff	Canada	China	Cisgender, Gay Man	Secondary	✓
Evan	Canada	China	Cisgender, Gay Man	Secondary	✓
Katherine	UK	Eastern Europe	Trans (Male-to-Female) Queer	Secondary	✓
Karen	Canada	South Korea	Cisgender, Lesbian	Postsecondary	
Richard	UK	China	Cisgender, Gay Man	Elementary	
Jake	USA	Southeast Asia	Queer	Elementary	✓
Andrew	USA	China	Cisgender, Pansexual ³ Man	Postsecondary	✓
Lawrence	USA	The Caribbean	Cisgender, Gay Man	Elementary	✓
Chris	UK	Japan	Cisgender, Gay Man	Secondary	✓
Jon	Canada	China	Cisgender, Gay Man	Secondary	
Ahmed	Canada	Middle East	Cisgender, Gay Man	Secondary	
Stephanie	USA	Southern Africa	Cisgender, Pansexual or Bisexual Woman	Secondary	✓
James	USA	Southeast Asia	Cisgender, Gay Man	Elementary	
Carlos	USA	The Caribbean	Cisgender, Gay Man	Elementary	✓
Ted	USA	The Caribbean	Cisgender, Gay Man	Elementary	✓
Michael	Canada	Japan	Cisgender, Bisexual Man	Secondary	

From this list of participants, we had three married couples (Ted & Carlos; Louisa & Francesca; Jeff & Evan). We also had two sets of participants with children (Ted & Carlos; Daniel) and one set of aspiring parents (Louisa & Francesca). Nine participants described their previous work experiences in 11 non-Western countries prior to their current positions; these former contexts were Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Iraq, Angola, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Taiwan, The Philippines, Kuwait, Mexico, and India. Fourteen participants disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity at work in some capacity, depending on the context. The participant could be open only to international staff, or to all staff, or to all students, staff, and parents. There was not a consistent degree to which study participants were “out” in their international workplaces.

Study participants experienced an in-depth, 1-hour virtual or telephone interview (Lichtman, 2010) that included questions about their negotiation of identity in their home countries and how

² Peter identified as a lesbian, cisgender woman at the time of the interview, and has only recently transitioned.

³ Andrew identified as a cisgender, gay man during data collection, and has only recently come out as pansexual.

their destination country and workplace influenced their knowledge, aims, practices, perceptions, and assumptions. Study participants received opportunities to check their transcripts for errors or make changes.

A discourse analytic method was used to facilitate data analysis focused on the production of new and unchanged meanings and knowledge (Talja, 1999), as understood within the theory of *borderscapes*. The interview transcripts “represented different contexts of discussion [and] enhance the generalizability of research results” (Talja, p. 474). As we read the transcripts, we coded the texts, such as identifying evidence of different understandings of sexuality or gender, to identify recurring concepts. Codes were organized into categories, such as expressions of non-normative identity-difference, in order to enhance data organization and interpretation, and to develop themes from them (Lichtman, 2010).

Revealing the Data

The data suggested four main themes cutting across personal and professional domains. These four themes were (1) shifting identities; (2) seeking to belong; (3) strong work ethic as personal security; and (4) LGBTQ initiatives and student engagement. Each are explained in turn.

Shifting Identities

The data demonstrated that 18 out of 23 participants experienced a shift in their identities. These shifts were in the areas of activism and community engagement, sexual or gender identifications, and parenting. Specifically, Chris, Stephen, Karen, Michael, Katherine, Jake, Andrew, and Stephanie shifted from being passive community members (advocating for LGBTQ inclusion was not a priority for them in their home countries) to becoming activists (advocating for LGBTQ inclusion became a priority in the new context). For example, Chris shared:

I really didn't belong to many LGBT communities when I was in the UK. As a drama student, there were lots of gay men who also studied drama. I didn't feel like I needed a specific LGBT community to belong to.

Once he relocated to Japan, Chris explained that he volunteered for an LGBTQ organization, which influenced his work interactions. He commented, “If I'm doing a self-introduction and they ask me ‘do you have a girlfriend?’, I usually will correct them and say ‘no, I have a boyfriend.’”

Jake also was not a part of the LGBTQ community in the United States, but it became more important to them after relocating to Southeast Asia. They shared:

Especially in the past few months, my queer identity is more and more important to me. It is something I am open about with students and with peers. But, internationally, I am not protected by the same laws as I would be in the States. Especially at my school. I work in a historically missionary school. Very white. Very heteronormative.

Other shifting identities noted in the data are as follows: (1) Rick and Richard, who were gay activists in their own countries, but not in China; (2) Katherine and Peter, who gender transitioned in their new country context; (3) Francesca, who came out as lesbian while teaching overseas; (4) Jeff, Louisa, Ted, Richard, Karen, James, and Daniel, who shifted from being teachers to becoming school leaders; and (5) Carlos, Ted, and Daniel, who expanded their family networks to include children. Ted, for instance, reflected on having children with Carlos:

The change came when we had the twins. Because before we had children, because we work with young kids, gay didn't really come up much. Now that we have a family, like if you were straight,

you are not going to hide the fact that you have a family. So we don't hide the fact that we have a family.

Participants' identity shifts were not unidirectional, straightforward, or static, but rather complex, multifaceted, and shaped by background, time, space, and a range of motivations. Given the overarching influence of safety on educators' decisions around disclosing their sexual orientations or gender identities, it is also crucial to recognize that personal actions always operate beyond the realm of individual choice and are made possible by systemic contexts that are facilitative or not. Successful integration in any host society is not merely a result of individual efforts to become part of the community (Crul & Schneider, 2010).

Seeking to Belong

Participants who remarked on which countries welcome LGBTQ identities demonstrated a feeling of acceptance as part of their schools or communities and a desire to belong. Feeling a part of a local or expatriate LGBTQ community meant that participants were seeking certain communities for support and familiarity, and accompanying this search is an awareness that change in safety and attitudes towards them may occur.

First, although not a dominant finding, nine participants (out of 23 total) who were gay cisgender men stated that they would avoid countries or regions that had homophobic laws or were potentially too dangerous for them. Places named by participants included Macao, United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, Egypt, Africa, and The Middle East. Katherine stated how she could not gender transition in Saudi Arabia for reasons of her personal safety. However, there were participants, such as Daniel, James, and Jake, who chose to work in places like Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Indonesia, and Iraq in exchange for keeping quiet about their sexual identities. In considering a possible departure from China, Richard read blogs to determine if he could survive the Middle East, and stated: "It's not living as a gay man. It's just living as a teacher, an expat." Yet being forced to hivel off a central aspect of personal identity just to survive in the new teaching context is what contributes to the physical and mental health issues cited in the earlier literature review (Duckworth et al., 2005; Hayden & Thompson, 2011; Reid et al., 2014). Excluding or expressing apprehension towards certain countries suggested the presence of safety and inclusion concerns.

Second, once participants confirmed their employment in the new country, 21 out of 23 participants stated that they did not receive a predeparture orientation that included information pertinent to LGBTQ issues or other personal and sociocultural realities. Most participants also did not receive any kind of predeparture orientation in general. This absence of LGBTQ curriculum in the already limited employer-provided orientation caused the participants to fill knowledge gaps on their own, be more tentative in expressing their LGBTQ identities at work, and question their safety, again reflecting earlier research (Boshier & Huang, 2007; Halicioglu, 2015; Mizzi, 2014).

Third, all participants researched the local LGBTQ community (e.g., social groups, bars), sought advice from other expatriates or local citizens, or located groups online with the goal of attaining some sense of belonging, before and after arrival. Ahmed explained that despite his Iraqi roots, he needed to befriend a few Egyptians to help him adjust. He described, "I am not sure if they are LGBT or not. I acquired them over the years through Facebook." Ahmed decided to keep his sexual orientation private from them. In addition, the data revealed that only a few participants disclosed their sexual identities at the job interview stage. For instance, Stephen was warned in his interview to stay away from Macao when he came out to his interviewer due to potentially homophobic situations he may encounter. For the majority who did not disclose at the interview

stage, it was because they wanted to prevent a homophobic hiring bias stemming from their LGBTQ identity.

Fourth, there were participants who experienced “un-belonging,” meaning that participants realized that they did not belong or over time lost their sense of belonging to certain communities. This result potentially meant not returning home, being forced out of work or the country, or finding difficulties connecting with the local LGBTQ community. Louisa and Francesca shared that they did not want to return home to the USA because “it’s the social environment that we’re not attracted to.”

Katherine also experienced “un-belonging” through having to gender transition back to presenting as a man when visiting her wife’s family on the weekend and wondering if her new colleagues would accept her gender identity each year or if her administration would change their political stance towards her. Ted and Carlos also had issues with their children being legally discriminated against in their new country. Carlos explained,

We’re struggling because the government does not recognize our marriage. They are not giving our kids visas because in their papers, they don’t have a mom and a dad. We have residency but our kids are tourists. We’re running into some legal issues with them at school.

In an alternate view on un-belonging, James lamented how much he missed Indonesia, his boyfriend, and his house there, but was forced to leave Indonesia for his current country when his school principal decided not to renew his visa due to “a big scandal [that] hit an international school in Jakarta” regarding child molestation. The association of LGBTQ persons with criminality is a long-established form of bigotry (Parry, 2014). Although James’s sexual orientation was initially not an issue for the school, the scandal caused him difficulties. James explained,

All of these rumors started, so it was harder for me to get my visa. These two women had to sign up for me to get my visa. They knew me really well. I actually know they were looking forward to me becoming principal. But that [scandal] took over, and, so, a couple of weeks before the end of the school, it was like, that is it. Your visa ends and you have to leave. It was a really painful ending.

Strong Work Ethic as Personal Security

A third theme that emerged in the data was a strong work ethic *as* personal security. This theme is akin to Lugg and Tooms’ (2010) notion of a “right kind of queer,” which explains the phenomenon of LGBTQ education professionals proving their worth by being overachievers and workaholics. If participants experienced marginalization, then they relied on their strong work ethic, excellent teaching skills, and high student achievement scores as survival strategies. In the data, 17 out of 23 participants, who were established teachers or had partners, commented that they strove to be exceptional teachers, often going above and beyond expectations, to protect them against experiences with homo/transphobia. Those participants who were inexperienced teachers or single did not mention this strategy. Inexperienced or single teachers generally chose to keep their sexual orientation or gender identity a secret as a protective measure. Carlos explained,

Because we had worked here before ... we had [a] great reputation ... At the end of the four years, Ted was the most requested teacher of all elementary school [staff], so, the admin still knew us. That made [for] a very quick and easy transition.

In addition, Louisa shared how she and Francesca spent 4 years rebuilding the school programs, targeting new hires to meet organizational needs, and establishing a new campus. Further, James commented that in Indonesia, which is similar to his current experience, “I was a well-loved teacher there. The people wouldn’t imagine that I would go anywhere.”

The participants reported mixed relationships with their school leaders. Katherine was told by her administrators, “we will allow you to transition,” without considering that choosing to live her gender identity was up to her. She stated that “my transition, my choice” is a heavy political statement in her context and relied on her strong work ethic to keep her job. In addition, Karen also relied on her work ethic to navigate a potentially dangerous situation. Her landlady entered her apartment while she was at work and saw her girlfriend sleeping in her bed and reported this observation to the school principal. Karen then described:

I showed up at school one day and I was swiftly taken by my director and his friend who can speak English better. Then I realized I was going in circles in a car around town to disorient me. They confronted me [with] being a deviant, and [said] I must have also been involved with drugs and all kinds of things. ... and then I said, “I don’t do any kind of drugs, they’re illegal in Korea. I know this. I don’t see there is an issue with my teaching. Is there any problem with my teaching? And I don’t understand why this is an issue.” To be honest, I was so young, and I was afraid because of what they said ... at one point in the conversation, they said if [being a lesbian] is the case, then we are going to your apartment now and we are taking you to the airport.

This threat of being immediately fired and deported highlighted some of the additional complexities and safety concerns that LGBTQ educators face when working internationally. Privacy legislation, personal choices, and personnel matters may function differently in the new contexts and moreover intersect in ways that are unfamiliar to teachers, therefore blurring boundaries of educators’ personal and professional lives. This complexity potentially makes LGBTQ educators more vulnerable, as in Karen’s case. Since her accommodation was provided by her employer, her landlady evidently had no qualms reporting private and personal aspects of Karen’s life to her employer, and her employer felt justified about taking action on the information with coercion and threats.

While such stories are indeed alarming, 18 participants reported that school administrators were the most supportive stakeholder group, although they were not very strong advocates. Support in these cases meant demonstrating openness, non-judgement, dialogue, and interest in LGBTQ teachers. When Louisa and Francesca decided to become pregnant in Toronto, Francesca shared that their administration had no issue with them leaving the school to try to get pregnant. In another example, Jeff and Evan’s school administrator connected them to two new lesbian hires so that they provide mentorship and build a network.

In addition, 15 of 23 study participants reported that students were supportive of their LGBTQ identities, with 9 of 23 reporting supportive parents, and none mentioning difficulties with parents. The participants attributed their positive relationships with parents once again to their strong work ethic and reputations as excellent teachers. Katherine felt proud that parents expressed to school leaders that “Dr. Katherine has always been a wonderful teacher.”

The responses of fellow teachers to the study participants’ sexual orientation or gender identity presented a more mixed situation. Of the 16 participants who described their relationships with other teachers, 10 reported positive experiences and six reported explicitly unsupportive encounters. Katherine shared that her female colleagues were more supportive of her gender transition than her male colleagues. Evan perceived a positive experience with a colleague, and shared:

We had this teacher advisory program. All the students met with their teacher advisor once a week for 40 min ... They [the students] were dealing with sexuality and relationships, and they decided to do a question and answer thing. One of the male teachers came to me and said, “would you come and do this with me? I don’t want to be the only guy with sixty boys asking me all these questions about relationship and sexuality.” I asked, “are you asking me because I am the gay guy? Do you want a

gay guy there to be able to answer the questions?” He said, “It’s not like that. I just want someone to have my back because it’s sensitive material.” I went in and it was really good!

In a contrasting example of non-supportive colleagues, Stephanie described how she included LGBTQ identities in her culture and society course, but experienced resistance from her co-instructors whereby they wanted her to exclude this content. She refused to do so, which fractured their relationship. Ted also shared how parents supported him when his colleagues went to the parents and school administration and asked them to remove Ted from the school due to his sexuality. He said,

My assistant found out I was gay, and she called all the parents in the class and said “you have to get your kid out of his class.” There was also a group of teachers, and this is even before the school year started, who went to the principal demanding I should not be allowed to work there. At the time, honestly, I just feel that they equated being gay with being a pedophile because a lot of them are born-again Christians and judgemental about everyone, not just gay people. That first year was really tough, but the parents loved me because they saw I was doing a good job.

LGBTQ Initiatives and Student Engagement

There were 14 of 23 participants who deliberately created LGBTQ-themed projects in their schools in order to minimize their students’ exposure to the kinds of homo/transphobia that the study participants experienced, and to foster resilience and allyship among their students. These projects took a variety of forms: coming out as LGBTQ, providing teacher professional development, debunking gender norms, sharing LGBTQ content (books, articles), developing gender-sexuality alliances and other safer spaces, offering lessons or lectures on sexuality, establishing safe and caring school committees, conducting relevant research projects, and engaging in activism on LGBTQ causes.

Colleagues’ reactions to LGBTQ initiatives were mixed. For example, Jake explained how the school governing body was being oppressive in ways that would be illegal in the United States. When they tried to order a LGBTQ-themed children’s book for the school library,

There was this big discussion of whether or not we can have a book like that available for students to read. Eventually, the board approved it but there is a big red sticker on it saying it contains adult controversial themes. It can only be checked out by parents and not teachers or students. Which, in the United States, is illegal. But these American board members are being oppressive here. So, I guess it’s a step, but I know of queer students on campus who are self harming and this is an issue that needs to be addressed immediately.

Further, Michael described creating a poster display for the school on LGBTQ culture and same-sex marriages at a Buddhist Temple in Kyoto, which was welcomed by his Japanese school leader. In a brazen move, Katherine proudly declared herself transsexual in front of 60 staff members, which given the mixed and negative reactions she received, she suggested she would “never do again, or advise anyone [to do].”

In addition, 11 out of the 14 participants who created LGBTQ initiatives reported students disclosing their sexual or gender identities to them. Andrew described that some of their students began “switching pronouns” in their assignments after sharing their queer research with the students. Lawrence shared that a colleague mentioned to him, “you have had that boy blossom in your class. Like, his gay side is just sparkling, and it didn’t use to” Daniel broke down gender norms in his classroom, which he hoped would help students be themselves. While describing an assignment that invited students to dress up as a person that inspires them, Daniel shared,

If a girl is inspired by a man, she can study that man and dress up as that person, and be that person, and present it to their families and to their peers. Then there was a girl who was really inspired by

Barack Obama at the time. I said, “you can totally be Barack Obama. You do not need to be afraid. You can be a man for this project.” She did, and it was awesome.

For those who did not have students disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to them, their LGBTQ students’ struggle was still a concern. Michael shared,

I ruminate with not being open about my identity with students. I have had the thought that if I have LGBT students struggling, having been open about myself would help them. That is something that I definitely want to do, but there is also a matter of balancing my own well-being. If I’m open about it, will I get negative reactions? Will that change my workplace relationships?

Belongingscapes as an Analytical Tool

The findings of this study clearly indicated that sexuality is largely nowhere to be found in official recruitment and institutional discourses, but it is everywhere through the study participants’ pedagogy, relationships, and practices at work. Hetero/cisnormativity shapes the lives of these educators, which resulted in taking steps, sometimes at great risk, to dismantle the normative borders occupying educational organizations. However, drawing on the theoretical principles of *borderscapes* (Brambilla, 2015) and the data, we introduce the concept of “belongingscapes” as a tool to analyze border-crossing processes and practices, particularly for LGBTQ and other marginalized people. As we explain below, belongingscapes (1) position “belonging” as a spectral concept; (2) include notions of identity and intersectionality; and (3) engage skills and join communities to strengthen belonging.

“Belonging” as a Spectral Concept

Belongingscapes mean that belonging is not a fixed destination whereby one ultimately feels a sense of emotional attachment to a location. Rather, belonging is situated on a spectrum and is socially constructed based on changing contexts, such as employment conditions, politics, resources, laws, and traditions. As the study participants demonstrated, there was a sense of belonging achieved at certain times (e.g., Ted and Carlos are welcomed by the parent community in their school), but then it was taken away (i.e., when their children were refused visas). Belongingscapes contain a temporality that attaches itself to “belonging,” whereby participants may feel as though they belonged for a certain period, but there was an ongoing realization that change could happen and they might suddenly face exclusion. For example, Michael wished he could come out to his students, but he was afraid that he would be no longer welcomed at his workplace. Underscoring the very real threat coming out posed, Katherine experienced unsteady support for, and sometimes hostility to, her trans identity.

Yet, in the process of belonging, there were examples in the data of un-belonging, such as when James was forced to leave Indonesia due to his sexual orientation, or when Francesca and Louisa realized they did not want to return to the United States. Using terms and symbols familiar to the participants helped shape the belonging process. For example, for most study participants who aimed to strengthen LGBTQ inclusion, it was through strategies exercised in their home countries (e.g., rainbows, pink triangles, LGBTQ language, themed days, campaigns, safer spaces). Although these initiatives may carry good intentions to foster a sense of belonging, they reify a dominance of Western LGBTQ rights political action to the detriment of local knowledge and community-building. This dominance may be a result of not having clear direction on how to promote sexual and gender diversity relevant to local and Indigenous communities.

Identity and Intersectionality

Belongingscapes include identity and intersectionality concerns. Stets and Serpe (2013) explained that identity is “a shared set of meanings that define individuals in particular *roles* in society ..., as members of specific *groups* in society ..., and as *persons* having specific characteristics that make them unique from others ... (original italics)” (p. 31). Intersectionality relates to identity, which means there can be multiple identifications that overlap and shape one another (Crenshaw, 1989). In this current study, the participants often commented on topics relating to class, race, and gender, trying to navigate the complexity, retain a sense of self, and strengthen belonging. Affirming identities is a part of belongingscapes, which may explain the multiple instances of shifting identities in the data (e.g., from non-activists to activists; coming out; new parent identities). To affirm identities means to reach new communities and to strengthen a sense of belonging. For example, there were participants who (1) identified their sexuality and gender differently while living overseas, and (2) downplayed or hid their sexual orientation or gender identity as a means of survival, suggesting that expressions of sexuality and gender need to remain fluid according to the political context. Participants who were open about their LGBTQ identity in their workplaces garnered respect and authority over time and proved themselves indispensable to the school. These participants challenged encounters of homophobia, by questioning those who expected them to address sexual orientation issues, justifying LGBTQ-inclusive pedagogy, or creating LGBTQ-inclusive initiatives. Further, the fact that administrators were a significant support group for the study participants countered Rottmann’s (2006) suggestion that, in a Western context, educational administrators are the last subgroup of educational practitioners to be supportive of LGBTQ identities. It was clear in the data that most participants conformed to their work contexts to a certain degree, but they did not completely hide their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Engage Skills and Join Communities

In our view, belongingscapes also signal a process of inquiry. There is a missed opportunity to express belonging when employers decide not to include LGBTQ perspectives in predeparture orientations or elsewhere in their schools. As a result, most study participants aimed to belong to their new work situations and communities, and learned how to do this through trial and error, mentorship, self-directed learning, research, and socialization. An example of this process was when Richard researched being LGBTQ in the Middle East, or when Jake tried to include queer content in their elementary school teaching. Most participants informally learned that demonstrating a strong work ethic and being a part of community could be their saving grace. For example, Karen, Katherine, and James emphasized their strong teaching practice so that they could retain a sense of belonging to their school community when their gender identity or sexual orientation came under fire. Single and inexperienced study participants did not communicate a strong work ethic as a protective factor. Rather, they tended to focus on sharpening their teaching skills, impressing their school administrator, and adjusting to the country context, which placed them in a more vulnerable situation given the amount of learning that was necessary. Most study participants expanded their networks of belonging through incorporating others, such as supportive students, administrators, community members, and parents. This network cushioned participants when difficult encounters arose.

Limitations, Recommendations, and Conclusions

The goal of this study was to understand the life and work challenges facing LGBTQ international educators and how these teachers navigated these challenges. A limitation of this study was that

there was an unanticipated disproportionate number of cisgender, white, gay men. Despite our best efforts to diversify our recruitment strategies, we were unable to recruit a broader sample of LGBTQ international educators. A second limitation is that we were not able to locate more participants from the adult and postsecondary education sector, which restricted our comparative analysis of educational contexts. Despite these limitations, the lives of these study participants demonstrated, as Shore et al. (2016) suggested, a need to understand clandestine lives to “unsettle dominate storylines of exclusion” (p. 314). This means analysing “boss texts” and the normativities and profits that underpin them, questioning concepts of family and schooling as sites for social transformation, and engaging reflexivity to form new relationships and disrupt ignorance (Shore et al., 2016).

We suggest two recommendations to promote a sense of belonging among future LGBTQ international teachers and their school administrators. First, an employee resource group (ERG) may be useful to LGBTQ international educators. ERGs are groups that are established around a shared identity or interest. They provide support and networking opportunities, advocate for organizational change, and help improve organizational effectiveness through raising their concerns to leaders. ERGs can be informal or formal in structure and internal or external to the organization (Githens, 2009). LGBTQ ERGs can help LGBTQ employees locate support and vital information, contribute towards organizational change and learning, and work towards addressing heterosexism and hetero/cisnormativity (Githens, 2009; McNulty et al., 2018). That said, an ERG is typically helpful for those who disclose their LGBTQ identities at work. For those who choose to keep their sexual orientation or gender identity a secret, ERGs can be interpreted as a threat to their safety rather than a support mechanism because ERGs and their members are vocal in their desire for change (Githens, 2009). ERGs might also end up doing the work of leadership, and so leaders need to be actively involved in the development of ERGs.

Second, in agreement with Neumann (2018), we recommend schools adopt diversity and anti-discrimination policies and provide ongoing education for staff and students on global sexual and gender diversity. We also recommend creating a system whereby LGBTQ-inclusive schools are more visible among international teacher recruitment agencies. Many participants in this study entered uncharted territory by creating LGBTQ visibility in schools, with some beginning this work at the hiring stage. Through this enhanced visibility, LGBTQ international educators can apply to schools that proffer sexual and gender diversity, and avoid problematic schools.

In sum, this study shifted the research on LGBTQ teachers to consider aspects of globalization and transnationalism. The data suggested complex discourses that shape the experiences of LGBTQ international teachers. Although international teachers as documented in previous research experience social, cultural, and professional challenges unique to their global careers, we have suggested that LGBTQ international teachers also experience belonging challenges. Our introduction of belongingscapes as an analytical lens illuminated these particular challenges and provides a fruitful approach for further research with LGBTQ international educators.

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