

Queering Early Childhood Education: LGBTQ+ Early Childhood Educators Navigating and Challenging Heteronormativity in Early Childhood Education Settings

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This study explores the experiences of eight LGBTQ+ early childhood educators (ECEs) in Ontario, Canada to understand the current challenges in navigating the heteronormative spaces within early childhood education settings. Through a queer theoretical framework, with intersectionality in mind, the stories shared remind us that early childhood education operates within the dominant discourses of heteronormativity. The LGBTQ+ ECEs in this study challenge us to uphold our commitment to inclusive and decolonial practices and to acknowledge children as social actors in their learning, which includes grasping the complexities of gender and sexuality.

Key words: queering, early childhood education, intersectionality, childhood innocence, heteronormativity

Current studies remind us that LGBTQ+¹ educators are still experiencing discrimination in forms of harassment and isolation (Gray et al., 2016; Hooker, 2018, 2019). While research on gender and sexuality has been done in the licenced childcare context, those studies mainly focused on how children (re)produced and reinforced gender norms and heterosexuality, and the influence educators have on socializing gender and sexuality in the classroom (Gansen, 2017; Gelir, 2020; Muasya & Muasya, 2020). Educators were found to police children's sexual expression and socialization by monitoring their gendered behaviours and reinforcing children's expressed gender roles and stereotypes that were learned within their heteronormative households (Gansen, 2017; Gelir, 2020). Research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ educators has also been done, but these studies only reflect the experiences of those within the K–12² school context (Gray et al., 2016;

Hooker, 2018, 2019; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2020; Toledo & Maher, 2019). The lack of research on LGBTQ+ early childhood educators (ECEs) is worrying because discussions of equity, inclusion, and social justice within the early childhood education field should include queer and trans folks. As the field moves toward change that focuses on inclusive, decolonial, and antioppressive pedagogies, we need to include critical and intersectional discussions around gender and sexuality so that queering early childhood education, which includes comprehensive sexuality education, is possible. However, how can we teach children about the diversity and fluidity of gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality when there are still queer and trans educators who are not comfortable being themselves in the classroom? This study aims to engage in such discourse through a collection of narratives from eight LGBTQ+ ECEs in Ontario, Canada. Their narratives were guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of LGBTQ+ ECEs in licenced childcare settings?
2. How does gender identity and/or sexual orientation of an LGBTQ+ ECE influence their work and interactions with staff, children, and families?

Theoretical framework

This study is informed by a queer theoretical framework because it creates opportunities to engage in queer and trans narratives that disrupt the constraints established by dominant discourses such as those of heteronormativity (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2020). To clarify, queer theory is not about identity or sexuality; rather, it focuses on positionalities (Sullivan, 2003). First coined in the early 1990s, the term *queer theory* was used to describe emerging feminist theorizations that challenged binary framings of gender and sexuality (Taylor & Blaise, 2007). As the term *queer* in queer theory experienced further theorization, queer theory was also used to critique the “normative categorization” (Loutzenheizer, 2020, p. 70) of sex, gender, and sexuality and its relation to political, social, and historical contexts. For these reasons, it is important to acknowledge the historical underpinnings of queer movements that have restricted queer theory research due to the saturation of queer white narratives and a binary focus on gender and sexuality (Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020; Quin, 2019). This study acknowledges such historical and socio-political underpinnings by also taking up intersectionality to examine the experiences of LGBTQ+ ECEs who may face “multifaceted and often overlapping oppressive power structures/systems that shape experiences of gender, class, race, status, disability, sexuality simultaneously” (Kiesling, 2017, p. 5; see also Akesson et al., 2016). A term coined by Black legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), intersectionality helps us understand the complexities of the human experience through the lens of power relations with/in the dominant society. Through such understanding of the human experience, intersectionality moves us away from a “single-issue” analysis (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149) in understanding queer and trans folks (Cohen, 1997; Crenshaw, 1991).

This study is situated within a transformative paradigm that values the experiences of individuals, raises awareness of social issues and inequities, and contributes to influencing reforms that may change the lives of the studied marginalized group(s) (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, exposing social inequities and oppression can often foster discussions that focus on the negative and traumatic experiences of marginalized people. Thus, this study kept a “desire-based” framework (Tuck, 2009) in mind when gathering and interpreting the narratives and stories of LGBTQ+ ECEs. A desire-based framework also moves away from a damage or deficit approach in doing research with marginalized communities toward more authentic interactions that bring to light “the complexities, contradictions, and self-determination of lived lives” (Tuck, 2009, p. 416). Furthermore, this approach reminds us to challenge whiteness and coloniality within research methodologies and design. For instance, this study included open-ended questions that did not sway participants to share specific types of experiences, and analyzed narratives in a way that did not focus only on loss but also on the positive outcomes of an experience (Tuck, 2009).

Author’s positionality

As a queer ECE and scholar, my experience working in licensed childcare settings contributed to the framing of this study. I have experienced a range of responses from other ECEs and families regarding my open and authentic expression of gender and sexuality, which has also led to confrontations that questioned my professionalism. Those unfortunate experiences fostered an unconscious response to assess social and educational spaces. Furthermore, being part of the LGBTQ+ community has provided me with an awareness of the various reactions and/or oppressions that queer and trans educators may experience. This awareness guided my decision to be open about my identity and experiences with my participants to foster a sense of trust, openness, and relatability between the participants and me.

I would also like to recognize my position as a racialized person, which has made me especially aware of the need to take up intersectionality to understand the lives of LGBTQ+ ECEs. I know, for myself, that the dominant discourse within queer studies—which focuses on gender and sexuality—does not fully encapsulate my experience as a queer person of Chinese descent and with a diasporic history. I have had to navigate a very conservative and

patrilineal culture that did not accept or explicitly mention queer and trans people, while also succumbing to the model minority trap that many racialized and immigrant communities have to navigate in Canada. Nevertheless, my positionality and experiences contribute to the hope that this study will create a space for other queer and trans ECEs to engage in conversations that will contribute to queer and trans inclusive practices in the early childhood education field.

Literature review

This literature review explores the current research that is relevant to understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ ECEs. Themes of *settler colonialism and childhood innocence*, *queer theory*, and *navigating heteronormativity* structure the discussion, while insight into the policies and practices in Ontario's early childhood education sector provides a context for the possible reforms needed to support queer and trans educators.

Settler colonialism and childhood innocence

In the settler colonial context of Canada, colonialism has established a monolithic perception of children in education (Tuck & Yang, 2012). For instance, residential schools, which aimed to assimilate Indigenous children into Eurocentric culture and beliefs, caused intergenerational trauma in Indigenous communities (Dyer, 2017). Not only did this maintain white privilege and sustain structural racism, it also positioned settlers as innocent or having an "absence of experience" (Mawhinney, 1998, p. 100) in contributing to current systemic problems because they (white settlers) "do not experience the problems" (Mawhinney, p. 103) and believe that those who are directly affected are better equipped to fix the problem. This settler colonial mindset appears to also divide nonwhite communities when it comes to how they respond to various social issues, with perspectives such as "*If I am not from that community or if I do not identify with that community, then it is not my problem.*"

Furthermore, the maintenance of settler innocence translates into various levels of governance that regulate discourses in life. In early childhood education, settler colonialism controls the information and learning children are exposed to through institutional practices and policies around childhood (Nxumalo, 2016). This control is further established through hierarchical colonial logics that position children at a lower level "than those who are labeled adults" (Cannella & Viruru, 2004, p. 69) and reinforces a Euro-Western understanding of human development that is "accepted as natural and unchangeable truths" (p. 69), this accepted "truth" being a sequential understanding of childhood (e.g., ages and stages, skills, competencies). Such universalized understanding of human development is problematic as it leaves out the complex and contradicting cultural and social contexts that influence children in early childhood. In the context of gender and sexuality, settler innocence frames such discussions as irrelevant and something to be avoided to preserve the "innocence of the child." However, a belief in childhood innocence avoids challenging colonial ideologies of childhood and erases the cultural specificities, symbols, and discourses that inform childhood socialization (Templeton & Cheruvu, 2020). Thus, childhood innocence as a means to protect children from informed and open exploration of gender and sexuality maintains the systems that privilege colonial ideologies and white supremacy (Garlen, 2019; Templeton & Cheruvu, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Queer theory: Performativity and the heterosexual matrix

Judith Butler (1990) theorizes the *heterosexual matrix* as a system of power that maintains gender stereotypes and heterosexuality through heteronormativity. Heteronormativity refers to processes and practices that view binary gender and heterosexuality as the norm and/or the "natural sexuality" (Taylor & Blaise, 2007, p. 1). In early childhood settings, heteronormativity is played out through the performance of gender roles and stereotypes by

children and adults. Early childhood research that took up queer theory has found that children police gender through play by reinforcing gendered behaviours for boys and girls, genderizing masculinity and femininity (Blaise, 2006; Callahan & Nicholas, 2019; Gansen, 2017). In some cases, children have been found to police gender through acts of excluding, publicly humiliating, and/or shaming other children who perform gender in a nonconforming manner or against the binary (Prioletta & Davies, 2024; Xiao et al., 2019). Adult educators also reproduce gender in the classroom by reinforcing gender norms and stereotypes expressed by the children, for example, by encouraging holding hands and kissing between children of the opposite sex, romanticizing behaviours and alluding to a “boyfriend and girlfriend” relationship (Gansen, 2017, p. 260) but ignoring or discouraging such actions between children of the same sex. The maintenance of heteronormativity in early childhood spaces not only limits the exploration of gender and sexuality for children but also creates an exclusionary environment for queer, trans, intersex, nonbinary, and/or gender-nonconforming children, parents, and educators. The next section further explores the effects of heteronormativity on the experiences of educators.

Navigating heteronormativity

According to Bower-Phipps (2020), educational institutions tend to be heteronormative in nature, silencing gay and lesbian educators due to homosexuality’s association with negative stereotypes of pedophilia and deviant behaviours (Hooker, 2018; Toledo & Maher, 2019). This silencing is usually coupled by anti-gay and anti-trans jokes and slurs from both students and staff that create an unsafe space for queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming educators (Hooker, 2019; Taylor et al., 2015). For transgender educators, the level of institutional support, or lack thereof, can highly affect their experience. In Wells’s (2018) study, the lack of institutional support for some transgender educators resulted in constant relocation to new schools, increased supervision with students, and segregation from colleagues. However, when support was explicitly expressed by management and peers, the experience was positive, even during times of gender transition. The expressed institutional support also fostered opportunities for the school community to learn about gender diversity (Wells, 2018). Nevertheless, the participants in Wells’s study still advised trans and queer educators to proceed into educational spaces with caution, especially for those who chose to transition or were in the process of transitioning. This cautionary advice reflects the existing lack of safety in schools for students and staff who identify as LGBTQ+. In a Canadian report by Taylor et al. (2015) about the “Every Teacher Project,” the authors found that only around 38% of LGBTQ+ K–12 educators in Canada perceived their schools to be safe for LGBTQ+ identifying students. While that percentage may have changed over the years, many LGBTQ+ educators are still constantly evaluating their work environment and self-regulating their behaviours, dress code, body movements, and gestures to avoid harassment and discrimination (Browne & Diale, 2018; Gray et al., 2016; Stones & Glazzard, 2019). This maintenance of behaviour by queer and trans educators has resulted in many cases where they have to overperform or perform outstandingly well to prove their authenticity and professionalism as an educator (Bower-Phipps, 2020; Gray et al., 2016; Hooker, 2018; Lee, 2020; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2020). This urge to overperform may also stem from the fear and anxiety of being seen as an incompetent teacher by parents and families due to the negative stereotypes associated with their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. For such reasons, LGBTQ+ educators may find themselves in complex situations of negotiating the boundaries between their personal and professional identity so as to avoid negative confrontations and maintain job security (Brown & Diale, 2018; Lee, 2020; Taylor et al., 2015).

Policies and practices in Ontario

In Ontario, major guiding documents such as *Early Learning for Every Child Today* (ELECT; King’s Printer for Ontario, 2007) and *How Does Learning Happen?* (HDLH; King’s Printer for Ontario, 2014) do not explicitly mention gender and sexuality in the context of understanding and supporting children’s learning and development. In fact,

documents such as ELECT reinforce gender binarism in their evaluation of children's development. For instance, when evaluating the social skills for friendship for school-age children (5–8 years), one of the indicators states that children are often seen “playing with children of the same sex with gender specific toys” (King's Printer for Ontario, 2007, p. 61). Although the HDLH document focuses on fostering a sense of belonging in children, it does so in broad language that promotes multiculturalism rather than explicitly supporting differences and diversity in identities (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, culture) (King's Printer for Ontario, 2014). Such multicultural approaches to inclusivity have contributed to heteronormativity going unchallenged within early childhood education. Even with documents that were published over ten years ago, such as *Building Bridges: Queer Families in Early Childhood Education*, which calls into action “the need for educators to support queer individuals in early childhood settings in Canada” (Janmohamed & Campbell, 2009, p. 23), there still appears to be a lack of education and discussion on diverse gender and sexuality inclusive practices and curriculum within early childhood education settings.

Methodology

A narrative inquiry approach was employed to provide participants the opportunity to share their stories and experiences through oral history and conversations (Clandinin & Caine, 2008; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This form of inquiry aligned with the transformative paradigm and queer theoretical framework taken up in this study as it places central importance on participants' experiences and how they navigate systems of power and oppression (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In total, there were eight participants in this study, all of whom are or had been ECEs in Ontario, with field experience ranging between 3 and 11 years. The participants' ages ranged between 23 and 34 years; five identified as female, one as nonbinary, one as a trans man, and one as a man. Two identified as lesbians, two as pansexual, three as bisexual, and one as queer. Four participants identified as white, one as white-Jewish, one as Italian-French Canadian with Métis heritage, one as Chinese, and one as Black and Jamaican. All participants had education and credentials for working as an ECE; five had a college diploma, two had a bachelor's degree, and one had a PhD (see Table 1). Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities, and demographic data collected (i.e., age, gender, race, sexuality, educational background) was only used to highlight the multifaceted experiences of LGBTQ+ educators when applicable to an intersectional analysis.

Table 1: Overview of Participants

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Age	Race	Education	Years of Field Experience
Jason	he/him	male	queer	25	East Asian (Chinese)	university (BA)	3 years
Kelly	she/her/they/them	nonbinary	pansexual	24	white (Jewish)	university (BA)	3 years
Sam	she/her	female	bisexual	31	white (European)	college (diploma)	5 years
Joey	she/her/they/them	female	lesbian	34	white (Italian French Canadian with Métis heritage)	university (PhD)	6 years
Clair	she/her	female	bisexual	23	Black (Jamaican)	college (diploma)	5 years
Skyla	she/her	female	pansexual	27	white	college (diploma)	11 years
Misty	she/her	female	lesbian	31	white	college (diploma)	7 years
Kevin	he/him	trans man	bisexual	29	white	college (diploma)	6 years

Online semistructured interviews were conducted due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions that were in place during the time of this study. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Participants responded to the same set of open-ended questions about navigating gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation in licenced childcare settings (see Table 2). Probing questions arose naturally throughout the interviews for purposes of clarification and/or to get a deeper insight on the narratives shared (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Also, a question on how the participants’ intersecting identities influenced their experience as an ECE was included to engage in an intersectional understanding of the experience of queer and trans educators. A balance of formal and informal moments was gestured to and welcomed by the researcher to create a conversational atmosphere that aimed to elicit genuine conversation. A member-check procedure was done to validate the information gathered and allow participants to corroborate and confirm the interpretation of their stories (Birt et al., 2016).

Table 2: Interview Questions

Category	Questions & Probing Questions
Background information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your preferred pronoun? • Gender/age/race/sexual orientation • Education background • How many years have you been working / did you work as an ECE?
Experience(s) as an LGBTQ+ ECE	<p>Can you tell me about your overall experience working as an ECE?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was your experience positive or negative or both? • Why or how was it positive or negative? • Do you think your gender identity and/or sexual orientation influenced your experience(s) as an ECE? • If so why? Or why not?

<p>Interaction with staff, children, and families</p>	<p>Do the people you work or have worked with know about your gender identity and/or sexual orientation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If yes ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How has that affected your interactions with them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If it has, how so? ▪ If it has not, why? • If not ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How does that affect your interactions with them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If it does, how so? ▪ If it does not, why? <p>Do the families you work with or have worked with know about your gender identity and/or sexual orientation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If yes ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How has that affected your interactions with them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If it has, how so? ▪ If it has not, why? • If not ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How does that affect your interactions with them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If it does, how so? ▪ If it does not, why? <p>Do the children you work with or have worked with know about your gender identity and/or sexual orientation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If yes ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How does that affect your interactions with them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If it has, how so? ▪ If it has not, why? • If not ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How does that affect your interactions with them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If it does, how so? ▪ If it does not, why?
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<p>Comfort in expressing gender and sexual orientation at work</p>	<p>How comfortable are/were you in expressing your gender identity and/or sexual orientation at work?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes you feel comfortable in expressing your gender identity and/or sexual orientation at work? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Could you provide an instance that made you come to this conclusion? • What makes you feel uncomfortable in expressing your gender identity and/or sexual identity at work? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Could you provide an instance that made you come to this conclusion? <p>How safe do you feel in expressing your gender identity and/or sexual orientation at work?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What experience(s) made you feel safe at work? • What experience(s) made you feel unsafe at work? <p>In your opinion, what would help you feel more comfortable and safer or continue to help you feel comfortable and safe at work?</p>
<p>Responding to children's questions about and expression of gender and/or sexuality</p>	<p>What is your experience in your work with children's expression of gender?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you respond and/or react? • What is the reasoning for your response and/or reaction? <p>Looking back, do you think your gender identity affected your interactions with children's gender expression?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If yes, how so? • If not, why? <p>What is your experience in your work with children's expression of sexuality?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you respond and/or react? • What is the reasoning for your response and/or reaction? <p>Looking back, do you think your sexual orientation affected your interaction with children's expression of sexuality at work?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If yes, how so? • If not, why?
<p>Towards Queering Early Childhood Education</p>	<p>Based on your own experience, do you think the current state of early childhood education supports the inclusion of educators, families, and children who identify as LGBTQ+ including those who identify as gender nonbinary?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If yes, how so? • If not, what suggestions do you have in addressing this issue? <p>Are there any dimensions/parts of your identity that influenced your LGBTQ+ experience?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If so, could you expand on that? <p>Based on your own experience, what advice do you have for future and current LGBTQ+ ECEs?</p> <p>How can those who do not identify as LGBTQ+ and/or gender nonbinary make early childhood settings a safe space for LGBTQ+ and nonbinary educators, parents/legal guardians, and children?</p> <p>What are your hopes for early childhood education regarding LGBTQ+ inclusive policy, practice, and attitudes?</p> <p>Is there anything we did not touch on?</p>

Analysis

A thematic analysis procedure was used in this study due to its flexibility in that it “does not subscribe to a certain

theoretical or epistemological approach” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). While thematic analysis still categorizes people’s experiences, it is important to note that this study does not represent the entire queer and trans community of educators, but rather contributes to the ongoing call to challenge dominant and oppressive discourses in early childhood education. The narratives the LGBTQ+ ECEs were analyzed with a queer, intersectional, and desire-based framework and the following research questions in mind: (1) What are the experience of LGBTQ+ ECEs? 2) How does the gender identity and/or sexual orientation of an LGBTQ+ ECE influence their work and interactions with staff, children, and families? Three main themes emerged from the interviews—LGBTQ+ educators’ feelings of acceptance; intersectionality: “not just a queer ECE”; and challenging dominant discourses in ECEC—along with several subthemes (see Table 3).

Table 3: Thematic Data Analysis of Findings

Main Themes	Subthemes	Supporting Codes
LGBTQ+ ECEs’ feelings of acceptance	Feeling safe, supported, and accepted Families’ perspective of “queerness”	Inclusivity in the classroom or absence of inclusive practice. Attitudes from staff and families regarding their gender and sexuality (judgmental and homophobic or supportive and accepting). Colleagues affirming gendered play or denying children’s gender-nonconforming play. Expressed notion of childhood innocence. Degree of support and understanding from families. Reaction from families regarding queer and trans educator’s identity. Reaction from families regarding their children’s gender-nonconforming play and/or expression. Queer visibility or invisibility. Gender identity and sexual orientation mismatch: “You’re not even gay.” Performative allyship from colleagues: “Well, my cousin’s coworkers, they’re gay.”
Intersectionality: “Not just a queer ECE”	Disabilities, mental health, and chronic pain Race and ethnicity Religion	Pathologizing queerness and disabilities. Homophobia and intolerance toward queer and trans people within racialized, ethnic, and religious communities. Personal experiences with discrimination as motivation to foster inclusive classrooms.

<p>Challenging dominant discourses in ECEC</p>		<p>Advocating love and kindness in their practice: “Your job is not to fix [children] ... it’s just to love that kid and teach them to be a loving and kind person. That’s your job.” (Kevin, he/him)</p> <p>Supporting gender exploration in the classroom (e.g., allowing a boy to wear dresses).</p> <p>Disrupting children’s heteronormative comments: “Yes, you know, two females can have a family together.” (Misty, she/her)</p> <p>Rethinking Mother’s Day and Father’s Day.</p> <p>Not raising concerns about a child’s nonbinary or transgender identity.</p> <p>Reaffirming children’s preferred pronouns, names, and gender identity.</p> <p>Accepting and learning about differences.</p>
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LGBTQ+ ECEs’ feelings of acceptance

In the participants’ experience, feeling a sense of comfort and safety were factors that contributed to their feelings of being accepted in licenced childcare settings. This sense of comfort and safety in belonging are discussed below through subthemes of *feeling safe, supported, and accepted in the workplace*, and *families’ perspectives of “queerness.”* The excerpts come from the narratives of four of the eight participating LGBTQ+ ECEs, whose sense of belonging and acceptance in the workplace seemed to be influenced by others’ understandings of gender and sexuality and perspectives and attitudes toward queer and trans people.

Feeling safe, supported, and accepted in the workplace. Misty (she/her), a lesbian ECE, expressed that the nonjudgmental environment fostered by her colleagues and supervisors made her feel included and part of the team, which translated to an overall feeling of being comfortable and supported at work.

My coworkers that work with me in the classroom are inclusive. They didn’t judge, they’ve welcomed me, and they know my identity, and they’ve never ridiculed me or made me feel bad. They’ve accepted me. And that really helps, just knowing that I can be myself and knowing that they have my back as well. It’s never been an issue, but let’s say maybe someone said something hurtful or tried to be hurtful, I know that I had that support. There is no difference in knowing another coworker has a boyfriend and I may have a girlfriend, or this other female has a boyfriend or a husband. I feel like they don’t treat me any differently. So that makes me more comfortable and supported. (Misty, she/her)

Similarly, Kevin (he/him), a bisexual trans man, expressed that the support for queer identities in his workplace allowed him to better respond to children’s socio-emotional needs because they felt they did not need to hide any parts of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

They (the staff) were super awesome and welcoming, and wonderful. And because I felt better in myself and who I was and everything, I noticed a difference in my work and how I interacted with the kids, because I felt better. And I was able to be more emotionally responsive to them. And honestly, just a better teacher, because I was more comfortable in me, so I could then be better for them. I really feel like it made me better as a teacher because I wasn’t hiding anything anymore. I wasn’t pretending to be something I’m not. I was just me. (Kevin, he/him).

Kevin’s improved teaching experience seems to highlight the need to challenge heteronormativity in early childhood education settings so that LGBTQ+ educators do not need to overperform or develop a “professional reputation as an outstanding teacher” (Lee, 2020, p 12) to validate their professionalism in the eyes of the institution and

communities. In addition, not having to overperform to protect themselves and/or to maintain their employment seems to contribute to the well-being of queer and trans educators as they do not have to constantly confront or expect daily (micro)aggressions and discrimination in their workplace (Brown & Diale, 2018; Lee, 2020; Stones & Glazzard, 2019).

While some ECEs had supportive colleagues and management, this was not expressed by all participants. Kelly (she/they), a nonbinary pansexual ECE, experienced a lack of support to address a child by their preferred pronouns. Instead, Kelly's colleagues were more concerned about negative reactions from parents than about affirming a child's sense of self. This reflects previous studies' findings about the policing of gender and sexuality in educational spaces through correcting the expression of gender identity in both children and adults (Gansen, 2017; Kelly-Ware, 2016; Renold, 2006). Kelly expressed:

My biggest passion is helping young LGBTQ people. That's what I want to do in my career. That's something that I found was really discouraged in childcare environments, because I had a child who was assigned male at birth and very clearly wanted to go by "princess" and wanted to only hang out with girls and wanted she/her pronouns and was like "I'm a girl." And I was like "Cool! Hey, Princess," and obviously there is no problem if you want to be called "princess." But all the other educators were like "You can't do that." "The parents will absolutely be so upset if you do that." "You have to call them him, him." And for me, not only is that hard because I want to be there for this kid, but in not affirming them, you are also saying who I am is wrong at the same time. (Kelly, she/they)

I want to also bring attention that even if a licensed childcare centre expresses a value of inclusivity for queer and trans identities, queer and trans silencing and/or erasure can still occur. For instance, Skyla (she/her), a pansexual ECE, was misidentified as a "straight ally" because she did not fit the stereotyped characteristics of a "gay" or "queer" person.

People assume that I'm a straight person all the time, which is kind of irritating. I've worked with school-aged kids and fostered a really open, positive environment. And everybody is welcomed, and you can be whoever you want. And that's obviously what my philosophy is. But on the other hand, people assuming that I'm an ally has been frustrating for me. I've talked a lot about like going to Pride or being really supportive of kids and talking to kids through experiences or the way that I am as an educator. And people have said to me, "Oh, well, like you're not even gay." And because of that I don't really feel comfortable saying that I am part of the LGBTQ+ community necessarily, because I don't know how that's going to be received. (Skyla, she/her)

This misidentification of Skyla's sexual orientation by her colleagues prompted her to reassess the work environment, which made her more cautious about who she could comfortably express her sexuality with. "Straight-passing" queer and trans educators are constantly made invisible or silenced within heteronormative educational spaces, and these microaggressions reveal the extent to which heteronormativity manifests in educational settings in forms of generalized and stereotyped categorization of queer and trans people (Toledo & Maher, 2019, pp. 13–14).

Families' perspectives of "queerness." When discussing how they would respond to children's curiosity around gender and sexuality, Kelly (she/they) responded that it is educators' duty to provide an answer. However, at the same time, fear was expressed about how parents might react to finding out their children are having these conversations in childcare settings—"I don't want parents to come knocking down my manager's door being like, your employee is trying to make my kid gay. You know?" Kelly's fear and reluctance to engage in conversations around gender and sexuality may be related to reports of negative parental reactions toward children being around LGBTQ+ educators. According to Bower-Phipps (2020), LGBTQ+ educators have expressed fear of judgment coming from parents

due to stereotyped associations that queer and trans educators are pedophiles and are not great role models for children and harmful assumptions that children will become “gay” if they interact with queer and trans educators, which shows how non-heterosexual identities are still perceived as unfavourable outcomes for children (Bower-Phipps, 2020; Hooker, 2018). These attitudes have led Sam (she/her), who identifies as bisexual, to selectively reveal her relationship with her wife at the childcare centre where she works. Although Sam’s management has expressed support for their LGBTQ+ employees, Sam still navigated their personal and professional identity selectively in the workplace, strategically disclosing their gender and sexual identity to avoid potential confrontations with families (Brown & Diale, 2018; Lee, 2020; Stones & Glazzard, 2019; Toledo & Maher, 2019).

Moving away from more cautious tales, I want to share the experience of Kevin (he/him), who had an unexpected positive reaction from both families and colleagues when he came out as a trans man.

One time on my way to work, a parent, she stopped me in the parking lot. I hadn’t even had a sip of coffee yet. And I was like, “Oh, boy, here we go. This is going to be the first [confrontation] that happens.” But she was actually so thankful and so grateful. And told me that, “I am so excited that my kid gets to be exposed to someone like you, because you are just like, so brave and so amazing for just being you.” And I’m like, “Oh, God, please stop complimenting me. I don’t know how to handle it.” But she was just really excited that her kid was going to be exposed to real-world kind of stuff. And she was really awesome and wonderful about it. And I love her dearly. That was one of the first things that happened after I came out, and I’m like, if this is how it’s always going to be then I hope it stays like this. (Kevin, he/him)

Kevin’s experience indicates that community support and acceptance are important factors in fostering a sense of belonging for queer and trans educators. Positive experiences with families also seem to promote more authentic and open relationships between families and educators, both at a personal and a professional level. However, we need to be cautious not to put the onus completely on queer and trans educators to be the representation and source of 2SLGBTQIA+ knowledge. In other words, we need to avoid approaching 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusive education through a “pedagogy of exposure” where pressure is put on queer and trans people (including children) to educate communities (Meyer et al., 2016). A suggestion to avoid relying on a pedagogy of exposure is to invest in designated comprehensive sex education and 2SLGBTQIA+ education experts that early childhood education institutions and schools can go to for resources and further training for their educators (Meyer et al., 2016).

Intersectionality: “Not just a queer ECE”

While the level of support from colleagues, management, and families had an influence on how comfortable and safe LGBTQ+ ECEs felt in the workplace, their positionalities beyond their gender identity and sexual orientation also contributed to their experiences. More than half of the participants, five out of eight, shared how other aspects of their identities influenced their workplace experience. Positionalities mentioned include disability, mental health status, ethnic culture, race, and religion.

Disabilities. Joey (she/they), a lesbian ECE, shared how their Tourette syndrome (TS) affected how they expressed their “true self” in the classroom. TS is a condition of the nervous system that “causes people to have ‘tics’ which are sudden twitches, movements, or sounds; people who have tics cannot stop their body from doing these things” (CDC, 2021). Joey’s disability adds complexity to how she evaluates her comfort level in revealing her identity as a queer disabled person. She spoke about how her disability can be perceived negatively in the queer community. This has propelled her not only to challenge heteronormativity in her work but also to bring attention to issues of ableism in early childhood classrooms.

When am I talking and I have some sort of vocal tic, I can turn it into a laugh and then it makes it normal. So, there's that. And I think, I haven't been telling many people about that disability that I have, it's a motor disability, it's a motor tic disorder. ... I wouldn't say that having both of those identities side by side and sharing that openly is something that I've ever felt comfortable about because maybe people will think that well, "She's queer, and she's got this weird tic." And connecting those things, it might pathologize my identity further, so I just don't typically share it with many people. So, I think there's a lot of ableism in the world and I think we need to be conscious of not just issues of heteronormativity but also issues of ableism, as connected to that identity. I'm hearing a lot about people who are disabled and who identify as queer. So, I think that's a really, really important space to navigate more. (Joey, she/they).

For Kelly (she/they), having chronic and mental health disabilities influenced her to become more aware and empathetic, as an ECE, toward children's way of expressing their sense of self. Whether it is regarding gender or disability, Kelly voiced that ECEs should not be correcting every aspect of a child and instead should be happy with *"the way that they already are."*

I'm disabled as well. So, I have chronic pain and I have other chronic disabilities. And mental health is a big one for me. And I think when you have, especially like a mental health disability, you really start to see how important it is to recognize other people's experiences and how you need to validate other people, especially children. I find a lot that—like something that always really pisses me off in daycare is when a teacher says "stop crying." That makes me so angry. That kid is sad, like, let them cry, you know. Or like, stop pretending to be a girl or whatever. Like, maybe that kid's a girl, or maybe even if like even if it's not permanent, they want to be a girl right now. Let them be kids—let them be sad, let them be gay, let them be whoever they are instead of fighting it, or let them be autistic, stop trying to correct every single thing and instead show them how to be a confident, happy individual with the way that they already are. (Kelly, she/they)

Similarly, Skyla (she/her), who struggled with mental health as a child and is discovering a potential ADHD diagnosis as an adult, mentioned that her disability and mental health affect how she cares for children. In fact, it has made her become more mindful and empathetic toward children's behaviour because she knew *"how it felt"* to be labelled as the *"difficult child."*

Race, ethnicity, and religion. Jason (he/him), a queer Chinese male ECE, expressed how being raised in a Chinese household led him to internalize a negative perception of his queer identity. In spite of that, his awareness of the negative impacts of internalized queerphobia influenced how he addresses topics of gender and sexuality with children.

So, it definitely ties with the fact of being raised in an East Asian family. It definitely has impacted how I want to address it (gender and sexuality in the classroom). Even though I know there should be representation and I can be that representation in the classroom, sometimes there is that level of or degree of shame and questioning that I have to confront myself. When addressing it (gender and sexuality in the classroom), I have to be wholly invested even if I stand a chance of rejection and resistance with children. I don't want to be "half-assing" it or rolling my eyes as I am talking about it. And I feel like a big part of it is because I have been brought up knowing and constantly hearing that "it isn't right" (to be gay). As a result, you internalize it in a way that other people have the same idea. (Jason, he/him)

Clair (she/her), who is Jamaican and bisexual, also expressed that her racial and cultural community had influenced her experience as a Black queer person within Black communities.

The Black communities just generally a lot of the time is so very homophobic. Or, they don't tolerate difference when it comes to sexual orientation or gender identity. Everything is set. Like if you're a man, you're a man, you wear these clothes, you're a woman, you wear these clothes. And a lot of it has to do with where we come from. I know where I come from, Jamaica, it is very much instilled in us. This has a lot to do with different cultural backgrounds. Like that's how things work. (Clair, she/her)

Furthermore, Clair's religious community had also impacted her experience as an LGBTQ+ ECE as she expressed a *"struggle between (religious) beliefs and just my own identity."*

These narratives demonstrate that taking up intersectionality is necessary to reveal the interactions of multiple systems of power and oppression that queer and trans educators might have to navigate. It reminds us that the experiences of queer and trans ECEs vary, despite shared intersecting identities. While LGBTQ+ ECEs navigate these systems of power and oppression, their unique and complex experiences foster empathy and mindfulness. Instead of policing children's expressions of gender and sexuality, they embrace them. As Kevin put it, *"Your job as ECEs is not to fix what you think may be wrong. It's just to love that kid and teach them how to be a loving and kind person. That's what your job is. Your job is to love them."*

Challenging the dominant discourses in ECEC

Despite having to navigate their gender identity, sexual orientation, and other positionalities (e.g., race, culture, religion, disability) in heteronormative educational spaces, the LGBTQ+ ECEs showed optimism in challenging heteronormativity at the risk of being subjected to prejudice, harassment, and discrimination. While some had already left the early childhood education and care (ECEC) field due to long-term negative experiences and/or personal endeavours, they continued their care and advocacy work in other positions within the field. Nevertheless, they remind us that it is important to continue the work to challenge dominant discourses in early childhood education settings. Clair shared an instance where she was caring for a child who chose to be addressed with a different name and by they/them pronouns. Some children respected that child's choice, but *"other children don't think their identity makes sense or they just don't know."* Clair's experience reminds us that (1) children are already reproducing and reinforcing heteronormativity at a young age, but (2) children are also capable of learning and accepting the fluidity of gender expression and identities. Children's resistance to and engagement in discussions of gender and sexuality also came up in Misty's conversations about marriage during pretend play. For more context, Misty had to intervene when a group of girls disagreed about same-sex relationships. One girl expressed, *"I want to marry a girl when I get older"* and the other girls responded with *"Two girls can't get married. You have to marry a boy."* Misty affirmed that two girls can get married in Canada and that same-sex couples can form families. The children continued to play after Misty's comment, and while we cannot confirm that they fully understood it, Misty's interruption of their play is an example of how educators can challenge heteronormative notions of marriage, relationships, and family structures.

The LGBTQ+ educators in this study were also making conscious steps to make their ECEC spaces welcoming to all families. For example, Sam took it upon herself to communicate with families about a more inclusive manner of celebrating Mother's Day that acknowledges other caregivers in children's lives regardless of gender. This resulted in a single mother who is a lesbian disclosing her identity and even expressing the need for representation at the centre. Robinson (2002) reminds us that gay, lesbian, trans, and queer families are often silenced and made invisible in early childhood education settings because of the *"extensiveness and effectiveness of homophobia [and transphobia] within educational settings and in the society more broadly"* (p. 427).

Recommendations: In conversation with LGBTQ+ ECEs

The ECEs in this study brought forth important recommendations to create queer- and trans-inclusive ECEC spaces. Recommendations included mandatory antibias and inclusivity training for preservice and in-service educators; the mandatory aspect was a common reaction to the slow progress in the ECEC field. Within these professional development trainings, there should be sufficient focus on queer- and trans-inclusive discourse. The importance of intersectionality and decolonial approaches was also expressed by some educators. Recognizing the sociocultural and historical trauma of marginalized folks in Canada not only addresses a decolonial approach but also challenges the settler colonial notion of childhood innocence that disregards the cultural contexts, symbols, and narratives that influence a holistic understanding of childhood (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Templeton & Cheruvu, 2020). A view of children as vulnerable also contradicts a praxis within early childhood education that recognizes children as competent to learn about the realities of the world.

These recommendations need to be made apparent within our practices and policies if the ECEC field hopes to move toward pedagogies of inclusion and antioppression. Critical and intersectional discussions around gender and sexuality also need to be included in early childhood education curricula. While the inclusion of comprehensive sex education in mainstream K–12 curriculum has been debated, its adaptation into early childhood programs for children aged 0–5 may require different inquiries and approaches. Reframing comprehensive sex education through the process of queering early childhood education may offer such adaptations. Queering early childhood education aims to acknowledge identities that go beyond the binaries of male and female and compulsory heterosexuality, and that disrupt the dominant discourses (e.g., Euro-Western, white, heteronormative) on which education has been built (Lin, 2017; Cavanaugh et al., 2023). Queering education also encourages educators, children, and families to learn, understand, and live with people regardless of their differences in identity and ways of being (Gansen, 2017; Gelir, 2020; Kelly-Ware, 2016; Linville, 2017; Robinson, 2005). However, doing so requires educators to confront their own perceptions around gender and sexuality. This may involve educators reflecting on and responding to children's and adults' attitudes toward gender expression and relationships (e.g., are you shutting down sexist, gendered, homophobic, and transphobic comments?), examining the toys and materials in the classroom (e.g., do they reinforce gender binaries?) and the language they use to react to children's exploration and expression of gender and sexuality (e.g., how do you respond when children explore femininity, masculinity, and intimacy such as holding hands, hugging, and kissing other children?), and evaluating the roles and language used in curriculum, planning, and documentation (e.g., how do we address heteronormativity within hidden curricula?). As ECEs engage in such reflexive practices, they then may be able to allow and address children's exploration of identities (e.g., gender, sexuality, race, spirituality, disability), be critical of materials used in classrooms, promote and encourage mutual understanding of equity and inclusion in the workplace (e.g., address queer and trans issues, anti-Black racism, ableism etc.), and avoid tokenistic or tourist approaches (e.g., only mentioning queer and trans people during Pride month or recognizing Black heroes during Black history month).

Lastly, I want to address the possible discomfort that parents and guardians might feel when ECEs engage in queering education, which includes comprehensive sex education in early childhood. While being transparent about the curriculum might dispel the misconception that we are teaching explicit sexual content to children, some parents may still resist if they have conservative attitudes toward gender identity, sexuality, and 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusivity (Csanady, 2016; Leung, 2017). Furthermore, educators may have to navigate the various political wills and perspectives that influence parents', caregivers', and families' reactions toward comprehensive sex education and 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusive curricula in early childhood. Bialystock and Andersen (2022) suggest a “democratic humanistic sexuality education” (DHSE) framework when engaging with historical and contemporary discourses around sex education. DHSE is an open-ended and customizable approach to sex and relationship education where

decisions on what is being taught consider ethics and civics education to foster educational spaces that cultivate citizens who participate in a democratic society. DHSE involves sex education that is “oriented toward applying values to sexual behaviour and including sexuality as an essential aspect of responsible citizenship” (Bialystock & Andersen, 2022, p. 140). A DHSE framework is customizable and requires parents and guardians to engage in the process of creating a sex education curriculum. Within this framework, standing against homophobia and transphobia is not negotiable. Bialystock and Andersen write that if “we want people to have the moral to treat people as people regardless of differences” (p. 106) then we need to recognize and support the well-being of queer and trans folks within our curricula. Future research may want to consider such democratic and humanistic frameworks in the process of queering early childhood education in a way that considers relationships with families and communities.

Conclusion

As the current study makes apparent, LGBTQ+ ECEs are an integral part of the early childhood community because they contribute to the work of supporting children and families regardless of differences in identity. The participants’ experiences as queer and/or trans persons with other positionalities have fostered a sense of determination to challenge heteronormativity in the classroom even while risking being subjected to prejudice, harassment, and discrimination. The stories shared in this study are an urgent call to queer early childhood education so that diverse and fluid identities—those that go beyond the binaries of male/female and heterosexuality—are acknowledged and the dominant discourses (e.g., Euro-Western, white, heteronormative) upon which education has been built are disturbed (Cavanaugh et al., 2023; Lin, 2017). This call is made more urgent because the recent rise in anti-queer and -trans discourse in Canada has manifested in nationwide protests (e.g., 1MillionMarch4Children) that use the rhetoric of parental rights and “saving” children to object to gender diversity curricula in schools (CBC News, 2023; National Post, 2023). Against this backdrop of heated rhetoric, the narratives of LGBTQ+ ECEs in this study provide perspectives that challenge heteronormativity in ECEC spaces through recognition, discussion, and acceptance of difference.

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- 1 This paper mainly uses (care-fully) the abbreviation LGBTQ+ instead of 2SLGBTQIA+ because it is a summative reflection of how the study participants identified. Two-Spirit (2S) and intersex (I) individuals are not included in the abbreviation used because none of the study participants identified as such. One participant identified as Métis but did not express being Two-Spirit. It is also important to note that while the longer abbreviation 2SLGBTQIA+ reflects a developing and complex way of understanding queer and trans communities, queer, trans, and Two-Spirit people may use different abbreviations and different terms to identify and describe their experiences. I chose to mainly use the shorter abbreviation because the narratives presented are not meant to represent all queer and trans educators but rather to challenge the overarching issues of cis-heteronormativity and settler colonialism that continue to affect queer and trans people in education.
 - 2 K-12 refers to the typical range of primary and secondary education in countries such as Canada and the United States. It covers a period of education from kindergarten through grade 6 (primary or elementary school), grades 7 and 8 (middle or junior school), and grades 9-12 (high school).

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