Creating inclusive workplaces for LGBTQ international educators: Voices from the field

Robert Mizzi[1]

University of Manitoba, Canada: *Robert.Mizzi@umanitoba.ca*

This paper aims to amplify LGBTQ international educators' voices on expanding school inclusivity to consider sexual or gender diversity. Fifteen LGBTQ international educators were interviewed about recommendations they would make to school leaders that would improve work situations for LGBTQ international staff. Analysis of the recommendations revealed four themes: pre-departure preparation, finding community, cultural navigation and school leadership. Study findings suggest that sexual and gender diversity are not absent in international schools and that LGBTQ international educators require various kinds of support compared to their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts.

Keywords: international teachers; sexual and gender diversity; inclusivity; recommendations

INTRODUCTION

Currently, 67 countries have criminalised consensual same-sex sexual acts (Mendos et al., 2020), including Malaysia, Bhutan, Kenya and the United Arab Emirates, that actively recruit international educators from around the world. In such countries, people who identify as heterosexual and cisgender (non-transgender) are considered 'normal' national subjects, representing social relations and values that are considered superior and thus hold power and privilege. People with same-sex sexualities or gender variances are repressed, partly due to the criminalisation of homosexual conduct during colonisation (Han & O'Mahoney, 2014). The problem is that many of these countries have not decriminalised homosexuality despite acquiring autonomy from their former coloniser. International lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) educators who teach in countries with oppressive laws and social values may encounter violence and marginalisation partly due to this controversial history.

There is little scholarship on expressing an LGBTQ educator identity in international contexts. Having an LGBTQ identity does not fit comfortably within some international organisations, although LGBTQ international teachers express personal agency by choosing (not) to share queer knowledge in the classroom (Mizzi, 2013; Mizzi et al., 2021; Nelson, 2004). Agency also surfaces when engaging in LGBTQ activism to mitigate social isolation (Boshier & Huang, 2007). Given that LGBTQ international teachers can encounter dangerous situations due to their sexuality or gender (e.g., Martin, 2012), recommendations by experienced LGBTQ international educators on how to make international schools safer and more inclusive are necessary.

This paper aims to centralise and amplify experienced LGBTQ international educators' voices on how international schools can be more inclusive of sexual and gender-diverse faculty.

Sharing community voices shifts the discourse around hegemonic forms of knowledge in the field of international education and explores the perspectives and interests of marginalised groups (Moore & Muller, 1999). As Moore and Muller (1999) explained, 'knowledge forms and knowledge relations are translated as social standpoints and power relationships between groups. This is more of a sociology of knowers and their relationship than of knowledge' (p. 190). This current study focuses on the recommendations from LGBTQ people to dismantle the 'sociology of knowers' (i.e., cisgender, heterosexual people) to promote authenticity, inclusion, and equity in international education. LGBTQ international educators, due to their personal and professional experiences, can identify recommendations for change. A recommendation study facilitates a greater understanding of what can foster social or organisational transformation. This work is similar to Moriña and Orozco (2020), who sought out faculty recommendations for improving their pedagogical practices for students with disabilities and then analysed their recommendations. Learning from the voices of those most impacted by oppression is essential to fostering equity and organisational change (Hill, 2009). This paper continues with a brief literature overview on LGBTQ expatriates and educators, followed by the research methodology, results and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on LGBTQ educators rarely considers transnational mobility, with most existing research situated within domestic contexts (Mizzi et al., 2021). It is clear from domestic literature that LGBTQ educators endure systemic and social homo/transphobia, struggle to find support, must keep their sexual/gender identity a 'secret,' and operate in hetero/cisnormative workplaces (Connell, 2015; Dejean & Sapp, 2017).

Unmarked sexuality is assumed to be heterosexual because teaching situations often mirror a broader heteronormative society (Paiz, 2019). For instance, Parry (2014) described how an international school in Hong Kong banned LGBTQ teachers from being employed at the school due to a staunchly heteronormative 'morality code'. This unmarked sexuality merges concepts of 'heterosexuality' and 'family', thereby limiting any space to welcome LGBTQ perspectives, same-sex desire or homosocial relationships. As a result, Halicioglu (2015) warned that LGBTQ international educators 'may find themselves marooned in a sea of heterosexual, marital morality, which can cause understandable stress' (p. 251). Even in contexts that support sexual and gender diversity, educators with LGBTQ identities have been deprived of inclusion and respect (Mizzi et al., 2021; Meadows, 2018). Meadows (2018) detailed a high degree of resistance when trying to teach positive LGBTQ identity programming to students at an international school in Kuwait.

LGBTQ international educators experience more complexity than cisgender and heterosexual international educators (Mizzi et al., 2021). First, LGBTQ international educators deserve the option to be open and authentic about their identities and take advantage of all work opportunities. School leaders can confront the pervasiveness of hetero/cisnormativity in their schools and work with staff to support sexual and gender diversity. This effort may mean, but is not limited to, including diversity policies, queering curriculum, supporting queer pedagogy and creating support systems.

Second, international educators have a professional expectation to respect local cultural differences (Gibson & Bailey, 2022), which may include adherence to hetero/cisnormativity. This complication may result in LGBTQ international educators navigating awkward conversations around desire, relationships, and tradition and choosing when or to whom they disclose their authentic selves. The negative physical and emotional impacts of hiding a non-

normative sexual orientation at work will wear down staff satisfaction, productivity and cohesion (Collins & Callahan, 2012).

Third, identifying as LGBTQ may be controversial and dangerous in certain countries, and the consequences of introducing these identities into the classroom are significant (Mizzi & Walton, 2014). Consequences could be deportation, imprisonment, job termination or marginalisation. Given that Gibson and Bailey (2022) observed how leaders contributed to racial divisiveness at international schools in Malaysia, they may also be drawing on heteronormative assumptions in their leadership. School leaders not addressing LGBTQ inclusion in international schools cement a status quo that validates only cisgender and heterosexual knowledge.

There needs to be a re-articulation of sexual and gender identity in international workplaces and an evaluation of safety and security concerns because of the experiences of LGBTQ expatriates (Gedro et al., 2013). Some direction for administrators to unravel the inherent tensions and complexities will help current and future LGBTQ international educators in their schools.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research question centring this study was: *How can international schools improve the work experiences of LGBTQ international educators?* Responding to this question centralised LGBTQ international educators' voices for social and organisational change. Moore and Muller (1999) stated, 'The key question to be asked whenever we encounter the notion of "voice", is not only who is speaking, but who is hearing—or, more accurately, reading?' (p. 194). Through those hearing—or reading—the voices shared in this research, better support for LGBTQ international educators and creating inclusive pathways can occur.

Using qualitative, grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), generative questions posed to LGBTQ international educators about ways to improve their work situations helped guide the research, collect data, identify core concepts and summarise the research. There were no patterns among the countries other than being culturally, economically, or politically identified as non-Western. The data analysis is based on generating new and unaltered meanings and knowledge (Lichtman, 2010). Interview transcripts served as data and the social texts to be analysed. Coding these social texts meant detecting reoccurring topics. Codes were then categorised, resulting in themes (Lichtman, 2010).

Following Dworkin's (2012) size recommendation for in-depth qualitative interviews, 15 international educators from across queer humanity were recruited for this study. Study participants held a paid instructor position within an international school (primary, secondary, or post-secondary) and were expected to teach lessons to students, collaborate with colleagues, create a supportive learning environment, engage parents and support extra-curricular activities. Table 1 lists volunteer study participants and summarise their backgrounds. The gender identities and sexual orientations offered in the table reflect what the participants described during data collection. Names and locations have been changed to protect anonymity. Except for one African nation, all countries represented in this study legally allow homosexuality. No country permits same-sex marriage. This research received approval from the author's university human ethics review board to conduct the study.

Table 1: List of Participants

Name	Origin	Current Context	Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation
Stephen	Canada	Southeast Asia (urban)	Cisgender, Gay Man
Louisa	USA	China (rural)	Cisgender, Lesbian
Daniel	Canada	Brazil (urban)	Cisgender, Gay Man
Peter	Canada	Southeast Asia (urban)	Trans, Queer
Jeff	Canada	China (urban)	Cisgender, Gay Man
Evan	Canada	China (urban)	Cisgender, Gay Man
Katherine	UK	Eastern Europe (urban)	Trans, Queer
Karen	Canada	South Korea (urban)	Cisgender, Lesbian
Jake	USA	Southeast Asia (rural)	Non-Binary, Queer
Andrew	USA	China (urban)	Cisgender, Pansexual Man
Lawrence	USA	The Caribbean (urban)	Cisgender, Gay Man
Chris	UK	Japan (urban)	Cisgender, Gay Man
Stephanie	USA	Southern Africa (rural)	Cisgender, Pansexual or Bisexual Woman
James	USA	Southeast Asia (urban)	Cisgender, Gay Man
Michael	Canada	Japan (rural)	Cisgender, Bisexual Man

RESULTS

Analysis of the participants' transcripts offered four main themes of recommendations, including pre-departure preparation, finding community, cultural navigation and school leadership. Each theme is presented below.

Pre-departure preparation

Preparing to work as an LGBTQ international educator means readiness for an experience different from cisgender, heterosexual colleagues. All participants affirmed earlier research that values pre-departure orientations for LGBTQ expatriates (Mizzi, 2014). The participants recommended that their employers' pre-departure orientations contain LGBTQ-specific information (e.g., work visas, privacy laws, health care, human rights, support for same-sex relationships and their children, awareness of LGBTQ realities and local community groups). Michael and Chris, who worked for the same organisation that employed international teachers, were the only participants who shared that their pre-departure orientations included LGBTQ perspectives. Michael noted, 'There was actually a former teacher [at the orientation] who was gay and gave his advice based on his experiences. Hearing that background relaxed me'.

In the case of an exclusionary or absent pre-departure orientation, the study participants recommended LGBTQ international educators ready themselves for the new community. First, teachers must make clear decisions about disclosure (or being out) in the workplace before arrival. Stephanie offered, 'I would say before you go, you have to make a decision on how out and vocal you want to be about your identity. Because it is going to change your relationships a lot.' This decision means, as Andrew shared, weighing priorities about which challenges educators will tackle in the workplace. Stephanie, Katherine and Andrew explained that not every staff member would approve of an LGBTQ international educator because of their sexual or gender identity. Second, Karen shared that LGBTQ international teachers need to 'rely on

adapting to the host country's culture because, at the end of the day, you have to learn about that and find that nuance. I would say to still be cautious but be as out as you are comfortable with.' Third, Andrew recommended websites such as the *International Schools Review* (see www.internationalschoolsreview.com) to see what problems certain international schools face. Lawrence also suggested joining the Facebook group, *International School Educators– LGBT+andAllies* (see https://www.facebook.com/groups/2250314125289347), to discuss school climate, local culture and past experiences with other educators. Fourth, Jake recommended that applicants ask more questions during the job interview and be more open about sexual and gender identity differences. They commented:

> For a long time, I was cautious about mentioning my sexuality and queer identity [during the job interview]. But those things being acknowledged and celebrated at schools is much more important to me now, and I wish I would have acknowledged that when I started teaching. It is not easy. You'll likely get rejected by a few places, but I wouldn't want to work for a place that doesn't celebrate me for who I am. Or students for who they are.

Related to this point, Katherine also shared for educators to 'choose the right country for you and find support. Schools need to be supportive'. This decision includes, as Louisa suggested, obtaining legal working visas despite the heteronormativity that dominates immigration processes to various countries (see Gedro et al. [2013] for a similar point).

Finding community

Study participants also emphasised the importance of finding a supportive community soon after arrival in the new country. Stephanie explained:

> I think that [finding support] is amplified when you're abroad because you probably don't have the support systems you would have elsewhere. That is also amplified if you are in a place that is not queer-friendly because the other viewpoints are often stronger and more present.

To address the lack of support, Stephen communicated with current friends already living in his destination country, Jeff and James joined local LGBTQ groups, and Daniel connected with LGBTQ educators to get a sense of their experiences. Daniel recommended locating gay clubs or neighbourhoods and learning how present the gay culture is in that city because that makes a difference. 'I went from Dubai to here, and we have a huge gay community where I currently am. So, if you end up in a place that doesn't have a visible community, it can be more challenging.'

Cultural navigation

All participants acknowledged that navigating cultural norms, particularly in countries where state-sanctioned homo/transphobia is prevalent, are challenging and complicating aspects of the job. Navigating cultural norms means being aware of cultural differences in perceptions towards and expressions of sexual and gender diversity and finding ways to mitigate these differences. Such practices can include hiding one's sexuality or gender, keeping silent, learning from mistakes, or choosing who or when to disclose to. This process is often nuanced by tense and delicate manoeuvring in day-to-day conversations. Evan stated:

> I would say there is often tension between personal values and your own culture and living in another culture. I find that when people cross cultures and live in other places, they refer to this thing about living in another culture and having to be respectful, especially in terms

of women's rights, children's rights, GLBT rights and disability issues, because the dominant culture is the one that we have to follow.

That said, study participants did not recommend returning to the proverbial closet. Michael summarised, 'never erase who you are and never try to hide whom you are' when sharing sexual or gender identity, as the ongoing secrecy will deteriorate mental health. James recommended:

> I will say keep an open mind and be prepared to have your whole life changed in ways you didn't imagine it could possibly change. I could never have imagined what was going to happen to me when I came overseas. I would never change that. The key is an open mind and an open heart. Or you'll suffer. Any person, straight or LGBT, it doesn't matter. If you don't have that, you're not going to survive when you come overseas.

Karen recommended professional development opportunities involving LGBTQ international educators to sharpen their intercultural competency skills. Collaborating with local LGBTQ community members may be helpful and function as a cultural and learning opportunity. Evan also suggested:

> If you're coming from another place, you can acknowledge and support those people who are similar to yourself, by just being who you are. You can enrich your own experience and the experiences of other people you work with and in that community.

Katherine offered a different point on the disclosure topic. She explained that openly sharing one's queer identity may result in experiencing blowback, which she endured when disclosing her trans identity at a staff meeting. It was something she would 'never do again or advise anyone [to do]'. As Evan and Katherine suggested, working in solidarity with other marginalised groups may help confront an oppressive system.

All participants recommended being cautious and safe, observing behaviours and interactions, and disclosing sexual or gender identity whenever it felt comfortable and to whoever felt most accepting. By waiting, as Michael explained:

> You understand that culture a little bit more, understand what it is lacking, and understand where there is an opening. Then you can start to find the opportunity to introduce a little bit of yourself and make the world a bit better.

This openness could be to everyone, only expatriate staff, only local colleagues, only community members, or somewhat of a hybrid approach. Andrew explained that recognising LGBTQ identities or concepts 'do not travel perfectly from one national context to the next', so adaptation and a greater understanding of global sexualities and genders are paramount. Chris added, 'once I am in an environment and we've gotten used to our surroundings, it's easier to be more open. Also, being part of the LGBT community has helped me to be more open.'

While LGBTQ international educators may wish to use their classrooms as transformative and progressive spaces, Andrew offered caution to LGBTQ educators in this regard:

> You can't go into these contexts expecting people to think about these issues or give them as much importance as you do. You don't need to get upset or offended; it means you re-evaluate where you are and how you engage with that person. The goal is not to win them over. The goal is to move the needle and raise awareness. Understand that their thinking is going to take time to develop.

These data points suggest that while international work may present one opportunity to make sexual and gender diversity visible, a cautious approach towards that visibility may produce more desirable results.

School leadership

The study participants offered recommendations for international school leaders regarding supporting their LGBTQ faculty, particularly for those administrators who are straight and cisgender. First, study participants recommended that school leaders and LGBTQ educators research and learn about being LGBTQ in the country. For example, Daniel and Jeff suggested learning about human rights, the treatment of LGBTQ people, queer culture, and school values towards sexual and gender diversity. Louisa recommended that school leaders learn and connect new LGBTQ educators to local community groups. This networking means not waiting for LGBTQ educators to self-identify but practising inclusivity of all identities during the onboarding process. Peter recommended keeping track of expatriate migration so 'we know who's moving out'. These efforts can result in a gender-sexuality alliance, an LGBTQ teacher network, and a school diversity policy. Jeff shared, 'I've been working with a committee to support the creation of the gender-sexuality alliance. The committee that created the diversity policy is working around these issues, which is an extension of who I am.'

Second, schools can foster LGBTQ identities in general, and school leaders are in an excellent position to facilitate this effort. Katherine recommended that school leaders create a trans-positive space in their schools. She created a 'confidence corner' as a space where everyone could feel safer in her classroom. Evan established a 'buddy bench' in his schoolyard for support-seeking students. Lawrence laid out a 'rainbow carpet' in his classroom for LGBTQ students to feel welcomed. These examples demonstrate that school leaders should signal LGBTQ inclusivity and empower their teachers to take such measures in their schools.

Third, the study participants recommended ongoing professional development for leaders and educators on sexual and gender diversity. Lawrence commented, 'I think it would be great if there were workshops and international conferences about creating LGBTQ-inclusive spaces. For example, [workshops on] how to navigate or resist parent communities, school boards, and local communities.' Lawrence also suggested that 'international organisations could conduct training and give the schools certification and markers of their schools' accepting places'. The overall goal here is for professional development to be a part of a larger strategy in which school leaders signal support for LGBTQ teachers and students. The pre-departure orientation may be a good starting point for setting a tone for LGBTQ inclusion (Mizzi, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The participants in the current study offered helpful insights and recommendations for LGBTQ international educators and their school leaders. Through pre-departure preparation, community, cultural navigation and LGBTQ-inclusive school leadership, there is an opportunity for positive experiences and employment outcomes for LGBTQ international educators. A poor ability to speak the local language and restricted access to resources and support in general positions the international school as a valuable LGBTQ socialisation and knowledge source.

The results suggest there were no differences among country contexts concerning the recommendations. Unsurprisingly, rural-based educators in this study reported having difficulty locating community resources and support more than urban-based educators. Queer teachers in rural areas struggle more due to a lack of resources and often staunchly anti-queer conservative climates (Lee, 2019). This current study reified the difficulties of being a rural queer teacher, with the participants emphasising the need for inclusive schools as a way for LGBTQ teachers to develop a sense of belonging.

In light of their experiences in their international schools, each participant offered recommendations that represented a range of disclosure practices (i.e., from being careful to being open about sexual or gender identity) and ways to confront heteronormativity in the workplace. Besides what was suggested by the participants, LGBTQ international educators may wish to seek additional ways to support one another and foster queer intercultural learning. This learning can be engaging in activism and community development that respects Indigenous and local sexual minority realities, queer mentorship and queer culture, which may help foster resilience and strengthen intercultural networks. Future studies may want to explore these additional dimensions.

In conclusion, this study expanded the voices of LGBTQ international educators, mainly on how to generate social and organisational change in their schools. Although this research is nascent and more is necessary, the findings demonstrated that sexuality and gender are not absent in international schools and that teachers with non-normative sexualities and genders will require support and information different from their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts. LGBTQ international educators need supportive and respectful work experiences that enhance their global careers. School leaders should work towards dismantling hetero/cisnormativity in their schools and accommodate sexuality and gender differences among their staff. Doing so would foster insights into how a visible and robust sexual and gender-diverse community strengthens international schools.

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