Courageous Leaders: Promoting and Supporting Diversity in School Leadership Development

**Introduction**

This article examines the effect of the United Kingdom’s first LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) School Leadership programme. Based on the values of authentic leadership, promoting inclusion, celebrating diversity, accepting difference, challenging the status quo, and achieving social justice, the Courageous Leaders programme provided mentoring, training and support for LGBT teachers aspiring to become school leaders. Utilising Social Phenomenology as methodological framework, the article considers the written reflections of a single cohort of ten lesbian and gay teacher participants, to reflect on the way in which Courageous Leaders affected their professional identities and behaviours.

There is evidence to suggest that schools are particularly challenging environments for LGBT teachers. Despite legislative protection, recent literature about LGBT teachers continues to record concerns about discrimination in UK schools (Rudoe, 2014; Thompson-Lee, 2017; Rivers, 2018). Evidence suggests that many LGBT teachers do not yet feel adequately protected in schools. Preston (2018), for example, notes an enduring climate of fear about coming out in the school workplace, stating that LGBT teachers have to ‘navigate complex terrain negotiating tricky private and professional boundaries’ (p. 340). Lee (2018) too, found that one in four of the teachers she surveyed, believed that their LGBT identity had been a barrier to promotion.

Courageous Leaders was a year-long programme for teachers designed around the values promoting inclusion, celebrating diversity, accepting difference, challenging the status quo, and achieving social justice, Courageous Leaders provided mentoring, training and support for LGBT aspiring school leaders over a twelve month period, with the aim of helping them achieve promotion. Using the written evaluations of a single cohort of ten teacher participants who each identified as either lesbian or gay, this article explores the effect of the programme on the professional identities and behaviours of the participants.

This article is underpinned by a poststructuralist theoretical framework that rejects essentialist paradigms of sexuality and challenges heteronormativity. Schools practise heteronormativity through the expectations placed upon pupils and staff. School staff are entrusted to uphold and promote the dominant discourse of the wider community and this usually means that heterosexuality, male masculinity and female femininity are the only gender and sexual identities that are encouraged in young people and even staff (Jackson, 2006). Rigid binaries of male/female, boy/girl, heterosexual/homosexual are engineered from the earliest years of formal education. Schools preserve and perpetuate the norms of masculinity and femininity, equating masculinity with strength, activity and rationality; and recognising in femininity, the inverse but complementary features of weakness, passivity and emotionality (Ferfolja, 2010). Pupils are coerced into understanding, accepting and engaging in the practices of gender regulation and heteronormativity (Renold, 2002) and this endures through all stages of education, from the play corner in reception, right through to the school leavers’ prom (Robinson, 2002). This paper assumes that gender and sexual identities are multiple and fragmented (Ward and Winstanley, 2005) and are constructed in relation to others and within systems of power and knowledge (Sullivan, 2003).

The article begins with a brief review of the literature before describing the methodological process for undertaking this research. Drawing on the written course evaluations of the participants, common themes are identified, before conclusions are reached.

Leadership can be broadly defined as holding an influence which moves others to think and behave in a particular way (Fassinger et.al 2010). Historically, in Western society, leadership evolved from the notion of great male leaders, commanding authority and controlling their followers (Sy, 2010). More recently, theories of leadership present models in which authority needs to be earned and depends on the leader convincing others of their credibility, by exhibiting traits, skills and expertise that convince potential followers that a leader is worthy of following. Fassinger et.al (2010) describe leadership as a transactional interplay of lead-and-obey behaviour in which followers, motivated by self-interest, are rewarded, praised or punished for specific behaviours determined by the leader. This transactional interplay model of leadership is however, contingent upon leaders being beyond reproach themselves, emanating power and not presenting perceived weaknesses that followers may take advantage of (ibid). According to Blount (2003), heterosexual, white, masculine and able bodied, are all characteristics embedded in Western conceptualizations of leadership, including school leadership. Despite a teaching population in the West that is overwhelmingly female, the traditional notion of the Headmaster, is a trope in which the masculine white male, continues to preside, particularly in secondary schools. Even in primary schools, where teaching younger children is regarded as feminised and inextricably linked to care (Moreau, 2019), UK Government policies continue to focus on attracting men into teaching, ignoring the under representation across all education phases of women in leadership roles (Moreau, et.al. 2008).

There are a number of leadership programmes emerging however, aiming to challenge the white male leadership trope and improve the diversity of school leadership. For example, there are programmes for black and minority ethnic aspiring leaders (Coleman and Campbell-Stephens, 2010) and a thriving Women’s leadership programme called Women Ed. Women Ed describes itself as a grassroots movement connecting existing and aspiring leaders in education. With the mantra of 10% braver, the programme encourages women to succeed in leaderships positions, challenging gender stereotyping in schools and seeking to close the gender pay gap (Porritt and Featherstone, 2019)

Whilst the BME and Women’s Education Leadership programmes, in common with Courageous Leaders, aim to produce more diverse school leaders, for LGBT teachers, the decision of whether or not to declare their sexual identity by coming out in school means unlike BME and Women aspiring leaders, LGBT teachers may be misidentified in the work-place and subject to heteronormative practices.

Heteronormativity defines, produces and perpetuates gender and sexuality practices in day-to-day school life (Thompson-Lee, 2017). Difference or diversity, particularly in schools, are too often framed “in terms of deficiencies and frequently labeled . . . as genetic and moral failings” (Karpinski and Lugg, 2006, p. 281). Gray (2010) argues that male masculinity dominates in schools, achieving its superior status through misogynistic and homophobic cultural and social representations. Schools sanction those identities and relationships that conform to the norms and values of heterosexuality – male masculinity and female femininity – but in doing so render individuals who do not appear to fit, as excluded or Othered. Despite 74% of the UK’s schools workforce being female, less than a third of women become Headteachers (Torrance et. al, 2017). The privileging of male masculinity in school contributes then to the continued emergence of masculine male school leaders in an environment in which they represent a minority of the workforce. Although secondary schools in the UK are starting to acknowledge and support young people with LGBT identities, it remains extremely challenging for LGBT teachers and in particular LGBT teacher leaders, to reconcile their personal and professional identities in the workplaces. Lugg and Koschoreck (2003) described school leadership, as ‘the final unrecognized and unexamined closet’ (p.4), adding that heterosexuality is a compulsory component of school leadership. Payne and Smith (2018) concur, noting that normative gender and sexuality serve as strong, emotional organizing factors in educational leadership. Britzman (2012) attributes this to the relationship teachers have to their workplace and their history as school pupils. Britzman states ‘Teaching is one of the few professions where newcomers feel the force of their own history of learning as if it telegraphs relevancy to their work’ (2012, p1).

One of the ways in which LGBT school leaders may emerge is through carefully managing the intersection between their professional and personal identities. Sparkes (1994) suggests that whilst the splitting of identities into professional and private may offer LGBT teachers a place of safety and protection from harassment or discrimination, it disguises the difficulties LGBT teachers encounter and perpetuates the myth to pupils in particular, that everyone is heterosexual.

In her article, “The problem of coming out”, Rasmussen (2004) considers the moral, political and pedagogical issues that necessarily influence educational discourses of the closet and coming out. She suggests that coming out discourses tend to forge a relationship between inclusivity and coming out, a relationship that, she claims, situates the closet “as a zone of shame and exclusion” (p.144). Rasmussen asserts that by encouraging teachers to come out, it leaves those who are unable to do so feeling that they have somehow abdicated their moral responsibility as a role model to young people.

Aspiring School leaders are expected to conform to gender expectations, presenting as typically male or, in the case of female leaders, typically female. According to Courtney (2014), the latter can be particularly problematic for aspiring women leaders, as the traits of leadership such as ambition, strength, power and assertiveness are all imbued with notions of masculinity. Fassinger, et.al. (2010), state that there is an obvious and ironic double bind for some lesbian leaders because as a lesbian, she cannot be viewed as a ‘real’ woman, but as a woman, she cannot be viewed as a ‘real’ leader. And if she further confounds her predicament by clear transgressions of gender role behaviour (i.e., by dressing or acting in masculine way), it is reasonable to expect that her professional identity will be further threatened and her perceived (and even actual) leadership effectiveness compromised.

Much of the literature on LGBT teachers portrays them as marginalised by the heterosexual hegemony of their school communities (DePalma and Atkinson, 2009, Gray, 2010; Rudoe, 2010; Thompson-Lee, 2017). Neary (2013) describes the school staffroom as ‘embedded with assumptions of heterosexuality’ (p.13). For LGBT teachers, significant energy and vigilance is required then to navigate the heterosexual staffroom and classroom. LGBT aspiring school leaders may experience low self-efficacy in regard to assuming certain leadership roles; Lineback et.al (2016), found that the LGBT teachers in their study tried to remain as invisible as possible in their schools so as to not draw attention to themselves, acknowledging that this strategy was not conducive to job promotion. Fahie (2016) too, found that participants in his study avoided opportunities for promotion, as to do so would ‘increase their professional profile and raise their level of visibility within the local community’ (p.402).

Some of the strategies LGBT teachers deploy to manage their identities in school may be however, conducive to emerging as leaders. Fassinger, et.al. (2010), state that in studies of gay and lesbian leadership, many LGBT leaders overcompensate for their sexual identity by achieving and demonstrating high competence, hoping that their ability will safeguard them against discrimination in the workplace on the grounds of their sexual identity (see also Coon; 2001; Snyder; 2006, and Rudoe, 2010). Much of the literature shows that LGBT teachers place inordinate amounts of time and energy into their teaching, often over-performing in order to develop a positive professional reputation as an outstanding teacher or teacher leader. Lesbian teachers in Griffin’s research similarly sought to acquire the reputation of being someone “not to mess with” (1992, p173), whilst strategies adopted by Rudoe’s (2010) participants included endlessly rehearsing how they would respond to confrontation in relation to homophobic remarks or behaviours .

There is evidence to suggest, however, that some of the values espoused by LGBT workers make them ideally placed to become effective leaders. Snyder (2006) showed that employees who work for gay leaders have significantly higher levels of career engagement, career satisfaction and workplace morale, than the general workforce in the USA. Coon (2001) discovered that gay and lesbian leaders attributed their leadership strengths to previous challenging experiences as sexual minorities. The strengths attributed to being gay or lesbian included challenging the status quo of the organisational culture, risk taking, being willing to listen and learn, fostering collaboration and inclusion, and empowering others, especially those on the margins of the workforce. A number of these qualities are entirely consistent with characteristics important in models of leadership in contemporary workplaces.

It can be challenging for LGBT teachers seeking career progression to know whether or not to reveal their sexual identity in the school workplace. The disclosure process may be affected not only by their current environment, but also by the individual’s perceptions of past experiences of discrimination, much of which may have painfully taken place within the school environment as a pupil. According to Ragins and Singh (2007), the fear of negative repercussions in the workplace may lead to psychological distress and decreased job performance even in the absence of actual discrimination (p.1104).

Though rarely explicitly articulated, there is evidence that the principal fear of LGBT teachers (particularly those in primary schools), is that their heterosexual colleagues, and parents of pupils in their care, will align their identity with discourses of hypersexuality and paedophilia (see Cavanagh, 2008; Borg, 2017: Thompson-Lee, 2017). Piper and Sikes (2010) too observe that ‘fear of the pedophile taints adult–child relationships in general’ (p.567). Although Preston (2018) suggests all teachers are potentially under suspicion, Piper and Sikes argue that ‘When the focus is on sex that is regarded as being outside of the norm … the difficulties are magnified’ (ibid.). The moral panic around child protection is a particular problem, therefore, for LGBT in schools. As the title of the 2010 article by Piper and Sikes declares, ‘All Teachers are Vulnerable but Especially Gay Teachers’ (p.566).

Within the last ten years, there have been important leaps in protective legislation in the UK for LGBT individuals in the workplace (see for example, the Equality Act; 2010). The Equal Marriage Act (2015) has also improved the status of same-sex relationships, positively presenting LGBT identities in the mainstream and providing occupational security, particularly around workplace benefits and pensions for same sex couples. This has emboldened a minority of LGBT teachers in the UK to come out at school (See for example Daniel Gray - The Observer 26th May 2018).

The traditional role of the school leader is as a figurehead, and this entails being a visible presence in all aspects of school life. Attendance at extra-curricular events such as Parent-Teacher fund raising events, school concerts and school social gatherings are all important parts of school leadership. Typically heterosexual school leaders would be accompanied at such events by their opposite-sex partner or spouse. However, Fassinger, et.al. (2010), note that in the case of an LGBT leader, the presence of a same sex partner is a constant reminder to the wider school community of the gender transgression and may be deemed as inappropriate, due to the way in which same sex relationships are often conflated with the act of sex, in a way that heterosexual relationships are not. Conversely however, the apparent lack of any partner may also be seen as unusual, suggesting the leader lacks the necessary attributes to attract a partner of any kind, and is perhaps odd or deficient in some way. It takes considerable courage for an LGBT school leader to present themselves with their same sex partner in the school community. However, Fassinger, et.al. (2010), argue that the visibility of a same sex partner, especially over time, may normalise same-sex relationships within the school community, dispelling negative myths for those with little previous contact of LGBT relationships. It may also encourage others within the school community to come out themselves creating an environment that is inclusive. The consistency of a single partner may also be viewed by school stakeholders as a stabilizing influence which counters the promiscuous and hypersexual stereotypes synonymous to some, with elements of LGBT community.

The climate for LGBT school teachers remains extremely challenging. Improvements to equalities legislation at the macro level do not necessarily filter through to create a more positive day-to-day experience for LGBT teachers at the micro level of their school communities. LGBT aspiring school leaders, must navigate complex cultural and political school environments, whilst under scrutiny of a host of different school stakeholders. To become a visible LGBT school leader is then, an act of considerable courage.

**The Courageous Leaders Programme**

The Courageous Leaders programme offered LGBT aspiring school leaders mentoring by education leaders in a safe and inclusive environment. Workshops promoted confidence building, developed the communication and presentation skills of participants, and examined what it means to be an authentic school leader.

The cohort of ten teachers analysed for the purpose of this article comprised of seven females all identifying as either lesbians or gay women, and three males, all identifying as gay men. All participants were white and British. The absence of racial diversity suggests perhaps that teachers identifying as both BME and LGBT, are perhaps more likely to pursue a programme based on their racial rather than sexual identity, the latter of which can be hidden. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect their identities. The males on the programme averaged only 3 years of teaching, whilst the females averaged 13 years in teaching, suggesting that the males had identified themselves, or had been identified by their school, as potential leaders much more quickly that their female counterparts. The table below provides summary data for each member of the cohort:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Participant** | **Identity** | **School Phase** | **Length of time in teaching** | **Role on commencement of Courageous Leaders** | **Promoted to within 12 months.** |
| Andrew | Gay man | Secondary | 5 years | Assistant Head of Music | Head of Music |
| Ben | Gay man | Secondary | 2 years | Teacher of Politics | Head of Department |
| Clare | Lesbian | Primary | 18 years | Class teacher | - |
| Donna | Gay woman | Secondary | 15 years | Head of Physics Department | Assistant Headteacher |
| Eve | Lesbian | Primary | 11 years | Class teacher | - |
| Fraser | Gay man | Primary | 3 years | Director of Learning | Head of School |
| Grace | Lesbian | Secondary | 10 years | PE Teacher | Head of Year |
| Helen | Lesbian | Secondary | 12 years | Head of Department for Science | Deputy Headteacher |
| Isabel | Lesbian | Primary | 21 years | Class teacher | Head of Alternative Provision |
| Joanne | Gay woman | Sixth Form | 10 years | Science teacher | Head of Sixth Form |

In order to access the programme, the participants had to seek the permission of their Headteacher to release them from school for five face to face days, with the Courageous Leaders programme paying for teaching cover. Each of the participants was then, at least open to their Headteacher about their sexual identity prior to embarking on the programme. The face to face training days took place in London inevitably leading to the majority of participants being based in London or Essex (6 participants), with each of the further four participants from the East of England, Surrey, Bristol and Ayeshire. The face to face sessions spread throughout a single academic year and covered a range of themes and activities including: Verbal and non-verbal communication skills; Becoming an Authentic Leader; LGBT leaders as role models;1:1 Mentoring from an LGBT leader and Networking

**Methodology**

**Approach**

**Ethics**

**Data collection**

Two months after the end of the programme, participants were invited by email to complete a written evaluation of the programme and could opt in at this point for their evaluation to be used as part of the data sample for this article. The evaluation form sought qualitative free text written comments reflecting on their experiences of the programme, as well as its subsequent effect on their professional identity and behaviour in the workplace.

It is important to acknowledge the relationship of the researcher to the Courageous Leaders cohort. The researcher identifies as a lesbian, is a teacher by background and acted as a mentor to two of the Courageous Leaders participants. It is imperative then to recognise that the sense-making that has taken place for the purpose of this article has been co-constructed by both the participants and the researcher, with the latter contextualising the written responses through the lens of knowing the participants over the period of the five face to face days, and interpreting the written reflections in light of her own challenges as a lesbian teacher (Thompson-Lee; 2017). Additionally, on a pragmatic note, the personal connection between the author and each of the Courageous Leaders participants led to 100% return rate of the written evaluation forms which is highly unusual in the collection of written forms of data.

The data set of ten evaluations was analysed first utilizing emergent coding (Carspecken, 2001) across the free text responses. This produced a number of key themes including coming out, networking, gaining confidence, leadership skills and seeking promotion. Each of the key themes was analysed using Carspecken’s critical approach (ibid), which subsequently and inductively produced sub-themes including being role-models for students, leading LGBT awareness amongst teacher colleagues, communication and presentation development, and renewed ambition.

**Results and Discussion**

Participants identified a number of challenges in being an LGBT teacher and aspiring leader, and described how these had motivated them to participate in the programme. Anxiety in the workplace and being wary around school stakeholders was a common theme. LGBT teachers recognised the importance of moving between schools to gain promotion, but concerns around navigating personal and professional identities and in particular ‘coming out’ in each new job caused considerable apprehension. The risk of moving schools and either being discriminated against or not being able to come out, made participants wary, and added a layer of complexity to career decision making. Where participants moved to new schools for promotion, anxiety had initially been high. Andrew, a gay male teacher with five years’ experience, moved schools to be an Assistant Head of Music but initially regretted the decision.

I wanted to…see if I was able to be the leader I believed I could be, but in the early days of my latest job I struggled a lot with anxiety and was afraid I had made the wrong choice in moving (Andrew).

Four participants wrote of feeling isolated in their current roles, and engaged with the Courageous Leaders programme because they did not know any other gay people in their schools. Ben, a gay male secondary school teacher of Politics within two years of his first teaching appointment stated;

As a gay man (new to the profession) it can at times feel a bit isolating and [I] hoped to benefit from meeting others and learning from their experience to help me overcome my internalised fears and anxieties (Ben).

Essentialist paradigms of sexual identity, difference or diversity are often framed in terms of deficiencies and creates an othering of LGBT teachers. Feeling othered and vulnerable in the school community was something a number of participants wrote of struggling to overcome. Three participants described being ambitious but lacking the confidence to put themselves into roles where they would be more visible within the school community, as this comment from Andrew articulates:

I was excited to attend a programme specifically for LGBT teachers, as I had never previously had an opportunity to be out at work, and this was something I felt strongly about. I particularly felt vulnerable in a new leadership position and was nervous about exposing my true self. I was excited to share and listen to other people’s experiences who are LGBT teachers, as I did not know any LGBT teachers who were in any sort of school leadership role (Andrew).

This comment captures the value of LGBT specific leadership training, not least for networking. The absence of visible LGBT leader role models for LGBT teachers, can deter others from putting themselves forward for senior leadership positions, resulting in perpetuating schools as sites of heteronormativity, and leadership as, visibly at least, only heterosexual. Five participants were motivated to join the Courageous Leaders programme because they wanted specific guidance on whether or not to disclose their sexuality at school, fearing that it may adversely affect opportunities for promotion. There was particular concern about whether or not to disclose their sexual identity to students, fearing what colleagues and particularly, the parents of pupils would think. Clare, a lesbian primary school teacher with eighteen years’ experience, aptly captures her concerns and motivation for joining Courageous Leaders:

I was excited to attend a programme specifically for LGBT teachers, as I feel sexuality brings with it fear and uncertainty, particularly thinking about whether or not to come out at school and the adverse effect this could have on my career progression. (Clare)

LGBT identities are too often imbued with notions of sexual acts in the way that heterosexuality is not. When applied to teachers, LGBT sexual identity is too often conflated with child protection discourses, due in part to the tabloid press historically associating male paedophilia (with boys) with homosexuality. Panic about protecting children from an LGBT teacher is often a guise for a more deeply entrenched worry about the ‘proliferation of queer identifications in school’ Cavanagh (2008, p.388). When every child is a potential victim of sexual abuse, every teacher is a potential perpetrator. When concern is expressed about the influence on young people of openly LGBT teachers, schools are perhaps instead, trying to preserve the conservative and heteronormative status quo (Thompson-Lee, 2017).

Overwhelmingly, the major reason cited by participants for wanting to join the Courageous Leaders programme was the absence of any sort of specific LGBT support network for teachers, as Clare described.

There isn’t a support network in teaching for LGBT people and I hoped this programme would offer that. It can be so isolating when you are not out to anyone at school (Clare).

Rumens (2011) describes the importance of workplace friendship as a resource for mentoring, climbing managerial career ladders, fitting into existing work cultures and developing managerial and leadership identities. Rumens found that LGBT workers preferred to befriend heterosexual colleagues, fearing that an association with other LGBT workers would hinder career development. If then, as Rumens suggests, LGBT workers avoid contact with one another within the workplace, it is important, as Andrew, Ben and Clare identified, that a safe professional network of LGBT support is available outside the work space. Courageous Leaders met this need for the LGBT teacher participants, providing a safe space in which they could participate in a mutually supportive environment.

**Experiences on the Programme**

The sense of an LGBT community for aspiring leaders was recognised by all participants as a strength of the programme. Donna, an experiences Head of Physics in a secondary school states:

The sense of an LGBT community was nurtured quickly in the group. This provided a safe, trusting and insightful view of leadership, especially addressing LGBT issues in schools or our own personal challenges. Previously I felt much more isolated and now I do feel as if I am part of a larger community, facilitating change and support for LGBT students and staff. The course has had a huge impact on me in this field. (Donna)

It was clear that the LGBT teachers valued feeling a part of a community in a way some of them had struggled to do in their schools. Despite clear equalities legislation, Payne and Smith (2018), state that school leaders often see embracing LGBT stakeholders as a politically charged act, rather than a professional obligation, and one in that is ‘potentially antagonistic to the heteronormative culture of the school community’ (p.208). Spending time as their authentic selves reflecting on their professional practice, developed the confidence of participants, allaying fears and anxieties about the dissonance between their professional and personal identities, as Eve, a lesbian primary school teacher with over a decade’s experience describes;

The size of the community that is out there to call on for support made a strong impression on me and I realised that so long as the right culture is created in school, there should be no reason why anybody should be worried about talking about these issues in school (Eve).

Over the course of the programme, Courageous Leaders was frequently referred to by participants as their ‘safe space’, somewhere in which they could let down their guard and not worry about managing the intersection of their professional and personal identities. In the written reflections, several expressed that this was a relief, allowing for greater focus on leadership, without worrying about identity management. Ben, a secondary school teacher relatively new to teaching describes his clarity of focus and thought once the issue of sexual identity was no longer apparent;

[it] allowed for frank, open and stimulating discussion in a safe environment where we could discuss challenges faced and be solution focused. This was incredibly empowering where I could be an open and out professional without the hesitation or after thought of what my colleagues may think of me. This enabled me to feel more confident and able to actively participate without the hesitation that so often influences my decision making process in new situations (Ben).

Ben’s reflection hints at the way in which managing his sexual identity erodes his confidence in the school workplace, causing him to be wary and hesitant in his interactions with others.

The programme aimed to help participants become more at ease with themselves so that they could focus on leadership in a supportive and environment. Fraser, an ambitious gay man in a middle leadership role, captures this:

Through the training provided, I feel I am more self-confident and I feel more settled and accepting of my LGBT status within the teaching profession….Hearing about the experiences of others has made me feel much less alone in my school journey. (Fraser).

The way in which the Courageous Leaders programme reduced anxiety and facilitated self-acceptance within in safe space was recognised as impacting positively on mental health. Donna stated,

It should not be underestimated, the positive effect of support for the LGBT individual on their mental health and overall well-being (Donna).

The value of Courageous Leaders programme as a resource for LGBT teacher wellbeing and mental health was echoed by two further participants who admitted in their reflections to bouts of debilitating depression. Meyer (2013) researching minority stress, asserts that a sense of harmony with one’s environment is the basis for good mental health. He adds that ‘when the individual is a member of a stigmatized minority group, the disharmony between the individual and the dominant culture can be onerous and the resultant stress significant’ (p.676.). Meyer recognised the way in which LGBT individuals constantly have to try to ‘maintain stability and coherence in self-concept’ (p.681) and argues that it is the constant disbursement of energy for this purpose that results in excessive psychological stress among members of the LGBT population. It was evident that the participants valued the ‘time off’ from their dissonance with their school environment and the chance to be in a professionally stimulating environment without the burden of managing the intersection of their personal and professional identities.

During the programme, the LGBT teachers participated in a workshop on communication and presentation skills for leadership. Led by a facilitator from RADA (The Royal Academy for Dramatic Arts), participants were given coaching to develop their verbal and non-verbal communication skills, particularly with regard to public speaking. In the presence of the entire cohort, participants co-constructed what it meant to be a school leader whist being their authentic selves. This session was overwhelmingly rated as the most rewarding and highly valued aspects of the programme, with Grace, a Physical Education teacher with ten years teaching experience recognising the discomfort she felt speaking in front of others when used to remaining as invisible as possible in the workplace. She wrote:

The most valuable moment was when we were taught presentation skills. I legitimately hated every second of it as I was very much outside of my comfort zone, but I have learned a great deal about how I come across and [have] grown as a result of it. I’m always Ok in front of the kids, but it’s made me speak up much more readily in staff meetings. (Grace).

As school leadership in the UK remains overwhelmingly male, heterosexual and masculine (Gray 2010), the lack of confidence among the cohort may be attributed to insecurities around their suitability and presentation as a leader. During the programme, some of the five mentors led whole group workshops in which they shared their experiences of navigating their heteronormative school communities and achieving their leadership roles in spite of their LGBT identities. The speakers were described as inspirational role models by several of the participants. Helen, a secondary school Head of Science with twelve years’ experience as a teacher valued hearing from an out gay male Headteacher, stating;

I didn’t think it would be possible to be a Headteacher and be out at school. But I know now that it can be done and this has renewed my ambition to be a HT all over again (Helen).

Helen’s lack of access to LGBT leadership role models had caused her to give up her ambition of becoming a Headteacher, but hearing from a gay senior leader, out to his staff, pupils all other school stakeholders, motivated Helen to resume the quest for leadership she had previously abandoned because of her sexual identity.

During each of the five face to face days, participants met with their mentors one to one, to plan and work together towards the leadership aspirations identified at the start of the programme by each participant. In between the face to face days, mentors kept in email or telephone contact with participants, advising and supporting them prior to making applications for promotion, by reading over personal statements and curriculum vitae, and later offering interview preparation, or rebuilding confidence where participants were unsuccessful. After twenty one years in the same school, Isabel worked with her mentor to successfully apply for a Head of School in alternative provision. Isabel clearly appreciated how the mentorship developed her confidence;

My mentor supported me to do the relevant research, and the coaching and mentoring and interview practice helped me to apply for the post. In the past I hadn’t had the confidence to look elsewhere for a job. I felt safer staying put. (Isabel).

With the help of her mentor, Grace was also successful and became Head of Year during the programme, a promotion that took her out of a role she had been in for more than six years. Grace wrote:

I was recently granted a promotion in my current school which would have been difficult to etch out without the help of my mentor. They have been contactable at the touch of a button and often offered insights and advice that I would not have been able to access otherwise (Grace).

Andrew too, achieved promotion to Head of Music and attributed the support from his mentor to helping him maintain his confidence through the application and interview process:

I found it so useful to reach out for support from my mentor, they spurred me on when I was doubting myself and was convinced I wouldn’t get the job. (Andrew)

Developing and co-constructing authentic models of leadership was a key component of the Courageous Leaders programme, underpinning all of the face to face days. Joanne, a sixth form Science teacher for ten years, captures the way in which the programme spurred her on to achieve promotion as Head of Sixth Form within a multi-academy trust.

My mentor provided me with the confidence to be myself and take my whole self to work. With this increased confidence, I was motivated to apply for a promotion I thought was beyond me. This is just the beginning, as a result of working with my mentor, I definitely will apply for further senior leadership roles in future (Joanne).

Joanne’s reflection implies a sense of relief in finding her authentic self and way to embody leadership authentically. It is clear from the testimonies of Courageous Leaders participants that once they permitted their personal and professional identities to co-exist, their confidence as potential leaders grew. With the help of their LGBT mentors, they were motivated to realise goals that had in some cases been abandoned due to the perceived complexity of managing their personal identity within the context of being more visible through their leadership role.

**Outcomes since the end of the Courageous Leaders programme**

Eight of the cohort of ten participants achieved promotion into positions of senior leadership in schools, including one as Head of School (Fraser) and another as Head of Alternative provision (Isabel). All mentioned in the written reflections that they were more relaxed and at ease with their sexual identity both in the classroom and the staffroom. Andrew reported feeling a sense of self-acceptance as a gay teacher and more able to reconcile his teacher and sexual identities:

Through the training provided, I feel I am more self-confident and relaxed at school. I feel more settled and accepting of my LGBT status within the teaching profession (Andrew).

Fraser, promoted to Head of School wrote that Courageous Leaders had helped him to be more open with school stakeholders, recognising that once he learned to relax about his sexual identity, he was more effective in his role. He stated:

It is because of this course that I feel less apprehensive about my personal life. I am more open with staff and children and am now more confident and relaxed at school….I no longer shy away from the topic of ‘being gay’ or ‘gay people’ with children and believe it is important that children see the world is made up of a lot of different people (Fraser).

As a direct result of the programme, three participants (Ben, Fraser and Grace) gained the courage to come out at school. Further to this, two participants (Ben and Joanne), approached their Headteachers and asked to run LGBT equality and diversity training for school staff. Andrew also set up an LGBT society, becoming an out gay role model for his students. He wrote:

As a result of this course I feel more open and confident at school. I have set up the school’s Equality and Diversity society, and am much more open about my personal life… I have also organised the school’s first ‘diversity week’ and have confidently challenged staff and students who were resistant to taking part (Andrew).

Andrew demonstrates in challenging staff resistant to taking part in ‘diversity week’ a robustness far removed from the anxiety he experienced at school before joining the programme. Challenging the attitudes of others is an important leadership trait, and school leaders who provide visible and vocal support for institutional change around diversity play an important role in promoting equality as the responsibility of all school. By becoming visible role models in their schools, Ben, Fraser and Grace disrupted the hegemonic heteronormativity in their schools and claimed non-normative identity labels (Courtney, 2014). Furthermore, the eight participants achieving positions of leadership are able to increase the visibility of non-heterosexual identities within their school communities. It could be argued that the Courageous Leaders programme has begun a movement which is serving to queer school leadership. Queering school leadership (Courtney, 2014), within the parameters of the participants fixed LGBT identity labels, is however, a paradox of sorts and what loomed large in the narratives of our participants was an acceptance that changes to the heteronormative cultures in which they worked needed to be made cautiously and incrementally. The legacy of the Courageous Leaders programme is however, a renewed and determined sense of ambition for those involved. Participants that did not gain promotion themselves within the period of the programme, gained confidence by seeing people like them, apply for and achieve positions of leadership. The quotation below from Fraser, captures the benefits of participation for him:

The network of people I met through the programme made me feel braver and more able to make further leaps up the career ladder. As a direct result of this programme, I had the confidence to pursue my dream of becoming a Head of School (Fraser).

**Conclusions**

The Courageous Leaders programme represented a distinct leadership development experience for LGBT aspiring leaders in schools. The values explored in the programme of inclusion, celebrating diversity, accepting difference, challenging the status quo and promoting social justice, are all vital facets of strong transformative school leadership. However, for LGBT teachers, the day-to-day management of potentially incompatible personal and professional identities through vigilance, concealment, assimilation and acts of pseudo-heterosexuality, take a great deal of energy on top of what is already a very demanding job. The Courageous Leaders programme afforded participants the opportunity to set aside the management of their sexual and teacher identities and concentrate fully on their development as authentic leaders. Authentic leadership can be described as self-awareness of an ‘emerging process where one continually comes to understand his or her unique talents, strengths, sense of purpose, core values, beliefs and desires’ (Avolio and Gardner, 2005, p.324). Authentic leadership relies on relational transparency and a leader’s open and honest communication and relationships with those with whom they work. Once each of the participants was supported to find and embody their authentic LGBT leader self, they went on, with LGBT mentor support, to be more successful than they perceived they would have been without the support of the programme, and the networks and supportive community it provided.

Courageous Leaders has worked with a total of thirty LGBT aspiring teacher leaders over three years. When LGBT leaders become visible within our schools, they disrupt hegemonic heteronormativity by embodying a distinct type of leadership that troubles more traditional heterosexual, white, masculine conceptualisations of school leadership. Few would disagree that in order to flourish educationally, young people need access to diverse role models, committed teachers and authentic school leaders. There are almost 500,000 full time equivalent teachers in the UK, and 20,000 Headteachers (Torrance, et.al, 2017). It is commonly recognised that one in ten of the UK population is LGBT and so it is feasible that there are as many as 50,000 LGBT teachers in UK schools. The Courageous Leaders programme was able to support fewer than 0.01% of this population. At a time when the average length of service for a Headteacher in the UK is just three years, Courageous Leaders demonstrates that specific LGBT leadership programmes present an important vehicle for improving the diversity of teacher leaders, and facilitating school cultures which enable LGBT teachers to be their authentic selves and flourish within the profession.

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