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Finnish queer teachers’ understanding of their language use in the workplace

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ABSTRACT

Finnish queer teachers work in an esteemed profession but also belong to a marginalized minority group. This article analyses interview data focusing on non-heterosexual teachers’ understanding of their language use in schools, drawing from sociolinguistic research with queer linguistics. Methodologically, Critical Discourse Analysis is applied to the data to explore the influence of heteronormativity shaping the way queer teachers understand their language use, resting on the knowledge that language use constructs social meanings and establishes discourses. The analysis provides discourses of safety, incompatibility and resistance that demonstrate the construction of social meanings to the understanding of language use, suggesting the main issues in heteronormative schools are connected to safety and experiencing incompatibility as a teacher. Queer teachers are also compelled to resist heteronormativity in many ways. The article concludes that there are heteronormative power settings specific to educational contexts, information that could be utilized for initiating change.

INTRODUCTION

As educators, non-heterosexual (henceforth: queer) teachers have great influence on their students but are also bound to represent and pass forward the prevailing norms and values of society that are defined by heteronormativity. Queer teachers work in a highly visible, valued and socially relevant profession but also belong to a group of people who have historically been stigmatized and whose experiences have been marginalized – being affected by the continuous reinforcement of dominant heteronormative power structures that constitutes them as undesirable compared to the heterosexual and cisgender majority (Butler 1990). This article explores the multifaceted queer teacher juxtaposition in the context of Finland, a Nordic welfare state known for its education, liberal values and progressive views on human rights. Prior research suggests that heteronormative ideals are upheld and reproduced in school institutions all over the world (e.g. Ferfolja and Hopkins 2013;
Lehtonen 2023), which, despite the legislative advances and the improved social acceptance of queer people in many Western societies (ILGA 2023), causes queer educators to experience hardships in their working environments (e.g. DePalma and Atkinson 2009; Gray 2013). The framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is utilized in the present analysis to reveal how the lived reality of Finnish queer teachers shapes the way they understand their language use in different contexts at the school.

The analysis of the interview data, conducted with Finnish non-heterosexual elementary, secondary, and upper secondary school teachers, examines the discourses that emerge from queer teachers’ understandings concerning their language use in schools. CDA is a methodological perspective for linguistic analyses that observes language use as a social practice and explores how social issues, hidden power relations and ideologies are embedded in and function within discourses and language use (Fairclough 2010). My research also rests on insights from sociolinguistic variation studies, which argue that variation in language use can construct social meanings and establish speech styles and discourses (Eckert 2012; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013), and by prior research suggesting that language use can invoke stereotyping and reveal social meanings (e.g. Taylor and Raadt 2021). The study was guided by the following questions: what understandings do queer teachers themselves have about their language use in the workplace? How are these understandings connected to heteronormativity in Finnish schools, the wider Finnish public, and the construction of queer teacher discourses?

The Finnish education system is well known for its equality, and Finnish teachers are highly appreciated in Finnish society. This makes Finland appear as a seemingly egalitarian country, and a comparable area of research for examining the covert nature of heteronormativity, where heterosexuality appears self-evident and where non-heterosexuality is recognized and tolerated only to a certain extent. (Juvonen and Toom 2023; Lehtonen 2023). The present analysis reveals the various ways that Finnish queer teachers are compelled to enforce or challenge the ideals and standards of the dominant heteronormative discourse, and how heteronormativity influences queer teachers and their language use.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, some context for Finnish schools and queer issues in Finland is presented. Second, a theoretical framework is provided from earlier research focusing on queer educators, heteronormativity and queer linguistics. Third, the methodology is explained, focusing on how CDA was utilized in this study to explore the construction of Finnish queer teacher discourses through the analysis of interview data. Finally, the analysis that resulted in finding discourses, and a discussion of findings and their implications, is presented.

**Queer teachers and schools in Finland**

Finnish teachers, both class teachers working in elementary schools and subject teachers in lower and upper secondary schools, are highly educated and enjoy broad professional autonomy and independence (e.g. Juvonen and Toom 2023). Informality, closeness, and lack of explicit power dimensions are embedded in the school culture and schools aim to create a supportive, open, and reflective environment where personality and individuality are valued (NC 2014). The inclusive culture is maintained with everyday practices, allowing teachers to be authentic in their self-expression and enabling them to utilize various aspects of their
personality. Ideally, this kind of workplace culture translates into a high level of psychological safety (Newman, Donohue, and Eva 2017) and can lead to increased teacher authenticity, linked to higher work satisfaction and performance of teachers (Laursen 2006).

Finland is by the measurable official and legislative standards an egalitarian society, scoring fourth among EU countries in the gender equality index (EIGE 2022) and ranking lowest in the EU in the share of LGBTI respondents who felt discriminated at work (13%; FRA 2020). The most recent Finnish National Curriculum for Basic Education requires schools to acknowledge sexual and gender diversity, mirroring the liberal socio-democratic ideals that shape Finnish education policies (Lappalainen and Lahelma 2016). Against this backdrop, there is a public opinion of Finland having already achieved the ideal of equality (Brunila and Kallioniemi 2018), denying the existence of heteronormativity affecting the everyday lives of queer people in Finland. Still, according to the nationwide Finnish School Health Promotion survey conducted on students (Jokela et al. 2020), queer youth in Finland face more issues in every sector of health and welfare than others, with bullying and loneliness illustrating issues present in schools. In recent years, Finland has experienced several hate speech incidents and bias-motivated violence towards queer people, echoing a current shift in attitudes and discourse against queer minorities worldwide (ILGA 2023). That is to say, the situation in Finland is not as rosy as the picture drawn by the official policies and legislation implies.

Theoretical background

Heteronormative schools

This article draws on Judith Butler’s theoretical framework, where gender and sexuality are seen as social constructs that rely on repetitive performance and where those performances that reinforce heteronormativity are more privileged and culturally normalized than others (Butler 1990). Here, this framework is applied to the context of schools, where teachers are compelled to perform their sexuality and gender in a way that accommodates the ideals and standards of the dominant heteronormative discourse. Consequently, queer teachers’ dual role in schools positions them in a conflicting dynamic, where they need to reflect on both the personal and pedagogical effects of discussing and disclosing their sexual orientation in different contexts. For example, Saxey (2021) argues that queer teachers are constantly balancing the expected negative and positive outcomes of being queer in their work and teaching practice.

To elaborate further, earlier research suggests that schools appear as seemingly non-sexual environments because the endorsement of heterosexuality is normalized as self-evident and has no sexual connotations, unlike non-heterosexuality (Mishel 2020; Reimers 2020). This desexualized heteronormativity, masked as neutrality, constructs a bias against queer teachers’ professionality by drawing unreasonable attention to their sexuality (Connell 2015; Reimers 2020). Furthermore, teaching is one occupational context where stereotypes against non-heterosexual people create more bias against them than in many others because they are thought to have a negative influence (e.g. gay propaganda, predatory behaviour) on vulnerable minors (e.g. Mishel 2020). However, queer teachers also bear the burden of representation in their working communities, since earlier research suggests that challenging heteronormativity in schools
mainly lies on the shoulders of individual activists who are often queer themselves (e.g. DePalma and Atkinson 2009). Some studies have suggested that teachers’ level of involvement varies according to the microculture of the school, and how heteronormativity is challenged is partially dependent on, for example, the school’s location and attitudes of the management (Ferfolja and Hopkins 2013; Gray 2013). Potentially, these tendencies lead to marginalization of queer teachers in their working communities.

Moreover, recent research done with queer youth in Finnish schools (Lehtonen 2023) and on the policies and practices of sexual diversity in Nordic countries’ educational systems (Kjaran and Lehtonen 2018) provides some insight. For example, Lehtonen (2023) argues that despite Finland’s image as a model country for equality, heteronormative discourse in Finnish schools and teacher education is widespread, and non-heterosexuality is only somewhat acknowledged, causing Finnish schools to be an environment where not everybody necessarily feels safe and included.

**Queer discourse styles**

The focus of this article is the understandings and perceptions Finnish queer teachers have on their own language use in various contexts and situations in schools. Contemporary sociolinguistic research suggests that queer people can to some extent control the features in their language use that could signal their sexual orientation, and switch between different speech styles to appear less queer (e.g. Daniele et al. 2020; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013; Podesva, Roberts, and Campbell-Kibler 2001). This is context-bound and can occur depending on, for example, how disadvantageous an overtly queer expression is expected to be in that certain context. Since heteronormative structures inhibit people’s expression of gender and sexuality through language use, deviating from the gendered language style a person is expected to perform can construct them as different and inflict consequences (Baker 2008). These notions tie in with the third-wave sociolinguistic theories that emphasize social meanings being mediated through language and discourse. Drawing from this sociolinguistic framework, the interview questions for this study were guided by the concepts of indexicality (i.e. linguistic variable being an index of social meaning in a certain context) and style (i.e. combinations of variables creating coherent discourse styles with complex social meanings). These concepts were utilized in the interviews to reveal the social meanings behind the understandings queer teachers have on their language use (Eckert 2012; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013) and are discussed more in the discussion section.

Queer people’s language use can vary due to heteronormative power structures influencing a broad range of social settings. For example, in socially relevant contexts, sexual minorities are known to index their sexual orientation and position themselves as queer with complex stylistic choices that consist of both stereotypically masculine and feminine linguistic features (e.g. Podesva, Roberts, and Campbell-Kibler 2001; Surkka 2022). Indeed, gay men are suggested to appear more stereotypically gay in contexts where being gay is safe or encouraged (e.g. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013; Podesva 2011) which schools, as heteronormativity-enforcing environments, are generally not. Queer people are known to employ conversational tactics, such as the language of risk (Leap 1996), to be ensured safety and like-mindedness, gradually revealing their sexual orientation in a low-risk manner. These tactics aim to allude to one’s non-
heterosexuality for example through the use of ambiguous language, humour and queer conversation topics, without the potential risks of explicitly revealing one’s non-heterosexuality. Ambiguity can be achieved somewhat easily in Finnish, which has only one, gender-neutral, third-person pronoun. This alleviates the issue of having to be gender specific to some extent, although gender-marked words (e.g. husband) are habitually used as third-person references in Finnish (Tainio 2006).

**Data and method**

The data for this study comprises eight interviews conducted with Finnish class teachers and subject teachers working in primary and lower and upper secondary schools. The participants were found through open calls posted on discussion forums for Finnish teachers on Facebook and utilizing the snowball sampling method subsequent to the connections of the researcher. The teachers were between 27 and 53 years of age and had all been working as teachers for a minimum of three years in locations varying in population size. The sampling was conducted somewhat purposefully since I aimed to reach participants varying in their sexual orientation, gender, and location. Due to difficulty in finding gender minority participants, the scope was narrowed down to cisgender teachers of various sexualities. Prior to the interviews all participants signed an informed consent and were told about their rights with the involvement and the measures applied to protect their privacy, including the pseudonymization of their names and indirect identifiers from the data. The participants were asked to disclose in their own words their gender and sexuality. A total of four gay men and four women (two bisexuals, one pansexual and one lesbian) were interviewed, all of them white, Finnish-speaking and cisgender.

As it states, the relatively small sample of 8 teachers and the exclusion of gender minorities in this study limits the applicability of the results to an extent. As such, this study cannot be generalized to signify all Finnish queer teachers. In future research, addressing the absent voices would significantly expand and elevate the pertinence of these findings.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Finnish, allowing free discussion. The themes emerged from earlier research, concentrating on challenges found relevant in queer teachers’ workplace experiences, on how the teachers express their queerness in language use and on beliefs about stereotypically queer speech characteristics and what the teachers assumed them and their relevance to be for them in the workplace. Teachers were asked to reflect on the changes in their language use and how their sexuality shows up in discourse, in the different contexts that emerged. The interviews were conducted in 2021–2022 over a 2-month period; two of them face-to-face at the university premises and the rest in a Zoom video call. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, ranging between 30 and 60 minutes in length. I have translated in English the parts quoted in this article.

**Critical discourse analysis**

The methodological framework for the analysis is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Discourse is defined in this study as a representative system consisting of thoughts, ideas and practices formed in social practice and in relation to other discourses and
sociocultural context, mirroring different truths and realities (Fairclough 2010). Discourses are connected to ideological power structures that shape the perceptions of the world and are regulated by social practices, communicating information that consists of contradictory values and perceptions. Fairclough’s (2010) three-dimensional model was utilized to examine the discursive constructions of heteronormativity embedded in the data. CDA works as an approach to analyze connections between texts and power relations, explore social problems and examine how language links to the construction of ideologies, power structures and structural inequalities (Fairclough 2010). Furthermore, the intersection of gender and sexuality as the two social categorizations of a teacher’s experience was taken into consideration. Although all queer teachers deviate from the heterosexual norm, the intersections of their gender and sexual orientation produce different standpoints in relation to each other (Levon 2015).

At the beginning of the analysis, the interviews were transcribed, after which close reading was applied to the textual data. Following the descriptive stage of Fairclough’s (2010) model, the analysis focused on the linguistic and semantic features of the text, such as discourse content, metaphors and narratives. In the interpretation stage, contradictory properties, as well as similarities, were sought out from the text to establish bundles of meaningful discursive processes that share corresponding meanings, guided by asking what the teachers said and how and what was emphasized and omitted. The analysis relied on the concept that discourses consist of similarities, contradictions and silences found that work to produce meanings within the text. The final, explanatory stage of the analysis links the interpretations to the larger sociocultural context, connecting the discursive constructions and their meaning to social processes. These interpretations were established as discourses by analyzing indicators of heteronormativity. This final part provides evidence of the discursive realities acting as mediators in the relationship between the text and the sociocultural practice.

Building on these notions of discourse, intersectionality and the critical approach, the analysis examines the influence of heteronormativity on queer teacher discourses and queer teachers’ understandings of their language use and discursive practices. In what follows, the analysis is explored, after which the implications and the larger sociocultural context of the findings are discussed.

Results

The findings are discussed in sections, one for each discourse found in the data. The analysis identifies three discourses: safety, incompatibility and resistance, which reveal the presence of heteronormative power structures influencing queer teachers’ understandings of their language use in schools. While all three discourses proved to be closely connected, the discourse of safety emerged from the data with the most findings.

Discourse of safety

This section focuses on the findings that constitute a safety discourse, revealing that queer teachers are foremost concerned about their safety. All teachers talked about strategically altering their language use, discourse topics and expression in order to protect
themselves and prepare for potential homophobic behaviour and consequences. The discourse is explained through three key contexts, first focusing on colleagues, then on the students and, finally, on the families and guardians through the examples found most adequate.

The most frequent findings constructing the safety discourse were the reported need to be silent and to withdraw from conversations among colleagues and other adults within the working context (i.e. new colleagues or unknown people) who were potentially seen as problematic:

*Extract 1* I avoid topics of conversation with certain people, to not have to be in a situation where I would leave feeling miserable […] I don’t use my partner’s first name when talking about her with certain people, and I feel that is a deliberate choice, to let it be and keep it to myself with some people and the same goes with students. *Lotta, pansexual woman*

Half of the participants had made the decision to not make their sexual orientation public knowledge in school like Lotta. Bearing similarities with the findings of Gray (2013), they avoided talking about topics that would reveal their queerness in the classroom or in conversations where they felt threatened. Lexical means surfaced to represent the teachers’ need to be gender neutral when referring to their partners. Many reported switching to the use of gender-neutral words, such as *puoliso* ‘spouse’ or *kumppani* ‘partner’.

In the data, silence and withdrawing from conversations in school were frequent with the interviewed women, while humour and actively taking risks to gather knowledge about the attitudes of the people were tactics presented only by gay men. One teacher described using gender-neutral words in conversation, for the purpose of being ambiguous and establishing a social environment which would make the possible future revealment of her sexuality easier and safe, echoing the concept of risk-taking language introduced by Leap (1996). In an opposite manner, one gay teacher described often performing as a hyperfeminine and sexual persona disguised as humour in communicative situations with only men present, taking a risk by implicitly revealing his homosexuality through gender-nonconforming behaviour, aiming to gather knowledge about the attitudes of the interlocutors before explicitly stating his sexuality.

Consistent with many findings on queer teachers internationally (e.g. Connell 2015; DePalma and Atkinson 2009; Gray 2013), all teachers acknowledged an overall looming presence of homophobic discourse among students and colleagues and reported observing their social environment for potential risks. They implied that the students’ use of the word ‘gay’ or ‘homo’ as a common slur and a signifier for anything negative was common (*homottelu* in Finnish). Six out of eight teachers discussed homophobic language and terminology more in-depth and gave insight into the daily verbal harassment they witnessed, such as students’ frequent use of word *hintti* (‘faggot’), which evidently has the purpose of signalling social distinction from queer people, further enforcing the forementioned homophobic discourse in schools. Indeed, safety discourse was found to influence the way teachers talked about queer topics in class, indicating they were wary of the homophobic discourse in school:

*Extract 2* … with kids there are often situations, especially with ones from religious families, where we are discussing something related to the topic in class and they yell ‘homosexuality
is haram’ or ‘gays end up in hell’ or something and I just think okay let’s see how we can move on from this. **Emma, lesbian woman**

Above, Emma acknowledges that homophobia influences the way she can talk about queer topics in the classroom. She also expresses that the situations where homophobic language use is connected to or justified with religion, are complicated and would be challenging for any teacher, but even more so for her as a lesbian, as she constructs the homophobic language use occurring in her own classroom a valid safety concern. Following the linguistic evidence of homophobic discourse provided in their understandings, four out of eight teachers were also prompted to construct discursive realities of potential threatening situations involving students and their families, such as this:

*Extract 3* I’m not afraid the students, I don’t think so. I have sometimes thought about, knowing how their families are, or like what they might come up with. Like if I were to leave from work when it’s dark out during the winter, they might come up with something. During the holidays I saw videos online where students from our school where shooting people with fireworks at the subway station, for example. […] this pops into my mind sometimes but then I just think I don’t fucking care, I’ll run if I have to. **Lauri, gay man**

Lauri, as an openly gay man, talks about feeling unsafe outside the school due to homophobic attitudes of certain families and legitimizes the real-life potential of the described incident by recontextualizing it with a real incident from the past. He presents details to accentuate the specificity of the described incident, which can be identified as marking his assumptions about certain contexts and people dangerous in real life. Besides violence, possibilities of other potential harmful experiences linked to being queer emerged in teachers’ insights, such as homophobic remarks from colleagues affecting work performance and a fear that gossip or rumours would tarnish their reputation as a teacher and even result in families wanting to transfer their children to another class. The presumed attitudes of conservative families were constituted in teachers’ understandings and linked to their safety concerns. Unlike Lauri, half of the teachers had made the decision to not reveal their sexuality to students due to the fear of negative feedback and personal criticism from families.

Subsequent to presenting evidence of homophobia influencing their language use and behaviour, all but one teacher often concluded their reflections with an attempt to diminish at least some of their safety concerns. While some belittled the gravity of their concerns and highlighted the rarity of the incidents, some used intensifiers, humour or hyperbole to make light of what was discussed or to provide additional emotional context, such as Lauri saying, ‘I don’t fucking care’. Appearing reasonable and level-headed serves queer teachers in their negotiation to alleviate their fears and safety concerns. In doing this, teachers diminished the possibility of homophobic danger, essentially surrendering to conform heteronormative power structures on account of their safety.

In conclusion, fear of homophobia proved to be the most prevalent manifestation of heteronormative power structures explaining this discourse. It was identified from the data that teachers acknowledged homophobic practices present in school and its influence on their language use and behaviour in various social settings. They discursively framed the concepts of ‘men’ and ‘religious people’ as their foremost concerns. Above all,
teachers showed implicitly anticipating negative views towards queer people from society and the general public, highlighting the hegemonial position of heteronormativity in schools, and its impact on their safety.

**Discourse of incompatibility**

This section focuses on the findings constituting the incompatibility discourse, suggesting the challenges of fitting into a teacher role as a queer person. Incompatibility issues were seen to result in complex and often contradictory dynamics in various social settings of the school. The analysis is again presented through three key contexts, focusing first on experiencing incompatibility as a teacher, then as a representative of the society and its norms, and finally as a member of the teacher community.

Characteristic of this discourse was the conflict between being queer and what was expected from teachers in the predominantly heteronormative school community. In six interviews, performing a role in front of the class or going into ‘teacher mode’ was brought up, in which the teachers’ queerness and characteristics they described as essential to being queer were not an acceptable part. The impossibility of viewing themselves as both a respectable teacher and queer was constructed by a parallel they drew with certain features that deemed essential or even integral to being queer, yet unsuitable for teachers:

*Extract 4* I am after all a soft, tender, and kind man. Recently, I have started to fear my sensitivity. It’s a little bit anxiety-inducing that I tend to get emotional even with my own students. [...] I cry very easily, and one could think that ‘oh well, this gay man here manages the class and bawls in front of the kids, is this even normal anymore’. An adult man [laughter] acts like this. **Timo, gay man**

In Extract 4, Timo likens homosexuality and sensitivity as similarly unfitting features for a male teacher. Constituting his feelings of incompatibility as a teacher is the fact that this comparison extends to the educational context: Timo acknowledges the heteronormative-based behavioural requirements for male teachers and emphasizes ‘this gay man’ to be in the centre of violating the norm. Timo connects his failure of attaining these behavioural requirements to his sexual orientation and by way of doing this, he sets out to demonstrate that the heteronormative ideal is what a male teacher should aim to be. With this comparison, he also implies that as a gay man, he is subjected to increased scrutiny to meet these standards and he should avoid any further deviation from the norms in order to be viewed as a suitable teacher. All the gay men interviewed for this study expressed fears of homosexuality influencing people’s perceptions of them as teachers, essentially stating that gay men are not seen as credible or professional as their heterosexual colleagues, in line with negative stereotypes identified in Taylor and Raadt’s (2021) study about male music teachers. In what followed in the interviews, all four of them positioned themselves as exceptionally good, smart, or high-achieving teachers, admittedly negotiating for their rightful position as a teacher in the light of these statements. They further provided evidence of the need to compensate for their queerness by talking about adjusting their behaviour and expression to appear more professional and actively taking risks in social settings to be taken seriously as teachers.
In connection with the normative regulations dictating teachers in the educational context, Finnish teachers are in the same way positioned as role models and morally superior characters in society (e.g. Juvonen and Toom 2023). Queer teachers acknowledged their marginalized position as queer people in a heteronormative society, which caused difficulties in trying to accommodate the Finnish model teacher standard:

*Extract 5* I think that being a teacher still is, and this is connected to being part of a sexual minority, that as a teacher you are still a certain kind of role model, that you should be very composed and neutral after all. [...] I obviously don’t really feel like this is how it should be, but then I notice that I tend to restrain myself and tone it down. As to not present myself as too flagrant. **Iida, bisexual woman**

Iida talks on a more abstract level about the societal norms that she feels teachers are subjugated to. Similar to Timo, she also connects her non-accommodating behavioural attributes as part of her queerness and highlights them as being in conflict with the teacher role. The way she connects heterosexuality with neutrality marks it as a self-evident norm and, similar to Reimers (2020) findings in Sweden, teacher’s non-heterosexuality in school appears as something non-neutral that needs to be toned down. Iida talks about what teacher should be *after all*, further proving that she recognizes the heteronormative standards under the coated surface of tolerance and acceptance that governs Finnish schools.

Like Iida, all four women teachers in the data talked about the need to *tone it down* when they were discussing queer topics or even personal lives with colleagues. In the interviews, they justified their queer activism in schools (e.g. participating in diversity committees) in a way that was acceptable and compatible with heteronormative standards, for example by saying that they would be *as involved* even if they were not queer themselves and that being concerned with queer issues is just part of being a good teacher, comparable to findings of both Gray (2013) and Ferfolja and Hopkins (2013). By withdrawing and appearing modest to fit the standard, they constructed a compensatory position for their queerness in an entirely opposite way than the gay men did, who performed as such exceptional or good teachers that their queerness would prove to be a non-issue.

All queer teachers also experienced incompatibility as members of their working community. Heteronormative assumptions and expectations in the workplace and among colleagues make it hard to fit in, and bring challenges to the social settings of the school if they fail to accommodate them:

*Extract 6* I was in the closet until we got married, [then] I decided I don’t want to do this anymore and invited a few colleagues to the wedding and after that the attitudes have been ok. It was so sympathetic, we had this extremely conservative principal who clearly had a lot to digest when their favourite Finnish teacher turned out to be a fairy faggot. **Tuomas, gay man**

Characteristic of the incompatibility discourse are the conflicting elements that Tuomas uses to describe his situation. He refers to himself in offensive terminology, revealing the core of incompatibility between occupying two positions simultaneously: *fairy faggot*, a silly, non-professional character, but also the principal’s *favourite teacher*. In the context of the work community, Tuomas talks about his frustration with being in the closet to his colleagues, until finally deciding to break the heterosexual assumption
and reveal the truth. He waited until being married, a strategy some queer people adopt to accommodate heteronormative ideals, to signal having common ground with the other teachers, and to soften the impact of coming out in the workplace. All the teachers who were ‘out’ at school had used their partner or their relationship status as a way to reveal their identity. The aim of this might be to ensure depicting queer life as normal and harmless, and queer people as equal in value to heterosexual people.

To conclude, at the core of these manifestations is requisite to not disrupt the harmony in the heteronormative school community, identified also in earlier research (see for example Connell 2015; Ferfolja and Hopkins 2013). It was identifiable from their interviews that queer teachers did not feel like they fully belong, on multiple levels – as teachers and as members of the teacher community and society. Incompatibility discourse coaxed them to shift their language use and expression towards heteronormative standards in order to belong, drawing a parallel to general findings in linguistic studies (Daniele et al. 2020; Podesva 2011) exploring variation in gay speech features.

**Discourse of resistance**

In this section, I explicate findings constituting the discourse of resistance, showing queer teachers challenging heteronormative power structures, and standards within their educational practice and in the social settings of the school. The resistance discourse builds on the other two discourses discussed earlier, overlapping with the realities constructed by them. In the analysis, I provide examples from the data, the first focusing on resistance in the pedagogical and educational context, and the second on the broader societal context mirrored in the workplace.

All teachers were adept in using their power position as teachers to disrupt and challenge the self-evidence of heteronormative practices that they had identified in school. Significantly, the teachers deemed the systematic weeding out of homophobic language use in school important, which Saxey (2021) identified as an important area in queer teacher research – especially because they felt their heterosexual colleagues did not deal with the issue adequately. The following example illustrates this, and gives insight into the practices queer teachers employ in their everyday educational practice:

> Extract 7 Even nowadays kids still know to use ‘fucking homo’ […] in these situations I say ‘I am a homo, do you think I’m a fucking homo?’ and usually they respond something like ‘no, you are not’ and I answer ‘see, I’m not saying fucking hetero to you either’. […] Or there’s that ‘fucking homo’ written on the wall. Then I ask the kids why do they think someone wanted to write this, do they want to tell that they are gay or that gays are their friends or something. So I make fun of it or joke around it. Eevi, bisexual woman

In Extract 7, Eevi uses multiple ways to strip ‘fucking homo’ from its pejorative power in a manner that is allowed in Finnish schools due to the lack of formality and explicit dimensions of power. She challenges the stigma attached to homosexuality and undermines the meaning of the slur. First, by constituting herself as ‘homo’, she expands on the apparent meaning of the word and normalizes the existence of queer people in the students’ lives. Then, using her teacher platform, she compels them to think critically about the way queer people are talked about and encourages them to disregard the default homophobic narrative circulating in the school social settings. Through the additional homo-hetero-juxtaposition, she provides her students with an alternative perspective to the
homophobic discourse. After constructing queer people as an ordinary part of life, she further adds weight to her teaching by continuing to present the slur as unreasonable with jokes that reverse the narrative.

Likewise, seven out of the eight teachers talked about utilizing their teacher platform to increase critical thinking among students, thus challenging the dominance of heteronormative standards in their workplace. Teachers talked about educating students and colleagues on queer topics whenever the opportunity presented itself, aiming to increase visibility and positive representation (consistent with multiple earlier international research, e.g. DePalma and Atkinson 2009; Ferfolja and Hopkins 2013; Gray 2013). They brought out the importance of being an example in school or talking in a more inclusive way. Queer teachers positioned themselves as activists challenging heteronormative power structures through pedagogically sensible means: increasing knowledge and promoting nuanced ways of thinking in their teaching and within the community.

Nevertheless, the position of activists that queer teachers are often compelled to adopt in schools can reinforce heteronormativity by upholding the imparity between the heterosexual majority and queer people in the workplace. Five teachers recognized the problematic nature of the position, verbalized here by one of them:

Extract 8 What irritates me is that, because every school has to have an equality plan and stuff which were just updated due to the new curriculum, they instantly suggested me to take part in it, ‘you go do it’ and I thought that I am part of a minority, but it’s not my job to define how to treat marginalized people here, it’s your job […] in many places I think it’s like ‘you know about this, you transgender homo woman in a wheelchair, why don’t you give us an operational model’ […] as if it’s our job to take care of ourselves. These things and plans are done for the majority and they in particular need to understand them. Tuomas, gay man

Tuomas resists having to educate heterosexual people and doing mental work on their behalf in the workplace. Instead, he calls for measures that would dismantle this asymmetrical power structure. Expressing criticism towards his colleagues’ level of involvement, and by listing marginalized identity markers one after the other to create a hyperbolic effect, Tuomas calls the school management’s motivation and ability to truly promote the inclusion and well-being of queer people into question. He implies that the basis of equality work should not be viewed as a queer-originating issue, but rather as holding the majority responsible for the way they act and talk. Tuomas points to a reality where, in order to elicit change in schools, queer teachers are presented with no other choice than to do the lion’s share of the educational work themselves, in compliance with the restrictive limitations that preserve the social harmony in a community built on heteronormative practices and standards. Indeed, Tuomas resists the incentive to work within these limitations and is critical towards the fact that heteronormativity should or could be challenged in a way that accommodates the comfort of the majority.

Tuomas reveals the indirect ways asymmetrical power positions are produced and enforced in the workplace that make outright resistance against heteronormativity difficult to justify. Holding queer people responsible for educating people first seems ideal in the establishment of inclusive practices, while simultaneously being considerate and respectful towards their experiences and opinions. However well-meaning, it maintains the power asymmetry that benefits the heterosexual majority, allowing them to
liberate themselves from truly doing the work and reflecting on their heteronormative attitudes and beliefs; institutional practices constructing these issues were discussed recently for example by Lehtonen (2023). Lending support to his decision to challenge this setting by not participating, making him appear as indifferent towards equality work, Tuomas concludes with a powerful, yet subtle argument that without the heterosexual majority, there would be no need for equality plans in the first place.

In a similarly critical style, the other four teachers challenged this power structure in other settings. For example, they rejected the idea of having a responsibility to ‘come out’ to anyone, that being queer necessitates explanations on their part. Even when they knew a heterosexual assumption was very likely to occur and cause a socially uneasy situation, they resisted the idea that their privacy should be violated for other people’s comfort. Essentially, by challenging this normative assumption they take back their right to privacy as a queer person. These teachers understood ‘coming out’ as a heteronormativity-enforcing act where heterosexual people ultimately hold the power (see for example Connell 2015) and positioned themselves in the interviews as indifferent towards any social discomfort caused by breaking this norm. Moreover, they expressed criticism towards the pressure they felt that was placed upon them as queer teachers to act as role models to queer students. They freed themselves from this ‘job within a job’ with similar argumentation that Tuomas has in Extract 8: queer teachers should not be held any more or less responsible for queer children’s wellbeing than any other teacher, nor should they be pressured to reveal their sexual orientation at the expense of their privacy.

In conclusion, teachers showed multiple ways they resisted conforming to heteronormative structures and practices. They promoted new ways of thinking in school but also challenged the practices that were rooted in heteronormativity and affected queer teachers negatively.

**Conclusions**

This article focused on exploring two questions: what understandings do queer teachers themselves have about their language use in the workplace, and how are these understandings connected to heteronormativity in Finnish schools and to the construction of queer teacher discourses? The analysis confirmed three discourses: safety, incompatibility, and resistance, in which queer teachers’ understandings of their language use connect to heteronormative power structures in Finnish schools. These three discourses produce discursive strategies and constitute various perspectives and positionalities for queer teachers in the social and educational settings of heteronormative schools. The analysis suggests that Finnish queer teachers’ primary concerns in school are connected to their safety and experiencing incompatibility and inadequacy as teachers, consistent with findings from earlier international research on queer educators’ experiences (e.g. Ferfolja and Hopkins 2013; Gray 2013). Teachers also reported resisting and challenging the dominant heteronormative discourse in school, underlining their capacity to dismantle heteronormativity in everyday educational and social practices as teachers and as members of the school community.

Teachers are instruments of change in society, and the way they perform their job in school plays a significant role in transmitting the attitudes and beliefs that enforce, uphold, or challenge heteronormative power structures. As the discourses from the
analysis shed light on the stylistic practices of queer teachers at school, they also provide discourse-level information on the social indexicality of said practices, further giving access to the covert messages that are being communicated about queer people and their assigned positions. There were certainly significant gender differences between the reported stylistic practices of queer women and men, summarized as women tending to fall invisible and men being markedly performative. Generalizing these findings is, however, subject to limitations as the analysis was conducted on reported speech and metalanguage, not authentic language use, of teachers. Nevertheless, the study offers scope for further research with queer linguistics in educational settings and in teacher context, such as mapping the variation of queer teachers’ discursive styles, elaborating on the abovementioned gender differences, and exploring the indexical linguistic features that queer teachers employ as part of their style.

The overall interest of this article, Finland, and its ethos of equality in the context of queer teachers’ language use, reveals that the backgrounded messages circulating in Finnish schools share the same central notion: that queer people are, after all, of secondary importance. These results contribute to the small pool of research done on queer topics in Finnish schools and give validation to the consistent international finding that heteronormativity is widely reinforced and reproduced in schools, having a significant influence on queer people (e.g. Kjaran and Lehtonen 2018; Lehtonen 2023). The three discourses mirror the broad cultural ideologies and social meanings about queer people that influence teachers, but they also produce contextual information about the displays of heteronormative power specific to educators. As the analysis points out, these power structures seem all-encompassing, infiltrating settings anywhere from classroom practice to workplace politics. However, these displays can be utilized to identify settings essential for initiating change in schools and providing steps towards dismantling the widespread practices that uphold heteronormativity.

To conclude this article, I aim to offer some contribution to the issues raised in the analysis by following Fairclough’s approach (2010) and the broader ideology of critical theory. Solutions to some of the oppressive practices and obstacles can be addressed by identifying ‘points of entry’ from the data (Fairclough 2010). First, increasing the responsibility of the majority and holding all teachers accountable for implementing heteronormativity-challenging ways in their educational practice, specifically intervening in the daily homophobic language use, should be established as a priority and an absolute necessity. Secondly, a call for clear and structured guidance to plan and implement equality work in schools is well justified, to lessen the temptation of burdening minorities with work that is largely directed to address the majority. This research would be beneficial on an international level, should it be utilized in developing equality and inclusivity training models for teacher education universities. Finally, I suggest that the influence of heteronormativity in educational contexts should be further studied from the workplace perspective of queer teachers, rather than focusing solely on the students or the educational practices.

Notes

1. The umbrella term ‘queer’ is used due to the term’s criticality towards heteronormativity and the heterosexual norm and acknowledging the diverse use of LGBTQIA+ -terminology in research.
2. In accordance with the University of Helsinki ethical guidelines and Finnish National Board of Research Integrity.

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