

The Lived Experiences of Queer*¹ Teachers in İstanbul Within the Scope of Institutionalized Heteronormativity and Neoliberal School Policies

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Even though the challenges that Queer employees face in the workplace because of their intersecting identities of gender, sexuality, race, and class continue to be one of the rarely studied topics in social sciences, there has been a resurgence of interest in recent years, concerning how Queer* teachers experience the conflation of their sexual and professional identities. Informed by the recognition that schools are one of the most representative prototypes of gendered organizations with their ever-adapting regimes of inequality, this study is motivated by the question of how Queer* teachers in İstanbul deal with the enduring institutionalized homophobia, which has only got worse in terms of its silencing and pathologizing mechanisms. Claiming one of the fundamental functions of schools to establish strictly heteronormative spaces of learning, where any form of gender nonconformity or sexual dissidence stands before disciplinary punishment or reprimand from other students and teachers, I have examined the current working conditions of Queer* teachers in İstanbul within the contexts of schools, which compel Queer* teachers to abide by their institutionalized rules and norms of compulsory heterosexuality. This study attempts to learn what kind of experiences Queer* teachers in İstanbul articulate regarding the conundrum of being forced into presenting themselves as non-sexualized and non-gendered professional figures, as neoliberal policies and capitalist expectations of a rigid separation between professional identities and personal lives of workers continue to negatively affect the occupational well-being of Queer* teachers. A careful analysis of the interviews has revealed that the Queer* teachers in İstanbul are burdened with the aesthetic labor they are constantly expected to perform due to the emergent neoliberal schemes of professionalism and that they suffer under closely monitoring mechanisms of heteronormative school policies and work climates.*

Keywords: queer studies, neoliberalism, institutionalized heteronormativity, education, LGBTQ+ teachers

¹ Throughout the paper, I employ the term *Queer** whenever I refer to my interlocutors instead of using the terms "gay" or "homosexual," even if each of my five interlocutors may customarily be assigned as males by the general, heteronormative public. The main reason for this is the fact that two of the teachers I interviewed stated that, despite having identified as gay before, ever since they have become aware of the term "queer" and its popularization in the "scene," they have come to find liberating and subversive power in it for being more inclusive and critical as "it shows how difficult it is to talk about this stuff" (Meriç they/them, 26). Adhering to the teachings of feminist and queer research strategies on the importance of the active involvement of the research participants in the ways their stories are narrated and interpreted (Browne and Nash, 2010: 10-21; Lykes and Crosby, 2014:148; Davis and Craven, 2016: 84), I have opted to consult them about their choice of pronouns and terminology during our interviews. Hence, I opt for this once-pejoratively used term since I see politically empowering potentialities in reclaiming and re-appropriating a slur, turning it into a linguistic instrument of defiance against homonegativity. The use of the asterisk is a homage to Jack Halberstam's term *Trans**, through which I similarly maintain the volatility and permeability of identities as well as differentiating it from those, who identify themselves specifically as "queer." This usage applies to other individuals of non-heteronormative sexualities in general – a myriad of gender and sexual identities, including lesbians, gays, bisexuals, bi+, trans*, intersex, queers, non-binaries, asexuals, greysexuals, demisexuals, aromantics, genderfucks, gender non-conforming and others who do not identify themselves as allosexual or alloromantic. It should be stated that the shared awareness and affirmation of queer theory and activism on the part of my interlocutors likely stem from the fact that all my interviewees graduated from exceptional universities in Turkey, and spend, according to their statements, most of their leisure time reading about social problems and gender issues. All the interviewees in this study are given a pseudonym to respect and protect their anonymity, and the names of the places have been changed for the same purposes.

1. Introduction: Que(e)rying a Teacher's Responsibilities

"The kids had a narrow escape," wrote a popular Turkish newspaper (Aytalar, 2003), regarding the news of Nedim Uzun's dismissal from his twenty-year-long teaching career on the grounds of having "forced" his teenage students to cross-dress at a costume party in a summer camp in Erdek, where he taught English, pretending to be a native English teacher called *Ned*. Following the "scandal," Nedim instantly became a source of fervent interest for the press. According to many news reports, he had not only disrespected the highly esteemed profession of teaching with his "bizarre" ways of talking and acting (referring to his feminine behaviors), but he also forced his "perverse sexuality" into the young minds he had promised to set an example for. Only a few at the time questioned the reason why he might have had to present himself as a foreign English teacher (feminine behaviors of foreign male teachers may sometimes be attributed to cultural differences and hence not construed as signs of homosexuality) or how much he wanted to avoid being judged by the norms of hegemonic Turkish masculinities (Keskin, 2018: 2; Özbay and Soybakış, 2020: 6-8; Yunusoğlu, 2011: 29). Nor did anyone attribute any agency to the teenagers at the party, who might have wanted to do something "funny" and experimental for the event, which, from my perspective, resembles the collective shock and the horror of the Victorians, who were aghast at the implication that their children might actually have solid knowledge about gender and sexual relations of the adult world.

Certainly, the hardships and misfortunes of being a Queer* teacher or a Queer* worker in service sectors are not specific to Nedim. As Hande Eslen-Ziya and Yasin Koç note (2016), the traditional gender roles and the hegemonic norms of heteronormative and patriarchal sexuality in Turkey not only exacerbate the dominant negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals but also fortify the pervasive institutional discrimination against them (p. 802). Due to the increasing levels of negative attitudes towards homosexuals in Turkey (Sakallı, 2002: 116; Bakacak and Öktem, 2014: 819), Queer* workers in different sectors of the workforce are more likely to experience formal and informal forms and degrees of discrimination and inequality based on gender and sexual differences. As Emir Özeren *et al.* have demonstrated, many Queer* employees decide to remain silent when they encounter or experience a homophobic utterance or incident in the workplace for fear of repercussions (2016: 229). Confronted with the expectation of a rigid separation between their professional identities and personal lives, most opt to remain in the closet, fearing that they might be fired and not wanting to jeopardize their chances of being promoted or getting a raise. However, the silence they reluctantly embrace as a self-protective measure becomes the very mechanism that traps them in a work environment, where they feel not represented or respected (p. 1204).

Even though the challenges that Queer* employees face in the workplace due to their intersecting identities of gender, sexuality, race, and class remain among the least studied topics in the social sciences (Özeren, 2014: 1203), there has been a rise of interest in recent years in how Queer* employees in the education sector, particularly teachers, experience the interaction of their sexual and professional identities (Khayatt, 1992; Kissen, 1996; Evans, 2002; Harris and Grey, 2014; Connell, 2015), albeit all conducted with Queer* teachers in Western Countries like United States, Canada, Australia,

the United Kingdom, and Ireland. Based on in-depth interviews with five Queer* teachers who have worked at various schools in İstanbul, my research builds upon the previous work by exploring how some of the Queer* teachers I interviewed navigate through the institutionalized regimes of inequality and discrimination whereas some of them changed careers after enduring institutionalized homophobia for years. Discerning that inequalities in relation to race, class, gender, and sexuality in the workplace are maintained through regimes that create and regulate discrepancies of power and control over resources and outcomes by means of particular discourses and practices (Acker, 2006: 443), schools may be considered one of the most representative types of gendered and sexualized organizations with their idiosyncratic regimes of inequality. While even in the United States, Queer* employees – their number is estimated to be 8.1 million (The Williams Institute 1) – are not protected against workplace discrimination based on homophobic attitudes, regardless of sector, the situation of Queer* teachers in Turkey is more precarious in terms of legal protection and future financial security compared to the situation in most Western countries².

2. Institutionalized Hatred of Diversity: Queer* Teachers in Turkish Context

Traditionally, the proliferation of homophobic and transphobic rationalities and prejudice against the LGBTQ+ population in Turkey has been traced to the modernization period in which the authoritarian state implemented social engineering projects of compulsory heterosexualization of the Turkish family and the patriarchal domestication of women as mothers (Kandiyoti, 1997: 127; Sancar, 2021: 57). These diligently delineated gender roles of the new republic culminated in the suppression of any individual who defied the prescribed gender roles and sexual scripts. Following Ferhunde Özbay's three-phase periodization of women's and gender studies in Turkey from the Republican era to the late 1980s (1990:1-8), we are now beyond the fourth phase, which is marked by increased interest in LGBTQ/Queer studies and collective, feminist demands for equal citizenship rights, perhaps, a fifth phase which has been identified by an increasingly insecure, dangerous and anxious atmosphere for LGBTQ+ individuals who are publicly condoned and ostracized by eminent state officials and state-sponsored institutions (Savcı, 2021: 20-1; Selen, 2020: 5525). Even though the LGBTQ+ rights and equality politics in Turkey have gained momentum in activist circles and public discourses, the state-sanctioned ban against the Pride Parade in 2015 (following the Gezi events), and the subsequent homophobic and transphobic statements of Prime Minister Erdoğan marked the beginning of an insidious, state-sponsored war against gender non-conforming and sexually dissident individuals whose mere existence, as the current Head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs stated, is conceived as "perversion against nature" (SPOD, 2020).

² While the experiences of Queer* teachers in rural and non-industrialized regions of Turkey remain to be documented, it is likely that the ways they encounter and experience homophobia in the workplace will be more different compared to the narratives of their urban and metropolitan Queer* colleagues as their experiences of sexual identities differ from those of Western gay men (Bereket and Adam, 2006: 146). Due to the socioeconomic, political, cultural, and ideological differences across different regions of Turkey, I would like to underscore that the experiences of my interlocutors are specific to İstanbul. The question of how these findings will differ is up to future research.

If one is to consider the recent findings of numerous studies that document LGBTQ+ individuals in Turkey being at higher risk than heterosexuals of numerous psychological problems due to social prejudice (Eskin *et al.*, 2005: 186; Bakacak and Öktem, 2014: 840-1; Göçmen and Yıldız, 2017: 1063), it becomes necessary to question what the current government and its officials aim to achieve through their discriminatory policies and regulations. As it has been seen in the recent events surrounding the protests against the state-appointed rector trustee to Boğaziçi University (one of the most acclaimed, highest-ranking universities in Turkey) and the following unlawful detention of almost 200 students on the grounds that they were rioting against state forces and carrying rainbow flags with their indication of the flag as a "terrorist insignia" (Korkmaz, 2021), many influential public figures, including the Minister of Interior Affairs, continue to target vulnerable populations and incite hate speech on television and in the social media, defining Queer* desires and identities as being against Islamic doctrines. While it is indisputable that Islam plays a large role in restructuring and actualizing Queer* sexual politics in Turkey which has lately been crystallized around a Boğaziçi student's artwork on the Kaaba and the attacks on LGBTQ+ students for "polluting" the sacred values of Turkish people, it should be noticed that state officials are systemically attempting to exploit "the long-standing fusion of religious and national identities" (Grzymala-Busse, 2012: 429) – a fusion that thrives on the increased differentiation of otherness in the public sphere and the unreserved violence against LGBTQ+ individuals and anyone who challenges the state's androcentric and heteronormative worldviews. In such a macabre climate, investigating how LGBTQ+ teachers, as the engineers of our futures, manage to survive in their work environment comes forth as a pressing social issue.

As one of the fundamental functions of the Turkish education system is to establish strictly cisheteronormative spaces of learning (KaosGL, 2012: 31), where any sort of gender nonconformity or sexual dissidence leads to daily harassment, disciplinary punishment, or the termination of one's teaching contract as we have recently seen in the case of Can Candan, a lecturer at Boğaziçi University who was unlawfully dismissed from his position due to having supervised the LGBTQ student's organization's activities (KaosGL, 2021), one of my fundamental goals in this paper is to document the past and current working conditions of five Queer* teachers at various schools of İstanbul and explore how they abide by or challenge the institutionalized rules and norms of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980: 637). As one of the most illuminating studies in the field, Catherine Connell's study (2014) revealed that the lesbian and gay teachers she interviewed, because of the constant burden of trying to maintain a balance between their sexual and professional identities, acted in three different ways: (i) attempted to split their so-called conflicting identities, (ii) created ways of knitting these identities into a harmonious whole, or (iii) simply left teaching, the latter being the more prevalent option for many Queer* teachers in İstanbul, depending on the interviews and my observations and personal experiences of eight years of teaching introductory-level English in İstanbul. Positioned as a male-presenting, Queer* researcher and a previous Queer* teacher who has had their own share of systematic discrimination, mobbing, and institutionalized forms of homophobia, I have been challenged by the Queer* teachers I interviewed to realize the experiences they disclosed are not to be interpreted as the stories of perseverance or giving up. On the contrary, their

stories revealed their diligent attempts to constantly monitor, navigate, and balance their positions as teachers in a larger web of power structures and hierarchal workplace inequalities which had been structured upon the heteronormative standards and expectations of the Turkish education system and its policymakers.

Even though the Queer* community in Turkey has achieved some public recognition (whether this has always been positive is debatable), Turkish society's attitudes towards LGBT rights and Queer* individuals are still negative, especially in areas, where material and cultural capital is low (Gelbal and Duyan, 2006: 574; Özbay, 2015: 871-2). As Dedeoğlu *et al.* pointed out, although many heterosexual teachers were not even aware of the many concepts related to gender and sexual dissidence, they were nevertheless conversant with the myths and parables about Queer* desire and its perils (2012: 262). It should not come as a surprise that teachers, just like any other employees, might be homophobic in their ideologies or actions (Shelton, 2015: 117). Even if they do not entertain such beliefs themselves, C. J. Pascoe effectively showed that teachers might sometimes use homophobic language to establish rapport with their students or they might simply allow such language to be used in the classroom without comment (2007: 78). But we need to recognize that heterosexual teachers and students are not the only actors in schools who generate and maintain these myths. As is the case in many organizations, schools have their own systems of organizing relations in a hierarchal manner and distributing power accordingly. Principals, in this case, are the ones who have more institutional power and help maintain the homophobic school environment and the heteronormative discourses in the daily lives of students and teachers by not addressing it or simply not regarding such incidents or statements to be homophobic (Farrelly *et al.*, 2017: 162). As I realize that Queer* teachers are situated in a complicated matrix, in which they frequently encounter the heteronormative, patriarchal beliefs and expectations of their students, and the principals, teachers, and the other school personnel during the regular flow of their work, in our in-depth interviews, in addition to learning about their gendered and sexualized experiences at schools, I also asked questions about their relationships with each group of people they interacted with, whether they experienced a conflict between their personal and professional lives, what kind of normative social scripts they encountered, and how they processed the negative emotions arising from their confrontations with heteropatriarchal school policies.

In the following pages, I try to reveal what sorts of experiences Queer* teachers in İstanbul articulate regarding the conundrum of being forced into presenting themselves as non-sexualized and non-gendered professional figures (yet oxymoronically, already gendered and sexualized from the beginning) because of the pressing supposition that there cannot be any other representation than heterosexuality or cisgenderism. This treatment of teachers' gender expressions and sexualities creates several outcomes on the part of the Queer* teachers: the burden of the aesthetic labor they are expected to perform due to the emergent neoliberal schemes of professionalism (i), and the indisputable necessity of maintaining the heteronormative school cultures through self-monitoring mechanisms (ii). As I focus on the myriad ways in which Queer* teachers experience the ramifications

of the aesthetic requirements of behaving in particular manners and embodying specific attributes and capacities espoused by the Turkish education sector (Warhurst *et al.*, 2000: 4), I also meditate upon the theoretical and practical efficacy of thinking through the processes of sexualization and desexualization of Queer* teachers and their work, which mandate that teachers, parents, and students are systematically ensured that there are no 'queers' in their schools "thanks to" the managerial prescriptions of an implicitly normalized cisheteronormativity regarding the personal lives of their teachers, their pedagogic approaches, and the curricula.

3. Looking Cis and Sounding Het: Aesthetic Labor and Performative Scripts

Schools are peculiar (work)places, functioning as the early spaces in our life trajectories, where we are present on a daily basis for long durations of time, being exposed to numerous worldviews and construals of the world, which are generally known to be quite static, hegemonic, and intolerant of other "readings". One of the most representative of these monolithic teachings is the axiom that considers gender the most salient criterion of differentiation (Epstein, 2017: 130). From the way we talk to the way we play in the school ground; children are always under close scrutiny in schools. Not surprisingly, this "hidden curriculum" (Williams, 2016: 147) not only forces teachers to preach to their students that there are only two genders, but they are also themselves forced into these norms, not letting any non-conforming action or doubt emerge or be heard, including their own. One can, of course, question why the teacher would accept this in the first place. Even though some teachers may strongly believe in the heteronormative worldview and arguments they teach, others who find such doctrines problematic may still abide by the system in order to keep their jobs. However, this "forced" compliance on the part of Queer* teachers in İstanbul (in the case of "take it or leave it") consequently damages their relationship with their personal and professional selves. Even in schools that do not care about a teacher's sexual orientation or treat it as a problem, the teachers are compelled not to carry their personal lives into the school. The neoliberal worldview, which is always seeking workers whose individuality does not create any nuance or unexpected scenario that might endanger its profit-maximizing goals, demands that teachers engage in some form of "deep acting" – constantly trying to feel in a particular way (Hochschild, 1983: 85). The main argument goes: "You might be gay, but do not show it!", even though cisgender and heterosexual teachers express their gender and sexual identities all the time, both in the classroom and in the teacher's lounge. On these unequal, implicit school policies, Meriç (a 26-year-old English Teacher at a private school in Kartal, İstanbul) stated:

I've never worked in a school where I did not feel administrators breathing down my neck. I don't know how to put it... You know, people always made fun of the way I speak. I always sounded like a woman. Ever since I've known myself. I get that it was funny to other kids as we were growing up but the reaction is still the same. I mean, once there was a Memorial Day ceremony on November 10 and the principal asked for someone to read an English poem for the special occasion. I was the only teacher who had the right pronunciation skills but they did not want me,

a deeper, more masculine voice. Of course, they wouldn't accept that they are homophobic. But I guess I am still very lucky. Even though they realize, no one would say a thing about me. Unless I flaunt about it.

Meriç's words reveal that some sort of aesthetic labor is constantly expected from them, and the female teachers. According to the stories Meriç recounted, it became apparent that the schools they worked at before (and the current one) have strict opinions and policies regarding how the teachers should look, dress, and behave, which they made explicit in the emails they sent to the teachers, specifying that a "proper" female teacher should always be careful about the amount of "skin" they show or that a male teacher should always wear dark-colored shirts rather than t-shirts or other colorful garments. Due to the administrative and the social demands and rules on the part of teachers to present a "professional" outlook, which is expected to be not only performative but "rather expressing deep-seated dispositions," the teachers find themselves burdened with the arduous task of trying to appeal to the norms and expectations of middle-class professionalism and the hegemonic patriarchal and heteronormative masculinities. As Meriç recounted numerous incidents when they were "warned" about the way they dressed and the topics they introduced in their lectures, it became evident that there are deeply-entrenched structural norms and expectations that require that teachers act and present themselves in a strictly delineated manner of "looking good and sounding right" (Williams and Connell, 2010: 350). If there is a discrepancy between a teacher's assigned gender and their gender performance, they are either not accepted for the positions or they are expected to "pass," for the benefit of the students, parents, and other teachers.

My personal experiences of teaching English in private schools also confirm the stories presented here. Similar to the ways Meriç was repetitively warned about their demeanor and the way they presented themselves, I also experienced daily tensions between the school policies and the gender non-conforming manners in which I experienced my daily non-binary self in my personal life. In one of the parents-teachers meetings, for instance, a father kept incessantly asking whether I was married, stating to the principal that he had some worries about my stance on teaching and morals. The next day, the director of the school "kindly" suggested I started wearing a fake engagement ring so that I would not be bothered by such negative comments. As Bergeron argued, the gender segregation of male and female workers, and heterosexual and homosexual workers (I would add) into different jobs do not follow from their gendered and sexualized tendencies; instead, they are the results of managerial imperatives produced at work (2016: 194). Following her argument, I want to suggest that the binarism of homosexual vs. heterosexual is created and reinforced in schools through constantly positioning heterosexuality as the natural, normative category against the "deviant" and "statistically rare" homosexual. Although Queer theorists such as Butler (1997: 142-143) and Sedgwick (2008: 11) examined the systematic processes of creating the "hetero-vs-homo" binarism in great detail, we lack knowledge regarding the ways this binarism affects real people in workplaces

(in this case, Queer* teachers outside the Global North³), and how this binarism (hetero/homo) proliferates and transforms itself in relation to the rapid neoliberalization of the education sector.

As marketization and financialization have deeply changed our subjectivities and everyday practices (Marchand and Velazquez, 2016: 447), schools had their share of this neoliberal “upgrade” as to their understanding of success, profit, and organizational functioning. By using the term “neoliberal” within the spheres of the social, cultural, and politico-economical, I refer to a particular, ideological state of mind and rationality that regards human beings as essentially rational decision-makers whose actions should not be controlled and regulated by governments by promoting privatization of the public sector, lesser social provisions, and commodification of almost everything (Harvey, 2005: 15-40). These tenets of neoliberal ideology come into prominence especially in the privatized education sector and private schools, in which the parents are treated as customers, buying the highest quality of teaching that they might expect. The lives and behaviors of the teachers are no longer beyond the scope of the parents’ consumption expectations, as I personally experienced as an out English teacher in a private English course. Even though the administration claimed not to care about a teacher’s sexuality, stating to me several times that it is an “extremely personal aspect” of one’s life (implying that it is left outside the course), they were not eager to let me go to the bimonthly parents’ meetings, for I might not quite “reflect the values of the firm cordially” – which should be read as an organizational HR tactic that would not bring me into close contact with parents who might find my gender expression weird or alarming. Following Williams and Connell’s ideas on aesthetic labor, I would suggest that Queer* teachers are burdened not only with the expectations of presenting their best selves to impress students and parents, but they are also forced to act according to the heteronormative dictates of national education systems and their curricula.

4. Having the Capital to Split or Quit: Self-Monitoring Mechanisms

In her analysis of gay and lesbian teachers working in California and Texas, Catherine Connell tackles the intersections of sexuality, class, and race, demonstrating how the experiences of gay and lesbian teachers related to these categories are inseparable from each other since the black and Latinx gay and lesbian teachers from the lower classes were also the ones with lower physical and cultural capital. While Turkish teachers’ experiences of race do not say much in the Turkish context, as only ethnicity might play a determining role for teachers (as in the case of Kurdish Queer* teachers), class has presented itself as a significant criterion for the benefits and advantages it provides the Queer* teachers. To recognize the complex interplay of economy, gender, labor, and subjectivity through history and culture, it is necessary to attend to Carla Freeman’s statement that “these forces and

³ For this study, I rely on the Western theories of gender and sexuality as the social scientific theories grounded in the actual experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in Turkey are still in process of their incipience and cumulation within the scope of sociology and anthropology of work (Özbay, 2010). While the Western theories of gender and sexuality have been a vital, effective part of LGBTQ+ activism and academic work in Turkey since the nineties, I situate the lived experiences of my interlocutors in a critical position that could mobilize, challenge, and detest these theories’ arguments and assumptions to refrain from the possible danger of engaging in epistemological and ethical violence towards my interlocutors by prioritizing the Western theorizations and conceptualizations of queer living and queer becoming.

processes inevitably change each other, manifesting themselves in new forms, expressions, and subjective experiences" (Freeman, 2014: 135). For instance, a gay, male teacher, who has the necessary capital to be able to live in a region or neighborhood that has many friendly cafes and pubs for the Queer* community would naturally experience a higher sense of belonging and representation than a Queer* teacher with limited physical capital, who might have to travel long distances in order to reach these "gathering places," spending both more time and money. Moreover, if they do not have the cultural capital that would enable them to construe their non-heteronormative sexual identity in a more affirmative manner, they might take it to be a merely "personal aspect" of one's life and thereby not seek interaction with the Queer* community. This might leave them vulnerable to feelings of alienation and loneliness both in their lives and in the workplace. But, for some, material/financial capital, especially in cases where a conflation of sexual identity and professional identity is not possible, provides the means to separate their personal and professional identities without endangering their work performance or their sexual identity. On this intricate relationship between sexual identity and class of Queer* teachers, Erdem, a 32-year-old English teacher working in a private school in Şişli, said:

I don't think it is anyone's business, you know, me being gay. What has it got to do with my performance in class, anyway? Of course, it would not matter how good a teacher I am if the parents heard about it. So I have to monitor myself all the time in case I let something slip. But even if the word gets out, I am sure the administration would protect me... Like, there was this PE teacher before. A student saw him in a gay bar and took pictures of him dancing with another man. The parents went wild, but our principal was adamant about protecting the teacher. They handled the issue efficiently and soon it was somehow forgotten, but if this had happened in another school, you know that they would have already fired the teacher.

Even though two of my interlocutors⁴, who had "quit" teaching, later informed me that they do not want their stories to be shared and published for believing that they are stories of "giving up" and "failing," I believe that all the stories and experiences of the Queer* teachers in this study are real-life

⁴ Two of my interlocutors contacted me a couple of days after the interviews and informed me that they did not want their stories published for (i) believing that it might discourage other Queer* teachers in the profession, and (ii) feeling about their decision in retrospect. Even though my commonalities as a researcher with my interviewees (sexual orientation and occupational status) helped me establish rapport and a relationship of confidentiality (Bacio and Rinaldi, 2019: 38), this news did not come much as a surprise to me, as our in-depth interviews, at least in my experience, were rife with moments of silence, resistance, and reluctance when it came to the topic of why and how they decided to change careers, and the events and the reasons behind their decisions. They did not want to listen to my interpretation of their experiences and the data they provided in the interviews, which ensured me that they were not feeling ready for "sharing authority" in documenting and interpreting their stories (K'Meyer and Crothers, 2007: 85). In total respect for their decisions, I do not share any of the information they disclosed in our interviews, however, I try to interpret their reticence and self-censorship during the interviews as an indicator of the depth of the emotional burden of the hardships and stress they experienced, and a sign of the psychological difficulty of even thinking and talking about those events (Layman, 2009: 218). While both of them named their acts of deciding not to teach anymore as "quitting," as I believe in the potent effects of naming and reframing, I construe their stories not as of quitting, but as of being left with no other viable, healthy option, and hence they are, in my perspective, are great "examples" of caring and dedicated role models who have shown me the importance of protecting one's self-worth and psychological well-being by not falling for the morally-infused, illusionary grand narratives of the self-sacrificial teacher.

proof of the adaptive strategies and survival techniques they employed in the face of structural inequalities and processes of silencing and ostracizing. These hardships and the efforts these teachers have to show became more evident when Mertan (a 41-year-old English teacher who is the only interlocutor that identifies himself as gay) talked about his experiences in a school he used to work at. Having been forced to “quit” teaching in 2010 for “potentially being improper and dangerous” for the kids, Mertan had to resign and sought jobs in the other areas of the service sector. He recounted the incident as follows:

I worked in a school at Sarıgazi for almost two years. It was a very conservative neighborhood, deep in that godforsaken Sultanbeyli. It wouldn't be wrong to describe it as a place where no good thing ever happened! (he laughs). Everyone was wearing those kufis and niqabs. I think the teachers were not very different in terms of mentality, I mean, their worldviews. They would always ask me why I wasn't married and all... So, one day I was texting with a guy on Facebook. On my fake account, of course. We exchanged photos and stuff. But then he immediately blocked me. Just as I was fidgeting about the whole thing, it turned out that a student baited me. I am still curious how that student went to the administration and told them about it. In two days, our principal called me into his office and told me to resign. He reprimanded me on morals and appropriate conduct. I said: Damn your school and your ignorance all the way to hell, and I have never worked as a teacher since then. I did some translation jobs, I worked as a cashier, and then I ended up here (referring to the office of foreign education consultancy he was working at the time).

To make sense of how the workplace experiences of Queer* teachers are affected by their class status, it is necessary to analyze Erdem and Mertan's quotations above in relation to each other. While both schools seem to expect similar behaviors from their Queer* teachers, in that explicitly heterosexual acting, the school located in Şişli, tends to embrace a somewhat protective policy. On the other hand, the second school, both in terms of its policies and the homophobic work culture they promote, makes it almost impossible for a Queer* teacher to work without experiencing certain hardships. While we might argue that it is the class of the students, other teachers, and the school that makes it a more hostile environment for a Queer* teacher, it should also be realized that Mertan did not have the financial security Erdem enjoyed at the time. While Erdem stated that he worked because he liked being busy and particularly being a teacher, Mertan reported that he was sending money to his sister, who was taking care of their ill mother, and he was living in a rented apartment, barely making ends meet. It was probably this lack of alternatives that caused Mertan to work in that school for a year and a half. Moreover, Erdem saw his sexual identity as disconnected from his professional identity, whereas Mertan was unable to do so. I argue that Erdem's frequenting of gay cafes and pubs and having a small group of Queer* friends, as well as the money that enables him to enjoy his Queerness*, allow him to split the two identities in a manner that is non-threatening towards his

identity as a teacher (as it was necessitated by the environmental and social factors). Following Catherine Lee's findings that LGB teachers in rural communities lack the opportunities to speak their identities, which worsen the level of their work experiences as a Queer* teacher (2019b: 12), Mertan's experiences in Sultanbeyli (an outer, rural part of İstanbul at the time) make more sense considering the conservative beliefs and the religious inclinations of its people.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have sought to demonstrate how five Queer* teachers in İstanbul experienced the neoliberal school policies, which promoted sexual neutrality for the sake of professionalism, bearing in mind how "power works in the flow of connected affectivities in and across bodies, discourses, practices, relations, and spaces in ways that maintain a collective orientation towards heterosexuality" (Neary *et al.*, 2016: 251). As the experiences of Queer* teachers in the study point out, teachers are not treated differently from other workers on the labor market: They are constantly required to examine and control not only how they behave, but how they feel as well. Moreover, their professional identities, different from a factory worker or a nurse, are burdened with the quest of setting an example, which can only be shaped and presented in accordance with heteronormative sexual morality and its norms. From the stories my interlocutors narrated, the ambivalent, if not hypocritical, treatment of Queer* teachers' sexual identities are stark. In that, whereas heterosexual teachers are free to mention their husbands or wives whenever they feel like it, not fearing the consequences of sharing details about their personal lives with other teachers or employees in school, Queer* teachers have to work within a "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" system. In a work environment where various forms of inequalities are legitimized and solidified with the stigmatization of non-normative expressions of sexuality, it is not quite possible for Queer* teachers to come into their politicized sexual subjectivities (Connell, 2015: 188). Instead, many Queer* teachers, feeling that they cannot be good role models if they do not acclaim their identities proudly and wholly, change careers in the end. If they choose not to give in, as Henderson wrote, "in their fears of the future, they are at best, the 'lonely flag bearer,' and at worst unable to function as teachers at all" (2019: 862).

While many studies conducted indicate that coming out has, overall, positive effects for the teachers (Smith, 2008: 16; Macgillivray, 2008: 87-8; Nielson and Anderson, 2014: 1100), in İstanbul the current situation in schools and the level of institutional control over teachers' actions seem to suggest that it is not possible to present such radical claims for now. In a country, where two teachers were condemned by MEB, the Ministry of National Education, through disciplinary action for hugging each other (Özmen, 2020), we need to continue having discussions whether coming out can ever be beneficial for a Queer* teacher, at least in the current state of affairs.

As LGBTQ+ teachers continue to experience debilitating psychological problems because of the heteronormative school environments (Lee, 2019a: 688), coming out can be a beneficial solution only if school culture, and more importantly principals and other managerial staff, work hard on protecting the rights and liberties of Queer* teachers before any homophobic student or parent. The need for

structural changes at the institutional level is strengthened by studies (Wright and Smith, 2015: 405), which argue that it does not matter much whether a Queer* teacher is out or not if it is not accompanied by legal protection and policies that ensure equal treatment in the workplace. As long as we do not implement policies that protect Queer* students and Queer* teachers from homophobic bullying and workplace discrimination, schools will continue to be stress-inducing places. While there are a few schools, colleges, and universities that embrace gender-inclusive educational agendas and/or aim to create queer-friendly workplaces and campuses, it remains to be answered how effective they have been in achieving these goals in the face of the AKP government's increasingly conservative, phobic, and heteronormative educational policies and top-down interventions. In these difficult times, when we as educators keep complaining that students do not question things or simply are not curious enough, perhaps we first need to realize when and how our practices silence the early curiosities of the students when it comes to inequality, gender, and sexuality, and dare to take action when a student calls another a "fag."

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