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Queer bodies in school spaces: dis/orienting practicum in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This article is a focused analysis of one participant's written reflections on what it means to be a cis-gender gay man on teaching placement in an Aotearoa New Zealand primary school. Sara Ahmed's queering of phenomenology is a powerful activation of theory offering the possibility of critical, interpretative insight into queer experience within teacher education. We demonstrate how Ahmed's queer phenomenology might generate depth in understanding of the spatial, affective and embodied dimensions of queer student teaching experience in practicum. We show that, in Aotearoa New Zealand, heteronormativity continues to play a significant role in the experiences of LGBTQ+ student teachers. Importantly, we find queer student teachers draw on capacities of resistance in order to enact and anticipate 'liveability' in school spaces.

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Introduction

Lived experience is a critical focus in queer studies, yet the lived experiences of queer student teachers are not well-understood in Aotearoa New Zealand. What studies exist signal the ongoing need for awareness and progress, both at the university and within associated school communities. Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand continue to be political sites that replicate social ideals, including heteronormative values (e.g. Allen 2019; Allen 2020; Carpenter and Lee 2010; Gunn 2011; Hemi and Mortlock 2023).

As teacher educators, we have worked with student teachers who have shared experiences of struggle outside the typical developmental process of becoming a teacher – navigating queerphobia, racism and ableism, for some in ways that have had an impact on their success on practicum. This study has emerged as a response to a body of anecdotal evidence that continues to be shared by student teachers who navigate minoritization across gender, sexuality, ability and ethnic or racial difference. We brought together a team of teacher educator-researchers, who have navigated our own difference in relation to sexuality and ethnicity, to engage with these experiences via queer phenomenology with the aim of better understanding and supporting student teachers.

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With this in mind, and while acknowledging that this study draws on the experience of one participant, we offer the following as broad anchoring questions that orient the study as a whole: In what ways do queer student teachers' lived experiences in professional practice placements play out? In what ways are queer student teachers' bodies, spaces and relationships shaped by these experiences in schools? And what might this mean for the fairness and equity of the experience of queer student teachers on practicum relative to their straight peers? These questions are not intended to produce generalizable answers from one case, but rather to orient our inquiry towards the broader conditions of queer practicum experience that Benny's account illuminates.

In this study, we apply a queer phenomenological lens in order to attend to the experiences of, in this case, participant and collaborator Benny,[1] a gay, cisgender student teacher on practicum at an Auckland primary school. Throughout this article, we use 'queer' and 'LGBTQ+' as our authorial terms, following Ahmed's (2006) usage of queer to represent any gender, sexuality or other identification outside of cis-heteronormativity. Where we draw on the work of other scholars or the words of our participant, we retain the terminology used in those sources, which reflects the evolution of language across time and context. We have used 'Aotearoa New Zealand' consistently throughout, acknowledging the significance of te reo Māori in naming this place. We attend to Benny's recall of his day-to-day 'arrivals' at the practicum school with regard to Ahmed's (2006) tenets from *Queer Phenomenology*: orientation, lines, histories, disorientation, and the concept of the liveable life. As Ahmed (2006) suggests, 'It matters how we arrive at the places we do' (2). Benny's account derives from a faculty-funded research study. This phenomenological inquiry sought to understand student teachers' lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion while at practicum schools in Aotearoa New Zealand.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, teacher education providers collaborate with schools in partnership to design programmes of teaching practice both within university and school settings. As required by Hapori Matatū Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, the professional registering body for teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand, student teachers must spend a minimum of 80 days on practicum in one-year graduate or post-graduate initial teacher education programmes and 120 days over three years in undergraduate initial teacher education programmes.

Professional practice in partnership schools is considered by the Teaching Council as core to the professional development of a student teacher, with the expectation that they are 'suitably prepared for their professional experience', and 'willing and able to develop adaptive expertise' (21). The implicit assumption is that each practicum school provides a comparable professional experience with a relatively equitable and just assessment of student teachers' professional practice, but we know that this is not often the case for minoritized student teachers (Russell 2020; Sexton 2021; Toledo and Maher 2019). Although the Aotearoa New Zealand curriculum and the Teaching Council's Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards for Teaching (2017) are guided by culturally responsive pedagogies, Te Tiriti o Waitangi commitments, and inclusive practices, minoritized student teachers appear to fall into a particularly vulnerable gap where certain principles, protections and practices intended for children are not easily accessed by them.

As teacher educators, we have worked with student teachers who have shared experiences of struggle outside the typical developmental process of becoming a teacher. These

include navigating challenges beyond the basic expectations of safety for teachers, which have had an impact on their success on practicum; issues such as queerphobia, racism and ableism. The conditions around their practice, and especially the assessment of their practice, were arguably impacted by forms of discrimination.

This study has thus emerged as a response to a body of anecdotal evidence that continues to be shared by student teachers who navigate minoritization across gender, sexuality, ability and ethnic or racial difference. We brought together a team of teacher educator-researchers, who have navigated their own difference in relation to sexuality and ethnicity, to engage with these experiences via queer phenomenology with the aim of better understanding and supporting student teachers. We have sought collaboration with recent graduates who were willing to share their lived experiences of both inclusion and exclusion on practicum.

Literature review

The following review first draws on international scholarship to establish the broader landscape of LGBTQ+ teacher and student teacher experience, before turning to Aotearoa New Zealand-based research that contextualizes the specific conditions shaping this study. Across both bodies of literature, a consistent picture emerges: school spaces and teacher education programmes are structured along heteronormative lines that constrain the professional formation and lived experience of queer student teachers.

There is broad agreement in existing research that LGBTQ+ teachers experience discrimination and marginalization in school spaces, which are socialized along heteronormative lines (Allen 2019; Ferfolja 1998). Such experiences can include: feeling silenced and/or invisible; the burden of continuously negotiating identity, e.g. coming out to some colleagues but not others; and/or the constant vigilance around the degree of queer visibility to learners and parents. In spite of the scholarly consensus, there has been comparatively less attention paid to the specific experiences of queer student teachers, particularly in relation to how norms existing in teacher education programmes and on practicum placements impact on developing professional expertize and the assessment of their practice.

In Nixon and Givens (2004) UK study of gay, lesbian and bisexual trainee teachers, experiences of institutional silence, vulnerability and the presence of hegemonic masculinity within some student cohorts are key themes. Participants also frequently encountered homophobic discourse in school settings such as 'Miss, you're so gay' (Nixon and Givens 2004, 220), and described needing to self-censor and remain closeted to maintain professional legitimacy. Nixon and Givens (2004) argued that normative student teacher identity was framed as heterosexual, which made queer visibility professionally and personally risky. A more recent study based in Sweden by Åkesson (2023) explores the affective aspects of discrimination experienced by minoritized student teachers, including queer and trans participants. The research demonstrates how structural and emotional forms of exclusion continue to shape participation and belonging within teacher education spaces and highlights how LGBTQ+ student teachers do not enjoy the same conditions as their straight peers. In the Australian context, Russell (2020) applied Anzaldúa's borderland theory to a study of queer student teachers, with findings highlighting how Australian school cultures still marginalize student teachers who do not align with

normative gender and sexuality discourses. Queer student teachers occupy precarious positions in school cultures and must navigate tensions related to visibility, professional conformity and self-preservation. Normative discourses of gender and sexuality in this Australian context remain embedded in the everyday practices of schools, often rendering queerness incompatible with the professional expectations of becoming a teacher (2020).

Other scholars have focused on the practicum component of initial teacher education, which represents a particularly challenging space for queer student teachers. For example, Toledo and Maher (2019), in their longitudinal case study of two U.S. elementary student teachers (one gay, one lesbian), highlight the emotional labour required to navigate practicum settings. The participants had a heightened awareness of the risks involved in coming out and highlighted the importance of the relationship with their mentor teacher, noting that affirmation or exclusion by their mentors significantly shaped their professional formation. Participants described having to manage their bodies, speech, and spatial presence in order to counteract stereotypes or avoid suspicion. Toledo and Maher (2019) frame this negotiation as 'heteroprofessionalism', referring to the expectation that teachers must appear gender-conforming and emotionally neutral.

Similarly, Fleet (2016), through a narrative inquiry with four queer-identifying student teachers in Canada, found that participants often felt compelled to separate their personal and professional identities in order to survive within institutional and practicum settings. Fleet's (2016) study reveals how feelings of shame and internalized stigma are commonly experienced when queer identities are invisibilized or unacknowledged in teacher education programmes. Fleet (2016) argues that a lack of inclusion in the programme's curriculum, combined with a culture of silence and erasure, contributes to the emotional burden carried by these queer student teachers, which limits the development of positive and queer professional identities.

In response to these challenges, some research has explored what LGBTQ+ support structures might look like in teacher education, which could have some application for teacher education in the Aotearoa New Zealand context. For example, Benson, Smith, and Flanagan (2014) examined the pre-practicum placement workshop in place for LGBTQ+ students in their initial teacher education programme at their university (McGill University, Montreal, Canada). This workshop offered a space for these students to co-construct their professional identity as queer pre-service teachers, and offered strategies for navigating disclosure in varied school contexts. The study found that the transition for queer student teachers to practicum was 'more pronounced' (383) than their heterosexual peers, with queer student teachers needing to negotiate the ethical, emotional and political layers of their non-heteronormative subjectivities. Benson, Smith, and Flanagan (2014) argue that explicit preparation and collective dialogue are essential components of effective, queer-supportive initial teacher education. Further to this, in Unwin et al.'s (2024) Australian study, the researchers advocate for the queering of the initial teacher education curriculum itself. This study drew on four reflective vignettes from queer teacher educators, the findings of which illustrate how institutional norms around professionalism, curriculum and identity reinforce cis-heteronormativity. They critique the pervasiveness of heteroprofessionalism and argue for the embedding of queer theory and critical literacy throughout the programme. Rather than treating

queer content as an add-on, Unwin et al. (2024) propose that queerness must be central to the project of justice-oriented education and that teacher education should play a much stronger role in intentionally supporting the formation of queer student teachers.

In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, research consistently shows how the heteronormative discourses embedded in schooling structures, policies and culture have a profound effect on LGBTQ+ teachers (Allen 2019; Allen 2020; Carpenter and Lee 2010; Gunn 2011; Hemi and Mortlock 2023; Robinson 2002; Smith and Payne 2016). However, fewer studies focus specifically on queer student teachers within initial teacher education. Lee and Carpenter (2014) engaged in a study at the University of Auckland, where a portion of the data focused on student teachers' perceptions of practicum with regards to LGBTI visibility. Lee and Carpenter (2014) found that heteronormativity significantly contours experiences at school, and that both straight and queer student teachers perceived a lack of safety for LGBTI student teachers and teachers. Sexton (2021) draws on case studies to explore the complex experiences of queer and other minoritized student teachers navigating school placements and corresponding teacher educator actions. Identity-affirming pedagogical relationships within initial teacher education can provide much-needed support when practicum exposes students to heteronormative hostility or indifference. Sexton (2021) calls for teacher education to do more to disrupt normative conditions by scaffolding queer identity development through pedagogies that address 'social justice hurdles' (200).

Despite this growing field, gaps remain particularly in relation to how queer student teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand are currently navigating heteronormative expectations within institutional and practicum spaces that are arguably increasingly repressive. Our study contributes by drawing on queer phenomenology (Ahmed 2006) as both theory and method. Queer phenomenology offers something distinct here by attending to the felt, spatial and embodied dimensions of queer experience, rather than focusing on the factors that structure spaces to be a certain way. Queer phenomenology allows us to consider how bodies arrive in spaces, how those spaces extend or foreclose certain bodies, how disorientation and reorientation are lived, and what conditions might make a practicum life more liveable.

Queer phenomenology

Sara Ahmed wrote her celebrated work *Queer Phenomenology* in 2006. This work inhabits a radical intersection between queer studies and phenomenology. Phenomenology, deriving from Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, explores experience and consciousness in relation to how meaning is lived. Sara Ahmed (2006) queers phenomenology by shifting the centre from its originary position of an unproblematized neutrality of being, towards recognition of the living, embodied and socially-situated queer subject. In this study, we are interested in the phenomenal organization of bodies and objects in educational spaces. Key queer phenomenological concepts we have chosen to work with are orientation/disorientation, lines and histories, and the possibilities of the uncanny leading to a liveable life.

Orientation concerns how we find ourselves in the world but also how bodies occupy space with respect to others. New spaces require adjustment for any body, however, for queer bodies, the work to feel at home is potentially loaded and more complex. A queer

body orients against the flow of the usual norms. Dissonance arises when a body's orientation cannot be fully accommodated in a cis-heteronormative space. When all other objects in a space are oriented towards another set of normative values and discourses, the work required to fit a space not made for the queer body is a constant tension (Ahmed 2006). Making a home in a new space is a negotiation between one's own orientation and the space that has its own orienting force. This space for the queer body may be experienced as uncanny or strange, while others may quite quickly feel at home.

Ahmed (2006) shows how Husserl's notion of the implicit intentionality of spaces might orient a queer body, where all other bodies and objects are already aligned to an inherited cis-heteronormative reality. This alignment of bodies, objects and spaces towards a certain trajectory is not an ambivalent phenomenon. This orienting force gains power upon a body's memory of repeated action, an assemblage consisting of the 'sediment' of prior experiences. Lines gather when spaces, bodies and objects tend in a certain direction and become entrenched in this direction through repetition. Ahmed (2006) mobilizes Merleau-Ponty and Husserl's notion of 'sedimented histories' (56) with respect to how bodies become so strongly disposed towards certain lines: 'what bodies tend to do are the effects of histories' (56). Histories are acquired not just in terms of the organization of bodies and objects in space. This sediment of history finds a home in the body. For bodies already oriented to, and at home in, cis-heteronormative discourses, they may find the space extends more easily to envelop them. This shared trajectory with others, 'allows bodies to extend into spaces that, as it were, have already taken their shape' (15). Lines shape what paths are available, what futures seem possible, and which bodies feel at home. This is how history gets under the skin.

For queer bodies, there is a potential burden of emotional and material labour in navigating what are always-already straight spaces. The experience for a queer body making the transition to a new space can feel like being 'thrown' (Ahmed 2006, 157); that is, an existential experience of disorientation. Social spaces are understood to be replicative in terms of cultural production, as well as reproducers of inherited social normative values (Allen 2019). This replicative work means that social spaces can be even more entrenched in their cis-heteronormative architecture. Whether acknowledged or not, these norms also still remain at the core of the educational project. Ahmed (2006) defines disorientation as 'failed orientations' (160), where bodies' arrivals into spaces are characterized by experiences of exclusions, restrictions and barriers. The stress of disorientation can be experienced as embodied suffering. It gets under the skin. Ahmed (2006) tells us that the pressure can transform into a vicelike weight, a feeling of being held against one's will.

Ahmed (2006) also posits that resistance, deviation and even deprivation might offer possibility and potentiality in these spaces that are aligned otherwise. When queer bodies find solidarity in otherwise spaces, new lines begin to gather. New patterns and new ways of making meaning become possible. Further, potentialities for new orientations are brought forth in the recognition of 'queer moments when objects slip' (2006, 171). These capacities of resistance to cis-heteronormative hegemonies become a certain hope of making the world more liveable, changing the shape of a space bit by bit. Engaging in queer gathering offers another path and brings another history to the fore. In this research, we ask whether this possibility for hope might arise for a queer body in the practicum space at school.

Ahmed's concept of the liveable life is pivotal here. When queer existence may already be a struggle to a greater or lesser degree, how might disorienting spaces become liveable? Ahmed draws from Judith Butler (2004, as cited in Ahmed, 2006) when she proposes the 'liveable life' (Ahmed 2006, 178) as one which mobilizes refusal, resistance, and solidarity in order to find new paths forward in the face of a world and its objects that continually retreat in the face of the queer other. This naming and eschewing of the histories that erase queerness offers space and strength for dwelling otherwise. Ahmed (2006) pursues this possibility in her book, *The Promise of Happiness* (2010).

A number of recent studies apply queer phenomenology in the fields of medicine, organization, politics and gaming (Dalby 2024; Hindmarch 2025; Norris 2023; Vitry 2021). Queer phenomenology has also been embraced in education and teacher education studies (Gregg and Bowling 2024; Sáenz Macana, Landi, and Devís-Devís 2024; Siegel 2025), offering tools to understand and name spatial and normative exclusion, or the emotional labour surviving these spaces. These studies also highlight resistance, in the form of redirection of space, and the creation of new forms of belonging (Siegel 2025), and that while various pressures might be in evidence such as silencing and the policing of queer identities, they can also be met with embodied resistance with reflection and presence as capacities for change. In Aotearoa New Zealand, queer phenomenology has been utilized in studies of inclusion in sports science, dance studies and youth support services (Matthews 2013; McIntosh and Buck 2022; Shaw 2025), but none thus far in initial teacher education.

Research design

This article draws from the first of three phases of our qualitative research study. The broader study seeks to understand student teachers' lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion in Aotearoa New Zealand classrooms, with the aim of tracing how their bodies and identities are shaped, constrained and enacted within educational spaces. As an in-depth qualitative study, we wanted to work with a small group of six to ten participants over the three phases, which consist of an individual written reflection, a one-on-one interview and a group poetic inquiry.

Phase one, entitled *Tracing Lines and Bodies,* invited self-selected participants (graduates of our university's initial teacher education programmes) to share written reflections on their experiences of inclusion and/or exclusion during their teaching practicum. These reflective accounts were intended to surface how participants experienced orientation and disorientation within their professional practice contexts. Participants were invited via an online portal to submit a piece of writing in response.

We received written reflections from six participants, but for the purposes of this article, we focus on one specific participant's written reflection in order to engage in a critical, close analysis through the theoretical lens of Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006). We worked particularly with the concepts of dis/orientation, lines and liveability, utilizing these as theoretical tools to analyse the participant's narrative. We selected Benny's written reflection for the way it demonstrates moments of spatial and embodied dis/orientation in relation to queerness.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) with ethics application approval number 24/347. Each

phase of the study was accompanied by a specific Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form. All participants consented to having their contributions included in publications, such as this article. All identifying details have been changed or omitted, and Benny, the participant whose story we engage with, reviewed a draft of this article prior to submission.

Benny's written reflection was submitted in response to an open prompt inviting participants to share their experiences of inclusion and/or exclusion during their teaching practicum. Participants were given minimal constraints in order to allow them to direct their accounts according to what felt most significant to their own experience. Benny's reflection runs to approximately 2,000 words and covers two practicum placements. For this analysis, we focus on the portions of his account that most directly bring up moments during practicum of spatial, affective and embodied dis/orientation in relation to his queer identity. The reflective format of the task, and its retrospective/introspective nature, means that we are working with Benny's account of his experience.

Excerpts from Benny's Reflection:

> My next fear was that the students would be able to tell I was gay and that would be a negative thing for them. I was scared they already had the societal expectations of what a man is supposed to look, sound and act like, that I have learned throughout my life, and would call me out as gay. I had forgotten that kids are more accepting than anyone, they haven't set the rules and expectations for everything yet and respond to people mostly based on how they treat them. If you smile and ask them questions about themselves and care about them, they'll think you're awesome! So, I didn't have any problem with student's thinking I was gay although they did assume I was straight as I was often asked if I had a girlfriend or a wife which I always thought wasn't lying when I said no and I wondered if they asked if I had a boyfriend would I say yes? I've seen many straight teachers talk to their students about their boyfriends, girlfriends, husbands and wives. I used to teacher aide in a class with two gay teachers, but they never spoke about their partners.
>
> I live with my partner so when people ask who I live with that is usually the moment I technically "come out" to them, which is always a little scary, and I find myself assessing their response to try and figure out if they are accepting of that or not. I didn't have any experiences where someone was not accepting of that thankfully.
>
> One instance I remember was during a staff meeting, and the Deputy Principal was talking about Pink Shirt Day which was coming up, and she told staff that if parents ask to tell them it doesn't have anything to do with LGBT, it's about anti-bullying, and that they have already had parents asking them about this as they are worried what the school is teaching them. Another teacher mentioned how the posters have rainbows on them, which the deputy principal said was misleading because it does give that idea it is just for LGBT bullying.
>
> This was difficult for me to sit through and hear her say Pink Shirt Day doesn't have anything to do with the LGBT+ community because I knew that it was actually started because of homophobic bullying in Canada. Given the school was celebrating the day and would be discussing bullying I thought the story of how it started would be an interesting thing to discuss with students. Yes, it has been extended to encompass resistance to all kinds of bullying, but homophobia is pink shirt day's roots. As a student teacher I didn't think it was my place to question that in front of the rest of the staff but a part of me wishes I had, not to be confrontational but to open that discussion and to share the story about Pink Shirt Day's origins. I think now as a full-time teacher who is a member of the staff I would speak up.

> In general, I definitely felt like at first, I would put forward the most acceptable parts of myself and as I got to know the staff better was able to express more of myself once I felt safe to do so. My first practicum had a social club every Friday after school they would have some juice, soda, beers or wine in the staff room, and I felt it was there I was able to learn more about who the other teachers were and therefore I was able to share my personality more because they were showing me that they were accepting people. This was harder at my second practicum because the staff weren't particularly social, but the year 2 team I was in were all very up front and expressed their honest selves with me.

> One of the teachers was once going to tell me something but didn't because one of the parents was around, after they had left she told me one of her parents who is a famous queer celebrity asked her if I knew who she was, to which the teacher replied that she doesn't think so because I haven't said anything about her. The parent then said, "well he's not a very good gay then". I found this to be hilarious, the fact that the parent had clocked me as gay and that her and the teacher were joking about that made me feel really positively about that teacher especially because she had chosen not to tell that story when one of one of the parents in my class was around to protect my privacy. Also, the fact that a queer parent was able to joke with the teacher about this showed how comfortable she felt sharing that part of her identity with her made me feel more safe around her.

Analysis

Benny's account, as found consistently in[2] the literature concerning LGBTQ+ teachers and student teachers, demonstrates that school spaces are rarely equitable for queer bodies. These spaces are understood to be overlaid with heteronormative (straight) lines and institutional silences that shape experience (Ferfolja 1998; Fleet 2016; Nixon and Givens 2004; Russell 2020). For queer student teachers in particular, practicum placements are high-stakes professional environments where they must negotiate not only the pressure to perform, but also to conform to the normative expectations of professionalism, intertwined as this is with expectations around gender and sexuality expression (Sexton 2021; Toledo and Maher 2019). These themes are reflected in Benny's narrative, where his experience of the practicum school space includes affective, embodied and spatial dissonance, but also moments where capacities of resilience are realized.

In this section, we discuss moments arising in Benny's account via the lens of Ahmed's (2006) *Queer Phenomenology*. With regard to these particular 'arrivals' we consider how queer bodies inhabit and are shaped by the experiential fabric of school architectures. In tracing Benny's story alongside Ahmed's (2006) concepts, we consider how heteronormativity is experienced and resisted by a queer body, and what it might mean to live and work 'otherwise' within spaces that are already aligned against you.

What a man is supposed to look, sound and act like

The school space in Benny's account is a structuring presence. Ahmed (2006) reminds us that 'some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others' (11). Working with Ahmed's (2006) theorizing of spatiality, we understand Benny's space as being shaped by repetition, normativity and orientation towards certain (straight) bodies and certain (heteronormative) histories. In Benny's reflection, the practicum space was oriented towards cisgender, heterosexual, conforming bodies, and disorienting to others. His recall of concern around how students perceived him is evident of this; his

fear that 'the students would be able to tell I was gay and that would be a negative thing for them'. Benny reiterates that he was scared that, 'they already had the societal expectations of what a man is supposed to look, sound and act like, … and would call me out as gay'. Benny describes this fear as 'learned throughout my life'. Benny also described vigilance around being asked if he had a partner:

> I live with my partner so when people ask who I live with that is usually the moment I technically 'come out' to them, which is always a little scary, and I find myself assessing their response to try and figure out if they are accepting of that or not.

Benny's account of the affective impact of queer orientation in a straight space aligns with Toledo and Maher's (2019) notion of 'heteroprofessionalism', which is the expectation that student teachers embody a professional identity coded as heterosexual and gender-conforming/gender-normative. As a gay man who describes his voice as non-gender-conforming, Benny lived within a horizon of ongoing vigilance, a space within which he negotiated his queerness professionally. Whether or how much Benny could or would disclose, how much he would keep hidden, demonstrates the baseline pressures of a school space alien to the queer body. This mirrors Nixon and Givens's (2004) findings that queer student teachers often feel they must remain closeted to maintain professional legitimacy. In Ahmed's (2006) terms, space is 'like a second skin' that 'unfolds in the folds of the body' (9), yet for Benny, the space of the school could not fully hold nor extend to his shape. His movements were traced by anxiety and unease, relying on surveillance and self-monitoring to manage his presence. The school space was experienced as a skin that at any minute might split.

I had forgotten that kids are more accepting than anyone

The absence of explicit hostility in Benny's account could be encouraging. However, when Benny notes, 'I didn't have any experiences where someone was not accepting of that thankfully', and 'I had forgotten that kids are more accepting than anyone', this does not necessarily make the practicum experience more equitable. As Åkesson (2023) and Sexton (2021) highlight, it is often the punctuated silences, the pervasive lack of affirmation, and the constant, subtle acts of erasure that contribute most to a queer student teacher's sense of disorientation. While Benny's practicum space was framed by the institution and the council as an equitable space for developing professional practice, there were implicit boundaries; limits that marked what could potentially be accepted or acceptable. Implicit in this space were rules for people and objects: queerness was the unspoken 'out of line', and alongside this the sense that inclusion and acceptance of queer bodies should be marked by the subject's thankfulness.

In Benny's experience, given the school was a space where attunement to a certain normative line was a demand carried by his body, the practicum setting functioned not only as a site of teacher development but also as a site of orientation towards a certain *kind* of teacher. Our reading of Benny's reflection via the lens of queer phenomenology demonstrates that school, rather than opening up possibilities, closed them down, constraining his body and presence into a semblance of hetero-professional compliance. In school practicum spaces shaped by heteronormativity, alignment requires conformity to embedded expectations of gender and sexuality, that is, 'being "in line" allows

bodies to extend into spaces that, as it were, have already taken their shape' (Ahmed 2006, 15). For queer bodies like that of Benny's, navigating the line involves implicit forms of self-negation.

Rainbows are misleading

A central vignette in Benny's account is his experience of a staff meeting where the deputy principal instructed teachers to tell parents that Pink Shirt Day 'doesn't have anything to do with LGBT' – it is about anti-bullying. A staff member's observation that 'the posters have rainbows on them' was met with the response that this was 'misleading'. For Benny, who knew that Pink Shirt Day originated from resistance to homophobic bullying in Canada, this was 'difficult to sit through'. Ahmed (2006) describes this kind of institutional move as a 'straightening device' (91), which is a pre-emptive erasure that presumes and reinforces straightness in advance of any explicit conflict. The deputy principal's directive demonstrated a cautious approach but in doing so, it actively structured the space against queer visibility.

And yet it is worth pausing here, because the Pink Shirt Day episode at Benny's school does not have to be read only as a story of erasure. Pink Shirt Day also had subversive potential, albeit suppressed. The school was celebrating the day with rainbows on the posters. The queer history of the event had had to be actively managed away, which in this act itself is evidence of its presence. As Ahmed (2006) reminds us, straightening devices are only necessary where deviation is possible. The deputy principal's intervention was working against a crack in the school's heteronormativity. Even though it remained unrealized in that moment, it had potential. This complicates any reading of the school as unequivocally heteronormative. As Fleet (2016) and Unwin et al. (2024) have argued, erasure reinforces a climate in which queerness appears incompatible with schooling. But the need to actively manage that incompatibility is evidence that queerness was present in the space.

It is also worth asking whether it is the school as space or Benny's expectations of the school that shapes his experience. Almost certainly both. Benny arrived at practicum already attuned to the risks of queer visibility in professional settings. His was a body conditioned by repeated encounters with spaces that do not easily extend to include it (Ahmed 2006). His heightened vigilance and careful self-monitoring were shaped by what he anticipated finding there. Something shifted when his expectations were challenged. The children did not see him as strange. A queer parent and a colleague acknowledged him with warmth. These unexpected moments were important because they disoriented Benny's own orientation towards the school as possibly hostile.

Part of me wishes I had spoken

For Benny, the impact of the staff meeting was nonetheless disorienting. Ahmed (2006) argues that 'bodies that are not "in place" involve hard work' (63), which was evidenced by Benny's self-regulation and the way he held himself in a space that had explicitly rejected the queer roots of an important event. He did not feel it was his place to speak, but reflects, 'a part of me wishes I had'. This ethical tension between what is experienced and what can be safely articulated is the paradox Ahmed captures: to pass may

ease external navigation, but it does not resolve internal misalignment. Benny's silence was a strategic negotiation of the limits of a space that could not hold his full self without professional risk. This is consistent with findings from Nixon and Givens (2004), Fleet (2016) and Sexton (2021), who each show that conforming to norms of professional credibility comes at the expense of personal agency for queer student teachers.

This was not an isolated moment. Benny's sense of disorientation was a recurring experience that unfolded across the practicum in moments where his body could not extend into the spaces in which he was professionally required to move. Ahmed (2006) writes that disorientation happens when bodies cease to extend into phenomenal space, when the world appears not the right way up, and normative lines of action feel blocked or inaccessible. Benny's self-censorship and emotional labour were not individual failings but symptomatic of a school space that was the wrong shape. In order to ensure safety, he needed to make his queerness less visible, and to this end he drew on his capacity to consciously monitor his voice, and his mannerisms.

Now, I would speak up

Benny's silence in the staffroom should not be read as failure. Like the participants in Toledo and Maher's (2019) and Fleet's (2016) studies, his decision to remain quiet was shaped by his awareness of positional vulnerability as a student teacher navigating a high-stakes environment. While he chose not to challenge the deputy principal's erasure of histories of queerness during the staff meeting about Pink Shirt Day, Benny later reflected that he would have felt more able to speak up as a 'full-time' teacher, indicating that his silence was shaped by a subtle awareness of the degree to which movement might be possible in one space compared to another.

When Benny describes sitting 'through' the internal conflict around whether to speak up, he is negotiating a moment in which the space no longer feels 'liveable'. Benny experiences disorientation because the space does not provide a direction for action without significant risk. Ahmed writes, 'disorientation is not evenly distributed' (159) suggesting that some bodies are more frequently required to absorb the friction of not fitting. His silence here is a strategic negotiation of the limits of a space that could not hold his full self.

For Ahmed (2006), a 'liveable life' is not the absence of discomfort, but one in which the self can unfold into a space where action and agency feel possible, presence is recognized, and orientation is not constrained by exclusion. Although Benny's practicum was shaped by experiences of misalignment and disorientation, his reflection also contains glimpses of certain capacities for resistance that create new lines and start movements towards liveability and possibility.

Benny writes, 'I think now as a full-time teacher who is a member of the staff I would speak up.' This imagined future action could be seen as more than a retrospective regret or wish. It signals a reorientation, a shifting relationship to space. His initial silence was shaped by the institutional hierarchy that regulates student teachers' agency in the practicum school, as also reflected in Sexton's work, which emphasizes the precariousness of queer student teacher identity in school placements and the impact of teacher education programmes that fail to actively support queer belonging. For Ahmed (2006), when reproduction fails, it opens space for fresh impressions and new directions to take shape. The

former space did not allow Benny to safely speak out, but the block, the disorientation, disturbed the lines of expectation and also created the conditions for imagining a different future. This anticipation signals Benny's capacity to refuse reproduction, the tendency of such hegemonies to repeatedly erase queer histories like this one. This signals the gathering of new, queer lines and future queer spaces at school.

This imagined possibility was not isolated. Benny's reflection also includes an experience of kinship with a queer parent and teacher, both of whom acknowledged him without him needing to take up the burden to declare himself as queer. These brief but powerful encounters mattered and impacted upon orientation: 'the point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do-whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope' (Ahmed 2006, 158). Experiences that affirmed his presence and hinted at the existence of queer lines, created alternate spaces of proximity within the dominant space. As Fleet (2016) and Toledo and Maher (2019) both highlight, such moments of connection, whether through mentorship, shared identity, or simple acknowledgement, can counterbalance the weight of institutional silencing experienced in the space of a practicum school.

These moments do not fully transform space, but they offer a beginning; they also offer knowledge with regard to future mobilization. Even within a context that attempted to straighten, silence and erase, Benny began to gather new lines. The emergence of a liveable life came from these subtle but significant shifts that Benny took hold of: imagining action, recognition in the presence of others, and the quiet assembling of queer possibility in spaces that are not built yet to hold it – but could be.

Conclusion

Benny's account grants us a phenomenological window into one gay student teacher's experience of practicum in Aotearoa New Zealand. Ahmed (2006) reminds us that it matters how we arrive at the places we do. What Benny's account makes visible is not just that heteronormativity structures school spaces, but that those structures are neither total nor immovable. There are cracks that give evidence of queer possibility already present in the school.

This has pedagogical consequences for teacher educators. When queer student teachers cannot be fully present in their practicum schools, it is not only their own development that is constrained. The school, too, is diminished. In managing Pink Shirt Day's queer history away from students, the school prevented a genuine moment of connection between an anti-bullying message and the communities from which it emerged. Benny's silence in that staffroom was a loss for the room. What might it mean for schools and teacher education programmes to take seriously their responsibility not just to tolerate queer student teachers but to actively create conditions in which their presence, knowledge and perspective can be fully extended into the space?

Ahmed's (2006) concept of the liveable life does not promise comfort or the absence of disorientation. It asks instead what conditions allow a body to unfold into space – to act, to be recognized, to imagine otherwise. Benny's reflection ends not in defeat but in anticipation: 'I think now as a full-time teacher who is a member of the staff I would speak up.' This is a small but significant reorientation. Teacher education programmes and

practicum schools might ask themselves what it would take to make that imagined future possible sooner. That would require naming and challenging heteronormative hegemonies in school culture, designing mentoring that specifically attends to queer student teachers' experiences, and embedding structural supports that redistribute legitimacy and recognition. The lines are not yet gathered. But Benny's story suggests they are gatherable.

Notes

1. All names of participants are anonymized in this study.
2. 'Spaces are not neutral; they are shaped by histories of inclusion and exclusion. Bodies take shape through being oriented in particular directions, and those directions are not available to all in the same way' (Ahmed 2006, 12).

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