British Journal of Educational Studies

ISSN: 0007-1005 (Print) 1467-8527 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rbje20

Gender, Sexuality and Social Sustainability in UK Schools: The Role of Language

Helen Sauntson

To cite this article: Helen Sauntson (28 May 2025): Gender, Sexuality and Social Sustainability in UK Schools: The Role of Language, British Journal of Educational Studies, DOI: 10.1080/00071005.2025.2507629

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2025.2507629

Published online: 28 May 2025.

British Journal of Educational Studies
Vol. 00, No. 00, 2025, pp. 1–19

Gender, Sexuality and Social Sustainability in UK Schools: The Role of Language

By HELEN SAUNTSON, *Centre for Language and Social Justice Research, York St John University, York, UK*

ABSTRACT: This article explores the relationship between language, gender, sexuality and social sustainability in UK schools. Social sustainability in education focuses around enabling every individual to develop the knowledge, skills and values necessary for shaping a sustainable future (UNESCO, 2016). Key principles in socially sustainable education include equity, collaboration and participatory parity between individuals and groups. The recognition and participatory parity dimensions of social sustainability have particular relevance to issues around gender and sexuality equality and diversity. It is well-documented that, despite progressive legal changes in the UK, gender and sexual minorities (GSM) continue to experience disadvantage, social exclusion and marginalization in schools. But there has so far only been a relatively small body of research which has examined the role played by language in processes of school exclusion and marginalization for GSM students. This article explores some of the ways in which language is central to achieving or preventing recognition and participatory parity in relation to gender and sexuality in UK schools. I examine how language is more often experienced by students and teachers as an obstacle to, rather than a facilitator of, social sustainability. I consider linguistic interventions that could be useful for breaking down some of the existing barriers to gender- and sexuality-related social sustainability in schools.

Keywords: Gender and sexual minorities (GSM), language, schools, recognition, participatory parity, social sustainability

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender and sexuality equality are recognised as worldwide issues as shown through their inclusion in the United Nations sustainability goals. This article explores the relationship between language, gender, sexuality and social sustainability in the context of UK[1] secondary schools. I draw on the definition of 'social sustainability' first developed by the Brundtland Commission (Brundtland, 1987) as 'To meet the

ISSN 0007-1005 (print)/ISSN 1467-8527 (online)

https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2025.2507629
http://www.tandfonline.com

needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs'. This understanding of social sustainability relates to a number of UN Sustainable Development Goals, most notably: 4 Quality Education; 5 Gender equality; 10 Reduced inequalities. Key principles in socially sustainable 'quality education' (SDG4) include equity, collaboration, recognition and participatory parity between individuals and groups. According to UNESCO (2016), social sustainability in education focuses around enabling every individual to develop the knowledge, skills and values necessary for shaping a sustainable future. The equity, collaboration, recognition and participatory parity principles in socially sustainable education are also key social justice principles and therefore have particular relevance to issues around gender and sexuality equality and diversity which are explicitly identified as goals in SDG 5 (Gender equality) and 10 (Reduced inequalities). Gender and sexuality-based inequalities are important to address as part of wider efforts to develop more socially sustainable education. Making education more socially sustainable in terms of gender and sexuality entails paying close attention to the social justice dimensions of equity, collaboration, recognition and participatory parity as they relate to gender identity and sexual orientation.

With this context in mind, this article pays attention to recognition and participatory parity in relation to social sustainability along dimensions of gender and sexuality identity in UK schools, and the specific role that language plays in these processes. Although gender inequalities have received much attention in relation to the UNESCO SDGs, issues relating to gender diversity and sexuality-based inequalities have been subjected to much less scrutiny in existing research, and the role of language in perpetuating or redressing these kinds of inequalities has also been minimal. Furthermore, very little attention has yet been paid to the role of language in the concept of social sustainability itself. The research discussed in this article aims to address these current gaps in existing literature.

Like many countries around the world, the UK has seen a number of progressive legal changes which have led towards greater equality for gender and sexual minority populations (including those in schools) over the past two decades. In 2006, the *Gender Equality Duty* was introduced as part of the *Equality Act* in Education. This was the first significant piece of legislation relating to gender equality since the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act and it required schools to promote gender equality in same way as race and disability equality. Despite the Act being very much based around a biological binary understanding of 'gender', the Act did emphasise the importance of educational inclusion for students who do not conform to traditional gender norms, acknowledging that such students often become subject to bullying and marginalisation. The Act also contained an acknowledgement that it is impossible for schools to address sexism without simultaneously addressing homophobia. Shortly afterwards, the UK Home Office published additional guidance on *Transphobic Bullying in Schools* in 2008. This guidance further emphasised a need for schools to foster an environment in which gender variance is

accepted and encouraged schools to support children who do not adopt traditional gender norms, regardless of whether or not they identify as transgender. Much of this and other existing equality legislation became subsumed under the Equality Act which was introduced in 2010. The Equality Act was designed to tackle discrimination based on nine 'protected characteristics' (including sex, sexual orientation and gender reassignment) and continues to cover all public institutions including schools. Other notable changes pertaining to gender and sexuality minorities (henceforth GSM[2]) populations in the UK include legislation enabling same-sex couples to marry and to adopt children. More recently, in 2023, the Department for Education published a consultation on draft non-statutory guidance for schools and colleges in England on children questioning their gender. This was followed shortly after by a House of Commons briefing document (Long, 2024) outlining provisions to support gender-questioning children in schools. However, both the draft guidance and the briefing document have been criticized by some organisations (e.g., Mermaids, National Union of Students) for being too parent-focused and for removing children's autonomy and voice. Students with diverse gender and sexuality identities continue to be afforded some protection in schools through the government's safeguarding document ('Working Together to Safeguard Children' – first published 2015, last updated 2024).

It is well-documented that, despite these progressive legal changes in the UK (and elsewhere) in recent years, gender and sexual minorities continue to experience disadvantage, social exclusion and marginalization in school contexts (e.g., Bradlow *et al*., 2017). However, the role of language in creating, perpetuating and perhaps challenging exclusionary practices has been given relatively little attention in existing literature, especially language-focused work drawn from the disciplinary field of linguistics. This is a significant omission because, arguably, language plays a key role in mediating and reinforcing values and attitudes towards gender and sexual diversity in schools. This article, therefore, addresses this gap in existing research by exploring some of the ways in which language is central to achieving or preventing recognition and participatory parity in relation to gender and sexuality in UK schools. The key research questions addressed throughout this article are:

- What role does language play in helping to achieve or prevent the recognition and participatory parity dimensions of social sustainability for GSM young people in schools?
- How do teachers and GSM students experience language use in relation to gender and sexuality diversity in schools?
- What linguistic interventions might be useful for breaking down existing barriers to gender- and sexuality-based recognition and participatory parity (as key dimensions of social sustainability and justice) in schools?

In what follows, I provide a brief outline of the main theoretical context for the arguments presented in the article, which is based primarily around Fraser's (1996) conceptualization of *recognition* and *participatory parity* as key dimensions of social justice. Drawing on school-based research, I then summarise and discuss the ways in which language is often an obstacle to achieving gender- and sexuality-based recognition, participatory parity and social sustainability in schools. Following this, I consider how these obstacles could be addressed so that language becomes a facilitator of greater gender- and sexuality-based social sustainability.

2. Theoretical Context

The concept of social sustainability as defined by the Brundtland Commission is closely linked to social justice. Key scholars of social justice such as Bell (2016, p. 3) argue that the goals and processes of social justice involve maximising 'full and equitable participation of people from all identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs'. The concept of 'equitable participation', which underpins this definition of social justice, is largely informed by Nancy Fraser's work, which is briefly outlined below as a means of theoretically situating this article.

Recognition and participatory parity are established components of social sustainability, and are conceptualized as key dimensions in Fraser's (1996) theory of social justice. Fraser is critical of previous theories of social justice, such as that of Rawls (1971), which conceptualise social in/justice as focusing solely on the un/equal distribution of resources. Fraser proposes instead that other important dimensions of social justice involve *recognition* and *participation*. In later work, Fraser ultimately argues that the *redistribution (of resources)*, *recognition (of cultural and social identities)* and *participation* dimensions of social justice are interlinked. *Redistribution* centres on socio-economic injustices and involves an assumption that injustice is rooted in the economic structure of society with the 'remedy' for this type of injustice being widescale economic restructuring. Fraser's *recognition* dimension of social justice focuses on injustice as cultural rather than economic and entails as assumption that injustice is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication. The ultimate goal of recognition-oriented social justice is a 'difference-friendly world, where assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect' (Fraser, 1997, p. 3). And, as McArthur and Ashwin concisely put it, 'To deny or misrepresent recognition is to do injustice' (McArthur and Ashwin, 2020, p. 24). Recognition injustice is therefore likely to be addressed through cultural or symbolic change and this can include changes in language practices and linguistic representation. The subjects of this type of injustice, according to Fraser, are 'status groups' who are defined not by relations of production but by lower

levels of esteem, honour and prestige they experience relative to other groups in society. Such groups may, for example, include people of colour, children and older people, LGBTQ+ communities and women. Fraser's third dimension of *participation* goes beyond *recognition* to incorporate a focus on lack of equal participation in social and political life. Fraser defines this type of social injustice as follows: 'To be recognized [. . .] is not simply to be thought ill of, looked down on, or devalued in others' conscious attitudes or mental beliefs. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction and prevented from participating as a peer in social life as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of interpretation and evaluation that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem' (Fraser, 1996, p. 26). Whereas recognition is primarily about representation, participation is about active involvement in particular areas of social life. Fraser does not set out to explicitly examine the role of language in her theory of social justice and, as stated earlier, little existing research has explored how language is central to this model of social justice and sustainability.

Language is perhaps most relevant to the *recognition* and *participatory parity* elements of Fraser's theory of social injustice. Subjects and groups become recognized in and through language. Language can be used to legitimate and illegitimate and to bestow recognizable status, or lack of status, on groups. And having recognizable status can be a key pathway to greater participatory parity. These linguistic processes are discussed and exemplified throughout this article in relation to gender, sexuality and schooling.

In the next section, I examine how language is more often an obstacle to, rather than a facilitator of, social sustainability in schools.

3. Language as an Obstacle to Gender- and Sexuality-based Social Sustainability

Kjaran and Sauntson (2020) explain how many countries in the world are experiencing socio-political transitions in the legal status of GSM identities and relationships as well as more progressive attitudes towards gender and sexual diversity. However, they note that there have been backlashes in terms of gender and sexuality equality/justice, especially in relation to education. Backlashes are often linked to moral panics fuelled by the media (especially in countries where the media is controlled by right-wing political parties), particularly around the inclusion of LGBTQ+ themed materials in schools (see Fabrício and Moita-Lopes, 2020). Kjaran and Sauntson (2020) also identify a 'lag' in which schools seem to be behind what is happening outside them in terms of increasing GSM visibility, social acceptance and legal equality. Ferfolja and Ullman (2020) suggest that factors contributing to this 'lag' include lack of curriculum direction and leadership, and conflicting policy discourses. These 'lag' factors, when

coupled with the language issues discussed in this section, could create significant barriers to participatory parity and social sustainability for GSM young people in schools.

There is, in fact, an established body of international research which shows that homophobia, biphobia and heterosexism continue to be prevalent in schools in many areas of the world including the UK (Bradlow *et al*., 2017; Jadva *et al*., 2021; Rivers, 2024; Sauntson, 2018), Poland (Pakula *et al*., 2015; Pawelczyk and Pakula, 2015), Australia (Holt, 2021; Ullman, 2021), Brazil (Mattos, 2018; Stucky *et al*., 2020), South Africa (Francis and Kuhl, 2020), and the US (Kosciw *et al*., 2019; Parent *et al*., 2020). This list is merely indicative of the breadth of research now available and is by no means exhaustive. But little of this research systematically or explicitly examines the role played by language in the perpetuation of homophobic, heterosexist and gender- and sexuality-based exclusionary practices in schools. There is also an established body of research-based evidence which shows that, when students feel excluded from lessons because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, this can have a negative impact on their school engagement and levels of attainment (Bradlow *et al*., 2017; Hazel *et al*., 2019; Pearson and Wilkinson, 2018). Students feel excluded from lessons and other areas of school life when they feel their GSM identities are not being recognised within the school context, for example, through curriculum materials and delivery, explicitly verbal discussion of GSM issues in class, visible posters and other forms of display in school spaces and so on (Glazzard and Stones, 2021; Moyano and Sanchez-Fuentes, 2020). Some have also found that students' feelings of exclusion from school related to lack of recognition of their gender identity or sexual orientation can take literal forms of exclusion such as external and internal truancy, lack of willingness to speak and/or participate in lessons, as well as well-documented negative effects on these students' mental health (Espelage *et al*., 2019; Glazzard and Stones, 2021; Moyano and Sanchez-Fuentes, 2020; Rivers, 2024). In other words, feelings of gender- and sexuality-based exclusion in schools are interrelated in terms of a lack of both recognition and participatory parity. If participatory parity is enabled through inclusive linguistic practices in schools (such as more explicit talk about GSM identities and issues, GSM issues being written into the curriculum, positive visual indicators of GSM identities within school spaces and so on), this ultimately means that linguistic *exclusionary* practices constitute a barrier to the participatory parity dimension of social sustainability. But, again, the role played by language in school-based exclusionary practices for GSM students remains relatively under-explored. What little research *does* incorporate an examination of language is considered in the following section.

In both my own previous research and that of other scholars researching language, gender and sexuality in educational contexts, three broad areas of language-based obstacles to gender- and sexuality-based recognition and participatory parity (as dimensions of social sustainability) can be identified: overt

homophobic language; heteronormative and heterosexist language; and silence and erasure. These interrelated areas are discussed in the sections which follow.

Overt homophobic[3] Language

Explicitly homophobic language is one language practice which can lead to feelings of exclusion, and therefore a lack of participatory parity, for GSM young people in schools. Homophobic language can be directed at subjects because of their assumed or perceived expressions of desire, identity, and practice, regardless of someone's actual sexual identity. And homophobic language can be used without there necessarily being an GSM-identifying individual present.

Over two decades ago, Epstein and Johnson (1998) found the term 'gay' being used in UK schools to refer to boys who were academically successful or who were simply seen as enjoying schoolwork. In other words, 'gay' as an insult was found to be closely tied to gender, specifically masculinity. In this early work, Epstein and Johnson observed that some boys rejected the perceived 'feminine' of academic work as a defence against being called 'gay'. McCormack (2013) has also found that homophobic language in schools is targeted particularly at boys who are seen to not 'measure up' to accepted norms of masculinity. Therefore, homophobic discourse works to regulate masculinities in schools, and not just to enforce heterosexuality. Espelage (2013) and Birkett and Espelage (2015) also found that homophobic name-calling in schools was rooted in gender and masculinity, with homophobic language thus performing the function of upholding masculine gender norms and heteronormativity (discussed more in next section). Other research has found that homophobic language is not only used by young people as a way of reinforcing masculine gender norms within peer groups.

Homophobic name-calling is reported as being the most frequent form of anti-LGBTQ+ abuse heard and experienced by young people in schools (Glazzard and Stones, 2021; Jadva *et al*., 2021; Rivers, 2024). And it is well-established that homophobic language has detrimental effects on the mental health of young people, especially those who identify as GSM. For this reason, homophobic language can potentially be seen as an obstacle to participatory parity for GSM-identifying young people in schools. If GSM-identifying students do not participate (or have limited participation) in school (for example, manifesting as absence from school, internal absence while at school, social isolation whilst at school, or lack of participation in class, this may ultimately create a barrier to social sustainability for GSM populations in schools (Glazzard and Stones, 2021; Jadva *et al*., 2021; Moyano and Sanchez-Fuentes, 2020; Rivers, 2024). If social sustainability is defined as 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs' (Brundtland Commission, Brundtland, 1987), then the lack of

participation and recognition for GSM students means that their educational needs are not being met, and the future needs of GSM students are also not likely to be met without these issues being addressed.

Heteronormative and Heterosexist Language

However, overt homophobic language is only one of the ways in which language operates to produce exclusionary practices for GSM students in schools. Lack of recognition of gender- and sexuality-based diversity in schools is more often produced through more subtle and nuanced linguistic means. Whilst the section above focused on the continued presence of homophobic language in UK schools, what appears to be even more prevalent are implicit or 'covert' linguistic manifestations of homophobia. Russell (2019), for example, refers to the idea of there being no 'smoking gun' when it comes to identifying homophobic language and communication, arguing that homophobic communicative acts are more often insidious. One of the main ways in which homophobia is produced implicitly in language is through the routine use of heterosexist and heteronormative language.

'Heterosexism', a term first introduced by Herek (1990), refers to the presumption that everyone is and must be heterosexual. Herek's conceptualisation of heterosexism has been influential in the development of work on sexuality-based discrimination and prejudice across a number of disciplines, including linguistics. Within linguistics, Ellece (2018), for example, defines heterosexism as 'a set of values or ideologies that demonize, deny, stigmatize, and otherwise discriminate against non-heterosexual practices, identities and people' and argues that language is a key vehicle through which heterosexism can be enacted and maintained. The related term 'heteronormativity' (first introduced by Warner, 1993) is broadly defined as 'the discursive construction of certain forms of heterosexuality as natural, normal or preferable' (Motschenbacher and Stegu, 2013, p. 520). When examined within linguistics, heteronormativity refers to language-based practices which either implicitly or explicitly promote a view that heterosexuality is normal and that all other kinds of sexuality are not normal. In this sense, homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity are all related in that they are mutually perpetuating. Indeed, Herek (1990) argues that presumptions of (cis) heterosexuality produce the conditions for homophobia. Research shows these processes routinely occurring in schools in ways which function to exclude GSM identities from a range of school practices. The unmarked yet constant presence of normative heterosexuality contributes to the routine exclusion of other forms of sexual identity in schools, as discussed further in the next section. What we see in many schools, then, is that, on the one hand, sexuality in the form of heterosexuality is highly visible and permeates numerous aspects of the school environment (Atkinson, 2021; Kosciw *et al*., 2019; Millers and Lewis, 2025;

Smith and Payne, 2016; Steck and Perry, 2017; Ullman and Ferfolja, 2015). On the other hand, the same research finds that gender- and sexuality-diverse identities are marginalized and often rendered invisible. Paradoxically, gender and sexual diversity becomes visible in schools only when they take the form of homophobic verbal abuse and other forms of overt gender- and sexuality-based bullying. Some international research does point to examples of positive practice focused around GSM inclusion in school curricula and practices, such as inclusive policies that specifically attend to sexual orientation and gender identity (Day *et al*., 2019), training and teacher professional development (e.g., Fenaughty, 2019; Gower *et al*., 2018; Russell *et al*., 2021) and GSM-inclusive curricula (e.g., Evans and Rawlings, 2021; Snapp *et al*., 2015; Ullman, 2018). However, it is repeatedly observed in research that these practices are patchy and by no means widespread. Furthermore, the specific role played by language in positive practices such as teacher training and curriculum inclusion is still not extensively explored. As representation is often mediated through language and linguistic presence, what this body of research cumulatively shows is a lack of the recognition dimension of Fraser's social justice framework – non-heterosexual identities and relationships are simply not represented through visible and routine anti-heteronormative language practices in schools. GSM-identifying young people may feel excluded as a result of this, and may subsequently feel that they are not able to participate fully in the lesson if their own gender identity and/or sexual orientation is not being recognised.

Silence and Erasure

The issues regarding heterosexist and heteronormative language outlined above are closely linked to the concept of exclusion and erasure of non-cisheterosexual identities and relationships. Herek's (1990) initial conceptualization of heterosexism is that it occludes all other sexual identities apart from heterosexuality. The same is the case for heteronormativity which also occludes non-normative gender identities as well as non-cis-heterosexual identities. The language of *exclusion* around gender and sexual diversity is therefore arguably another, albeit related, obstacle to recognition, participatory parity and social sustainability in schools. Homophobia is often construed as an effect of silence and invisibility, especially in organizations such as schools, and language practices which exclude GSM identities from schools mean that young people who identify as GSM do not have recognition and participatory parity. Very little research to date has examined absence and silence relating to gender and sexuality diversity from a linguistic perspective. In relation to Fraser's (1996) social justice theory, I again argue that language can be a key vehicle for recognition and participation. If language around GSM identities is absent, students who identify as GSM face barriers relating to these dimensions of social sustainability in school.

In his extensive theorisation of silence, Stern (2021) argues that silence can refer to the omission of a particular topic and to 'disengagement', as well as to the literal absence of sound. It can, for example, refer to the perceived 'unsayability' of particular topics relating to sexual diversity and identity in schools. In her work on schools, Lees (2012) distinguishes between 'strong' and 'weak' silence with 'weak' silence involving denial, shame and fear. This kind of 'weak silence' is particularly relevant to the discourses of gender identity and sexuality which frequently circulate in schools in which GSM identities are denied and rendered objects of fear and shame through their absence. These ideas have informed more recent scholarship which has included a focus on exploring how more implicit forms of homophobia can be enacted through language, including silence and erasure. The work of Butler (1997) has been influential in this respect. Butler argues that the perlocutionary force (meaning effect) of an utterance can be 'injurious' regardless of its locution. Discursive practices can therefore express what Leap (2010) terms 'homophobic entailments', whereby the locutionary content of communicative acts contains no explicit homophobic language but the linguistic act is still experienced as homophobic by its recipient. In sexuality-focused work in linguistics, scholars have argued that silence as a linguistic act can produce the effect of homophobia when that silence functions to exclude non-cisheterosexual identities when there is no logical reason for doing so.

These ideas about the role of silence and linguistic absence as a means of homophobic discourse production have started to be specifically applied to educational contexts. In a small body of research, it has been increasingly recognized that homophobic language and behaviour in schools is often covert and sometimes difficult for teachers to even notice. For example, Mattos (2018) and Sauntson (2013, 2018), find in their research that GSM young people repeatedly report in interviews that sexual diversity, and especially homosexuality, is 'not talked about' and 'ignored' and that this has a negative emotional effect on them which, in turn, decreases their motivation to attend school. And a lack of motivation to attend school means that these students are not participating in either the pedagogic or social aspects of school life. These kinds of assessment about the absence of language around gender and sexual diversity suggest that diverse identities are not represented in schools – in Fraser's social justice framework, this would then indicate misrecognition. Thus, recognition as a dimension of social sustainability in education is not extended to these groups of young people.

In my own research, I have examined this phenomenon of homophobia being enacted through linguistic silencing in interviews with teachers and GSM students in secondary schools (Sauntson, 2013), identifying instances where teachers and pupils would have expected GSM identities to be explicitly discussed or made visible, but they are not. I have also argued (Sauntson, 2018) that linguistic presence in the form of inclusion in aspects of the school

curriculum function to legitimize certain subject content and ideological positions, while linguistic absence functions to delegitimize certain positions. For example, in the subject of Relationships and Sexuality Education, only heterosexual identities, relationships were included in lessons I observed during the research. All of the young people in the interviews also reported the same issue. A similar picture emerges in international contexts beyond the UK. In Brazil, for example, Ferrari (2011) shows a similar silencing process in Brazilian schools in which gender and sexuality diversity-related topics were brought up in informal out-of-class interactions among students but ignored by teachers.

In my research, I found a similar silencing effect occurring in other subjects such as English, in which the curriculum excludes content around gender and sexuality diversity when there may legitimately be reasons for including it (e.g., in teaching particular texts which feature GSM identities and relationships). For example, one young person in the interview research recalled studying the novel *The Colour Purple* in A-level English. In this very well-known novel, the protagonist is a lesbian. The lessons involved learning about issues pertaining to race and ethnicity in relation to the novel, but *not* about sexual diversity. This means that sexual diversity was silenced even when it is highly present in the texts being studied. Another student reflected on studying some of the works of Oscar Wilde in English lessons but, again, with no recognition at all of Wilde's known homosexuality. In fact, this student reported raising Wilde's sexuality with the English teacher and being told she was 'reading too much into it'. And one of the English teachers interviewed talked about the poems of Carol Ann Duffy (a former British poet laureate) being included as part of the English national curriculum. Despite many of Duffy's poetic works exploring her own lesbian identity, the teacher lamented none of these particular poems being included in the curriculum. I have previously termed such practices as 'illocutionary silencing' (Sauntson, 2013) whereby heteronormativity in schools is upheld not by what is said, but by what is not said – through linguistic absences around sexual diversity. Illocutionary silencing is repeatedly reported by young people and teachers, and is experienced as an exclusionary discursive practice which produces lack of participatory parity for GSM young people. It therefore needs to be challenged in order to create more inclusive, positive and socially sustainably school spaces.

I would argue strongly that silence and erasure of sexual diversity is a significant barrier to participatory parity for GSM populations in schools and therefore operates as a concurrent obstacle to social sustainability in schools, as explained earlier. If GSM populations are not included or even acknowledged in curriculum content, then they do not have recognition or participatory parity meaning that their present needs are not being met, and current educational practices may be compromising the ability of future generations to meet the needs of GSM students. In her theory of social justice, Fraser (1996) argues that absence of representation constitutes lack of

recognition. And, as discussed earlier, lack of recognition subsequently leads to lack of participatory parity, as participation can only take place when individuals and groups are recognised within a given context. Even when students legitimately raise issues relating to sexual diversity in lessons, they often report having their views dismissed by teachers which compounds the feelings of exclusion and lack of participatory parity. In the following section, I consider the impact of the research discussed so far by exploring some of the ways in which the obstacles to recognition, participatory parity and social sustainability identified in this section may be addressed through school-based language practices.

4. Language as a Facilitator of Gender- and Sexuality-based Social Sustainability

This article has identified a need for educators to consistently use language which includes, rather than excludes, GSM identities. Arguably, in educational contexts, we need to create spaces for new uses of language to emerge, rather than closing down possibilities for linguistic expression or subsuming such possibilities under normative heterosexual experience. Put simply, schools need to be places where GSM identities and experiences are openly expressed and linguistically incorporated into lessons and into the general life of the school. Specific examples might include using the word ‘parent’ rather than the heteronormative ‘mum’ and ‘dad’, referring to being in a relationships with ‘someone else’ rather than explicitly marking out gender (‘boy’, ‘girl’, ‘guy’ and so on), explicitly referring to particular authors and scholars as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ and so on when it is widely known that they are (thus breaking taboos about talking openly about non-heterosexual identities), making it known that it is acceptable for students to ask questions relating to GSM identities and issues if they are relevant to the lesson content – and that such discussion will not be closed down by teachers.

In the remainder of section, I consider the potential impact of what has been discussed so far by suggesting some broader linguistic interventions that could be useful for challenging and breaking down some of the existing barriers to gender- and sexuality-related social sustainability in schools. Broadly speaking, effective interventions would focus on educating teachers, and raising their awareness and understanding, about the ways in which language can be used in classrooms and curriculum documents to create greater visibility and positive discourse around gender and sexuality diversity. Language which enhances GSM visibility creates greater recognition and representation of GSM identities in school spaces, thus validating the existence of GSM students in schools. Researchers such as myself (Sauntson, 2018; Sauntson and Borba, 2021) and Motschenbacher (2011) have suggested that the anti-bullying policies routinely used in schools need to include a clearer, more explicit and more extensive

focus on *language*. Importantly, this would include not only language which tackles overt forms of homophobia but also implicitly heteronormative and heterosexist language i.e., anti-heteronormative language. Doing so would create greater recognition of GSM identities as identities which are positively valued in school spaces. Again, Fraser (1996) argues that recognition is linked to participation – it is only when individuals and groups feel recognised and represented, that their participation in areas of life becomes possible. In-service and pre-service training for teachers (and other educational professionals working in schools) could be provided which more explicitly addresses language issues. A recent audit of training and resources available to teachers for addressing homophobic bullying in schools (Patterson and Sauntson, in preparation) has found that materials rarely, if ever, include a specific focus on language – at least not beyond identifying the most obvious overt forms of homophobic and transphobic verbal abuse. Arguably, new training programmes and materials need to provide educators with linguistic resources which enable them to start discursively constructing schools as spaces which are inclusive and celebratory of diversity, and in which the habitual and repeated use of pro-diversity language produces the cumulative effect of creating new 'norms' of gender and sexuality identities and practices.

Research in the field of language learning suggests ways in which language teachers can develop language-based inclusive recognition-enhancing practices around GSM identities and populations. I would argue that these same principles can be applied to generic secondary school contexts and could, in the future, be used to inform the development of statutory guidance around providing inclusive learning environments for GSM populations. Such guidance would include a prominent focus on the use of language which goes beyond simply identifying and calling out overt homophobic and transphobic language, but which fully incorporates how to use language to make GSM identities always visible and recognised in positive ways in school environments. Greater recognition then paves the way for greater participatory parity for GSM students in schools.

Knisley (Knisley, 2024; Knisley and Paiz, 2021; Knisley and Russell, 2024), for example, has drawn on a range of research to develop a set of guiding principles, strategies and pedagogic materials for using 'gender-just pedagogy' or 'trans-affirming queer inquiry-based pedagogies (TAQIBPs)' in language classrooms. These strategies and materials involve interrogating language-based heteronormativity (and other forms of normativity) in language classrooms, creating spaces for marginalized people's perspectives and identities and using language in ways that fosters respect for different identities and viewpoints. Merse (2025; Merse, 2015, 2023) similarly has developed sets of materials for use in English language classrooms which incorporate queer and trans-affirming and queer and trans-inclusive language and approaches to learning. Again, these language learning and teaching-focused strategies could,

I argue, be applied to UK whole-school contexts, especially if they are embedded in policy and statutory guidance for schools.

Similar ideas have been discussed more broadly in relation to (international) whole-school contexts by Kjaran and Sauntson (2020) who argue that schools have the potential to be 'transformative' spaces in terms of GSM identities. They propose that schools as queer transformative spaces are characterised by: dialectic processes of learning and 'unlearning'; critical awareness and reflexivity; the acceptance of multiple voices and views within learning spaces. Kjaran and Sauntson's edited volume contains chapters from international contexts which explore possibilities for resisting heteronormativity and 'creating transformative queer spaces in schools in order to make them more inclusive and diverse in terms of gender and sexuality identities' (2020, p. 3).

The suggested approaches outlined above, if accepted and put into practice in schools, would enable UK schools to more effectively provide both greater recognition and participatory parity for GSM students which, in turn, is a key contributing factor to their long-term social sustainability.

Beyond these practical suggestions, more research is arguably needed to further develop understanding of the role played by language in creating, perpetuating or challenging gender- and sexuality-based practices of exclusion and misrecognition in schools. Future avenues for further research might include action research projects based around the development of learning and teaching materials which incorporate GSM identities into different areas of the school curriculum, using language which is highly visible and inclusive. Action research could engage in cycles of evaluation and improvement of these kinds of materials, as well as reporting on their reception and use. More research which explores young people's own views about what they believe would be helpful inclusive language practices in schools would also be greatly beneficial. This kind of research could find out what kind of effective language-based interventions young people believe could increase their feelings of recognition and participation in areas of school life. Furthermore, observation-based studies of actual language practices in schools would facilitate further understanding of how language actually operates in schools to produce or prevent GSM recognition and participation for young people.

5. Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I outlined how gender- and sexuality-based social sustainability is embedded within a number of UNESCO SDGs, most notably SDGs 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Focusing on recognition and participatory parity as key principles of both social justice and socially sustainable education, I have argued that GSM young people continue to be denied full recognition and participatory parity in education in the UK. This is, to a large extent, a result of

three main exclusionary language practices which they routinely experience in schools: overt homophobic language; heteronormative and heterosexist language; silence and erasure. It therefore follows that SDGs 4, 5 and 10 cannot be fully achieved without due attention being paid to the relationship between these language practices and lack of participatory parity and recognition for GSM populations in schools. Although both UK-based and international research has shown how language routinely closes down participatory parity in relation to GSM identities in schools, I have argued that language can also be a key facilitator of participatory parity if schools are willing to adopt more transformative and inclusive pedagogic practices. Language, as a vehicle for inclusive school practices, is therefore arguably the key to achieving long-term global social sustainability for GSM populations in schools.

6. Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

7. Orcid

Helen Sauntson http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0373-1242

8. Notes

1. Education systems in the UK are devolved to the separate governments of the four countries. Most of the article content applies to all four nations of the UK which is why the term 'UK' is used throughout.

2. The term GSM (gender and sexual minorities) is an established shorthand term to refer to a range of identities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual, intersex, non-binary. This is not an exhaustive list of identities and the term 'GSM' can include any identity which is deemed to fall outside cis-heterosexuality and binary gender.

3. It is acknowledged that the term 'homophobic' is contested but, following Russell (2019), is used here as a shorthand term to refer to any kind of anti-lesbian, gay or bisexual bias, including lesbophobia (discrimination against lesbians) and biphobia (discrimination against bisexuals). Russell explains '[…] homophobia should be understood as any expression of disdain or diminution, exclusion or negation, derision or reduction targeting non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender persons, be this physical, political, economic or social' (Russell, 2019, p. 5).

9. References

Atkinson, C. (2021) 'They don't really talk about it 'cos they don't think it's right': heteronormativity and institutional silence in UK primary education, *Gender and Education*, 33 (4), 451–467. doi: 10.1080/09540253.2020.1773410

Bell, L. (2016) Theoretical foundations for social justice education. In M. Adams, L. Bell, D. Goodman, and K. Joshi (Eds) *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (3rd ed) (London, Routledge), 3–26.

Birkett, M. and Espelage, D. (2015) Homophobic name-calling, peer groups, and masculinity: the socialization of homophobic behaviour in adolescents, *Social Development*, 24 (1), 184–205. doi: 10.1111/sode.12085

Bradlow, J., Bartram, F., Guasp, A., and Javda, V. 2017 *The school report: the experiences of lesbian, gay. In Bi and Trans Young People in Britain's Schools in 2017* (London, Stonewall).

Brundtland, G. (1987) Report of the world commission on environment and development: our common future, *United Nations General Assembly Document*, A/42/427.

Butler, J. (1997) *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London, Routledge).

Day, J., Ioverno, S., and Russell, S. (2019) Safe and supportive schools for LGBT youth: addressing educational inequities through inclusive policies and practices, *Journal of School Psychology*, 74, 29–43. doi: 10.1016/j.jsp.2019.05.007

Ellece, S. (2018) Homophobia and the media: a sample critical discourse analysis. In K. Hall and R. Barrett (Eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Epstein, D. and Johnson, R. (1998) *Schooling Sexualities* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

Espelage, D. (2013) Bullying and sexual violence: definition, prevalence, outcomes and moderators. In I. Rivers and N. Duncan (Eds) *Bullying: Experiences and Discourses of Sexuality and Gender* (London, Routledge), 31–44.

Espelage, D., Validao, A., Hatchel, T., Ingran, K., Huang, Y., and Torgal, C. (2019) A literature review of protective factors associated with homophobic bullying and its consequences among children and adolescents, *Aggression & Violent Behaviour*, 45, 98–110. doi: 10.1016/j.avb.2018.07.003

Evans, I. and Rawlings, V. (2021) "It was just one less thing that I had to worry about": positive experiences of schooling for gender diverse and transgender students, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 68 (9), 1489–1508. doi: 10.1080/00918369.2019.1698918

Fabrício, B. F. and Moita-Lopes, L. P. (2020) Creating queer moments at a Brazilian school by forging innovative sociolinguistic scalar perspectives in classrooms. In J. I. Kjaran and H. Sauntson (Eds) *Schools as Queer Transformative Spaces* (London, Routledge), 35–63.

Fenaughty, J. (2019) Developing resources to address homophobic and transphobic bullying: a framework incorporating co-design, critical pedagogies, and bullying research, *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning*, 19 (6), 627–643. doi: 10.1080/14681811.2019.1579707

Ferfolja, T. and Ullman, J. (2020) Parent perceptions of GSD-related content inclusions in school education: voices from Australia. In J. I. Kjaran and H. Sauntson (Eds) *Schools as Queer Transformative Spaces* (London, Routledge), 191–206.

Ferrari, A. (2011) Silêncio e silenciamento em torno das homossexualidades masculinas In A. Ferrari and L. P. Marques (Eds) *Silêncios e Educação* (Juiz de Fora, Brazil, UFJF), 91–112.

Francis, D. A. and Kuhl, K. (2020) Imagining a curriculum beyond compulsory heterosexuality in South African education, *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 19 (4), 469–488. doi: 10.1080/19361653.2020.1844606

Fraser, N. (1996) *Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation. The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* April 30-May 2, 1996 (USA, Delivered at Stanford University).

Fraser, N. (1997) Heterosexism, misrecognition, and capitalism: a response to Judith Butler, *Social Text*, 52 (53), 279–289.

Glazzard, J. and Stones, S. (2021) Running scared? A critical analysis of LGBTQ+ inclusion policy in schools, *Frontiers in Sociology*, 6, 613283. doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2021.613283

Gower, A., Forster, M., Gloppen, K., Johnson, A., Eisenberg, M., Connett, J., and Borowsky, A. (2018) School practices to foster LGBT-supportive climate: associations with adolescent bullying involvement, *Prevention Science*, 19 (6), 813–821.

Hazel, C. E., Walls, N. E., and Pomerantz, L. (2019) Gender and sexual minority students' engagement with school: the impacts of grades, feeling unsafe, and gay/straight alliances, *Contemporary School Psychology*, 23 (4), 432–443. doi: 10.1007/s40688-018-0199-5

Herek, G. (1990) The context of anti-gay violence: notes on cultural and psychological heterosexism, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 5 (3), 316–333. doi: 10.1177/088626090005003006

Holt, M. (2021) *Sexual Orientation Inequality in Schools: Teacher Advocacy and Action Research* (Basingstoke, Palgrave).

Jadva, V., Guasp, A., Bradlow, J. H., Bower-Brown, S., and Foley, S. (2021) Predictors of self-harm and suicide in LGBT youth: the role of gender, socio-economic status, bullying and school experience, *Journal of Public Health*, 45 (1), 102–108. doi: 10.1093/pubmed/fdab383

Kjaran, J. I. and Sauntson, H. (2020) Introduction: schools as queer transformative spaces. In J. I. Kjaran and H. Sauntson (Eds) *Schools as Queer Transformative Spaces: Global Narratives on Sexualities and Genders* (London, Routledge), 1–14.

Knisley, K. (2024) *Trans linguicultures, trans logics: Re-imagining the potentiality of applied linguistics through gender justice* [plenary]. American Association of Applied Linguistics (AAAL) 2024 conference, Houston, USA, 24 March 2024.

Knisley, K. and Paiz, J. (2021) Bringing trans, non-binary, and queer understandings to bear in language education, *Critical Multilingualism Studies*, 9 (1), 23–45.

Knisley, K. and Russell, E. Eds 2024 *Redoing Linguistic Worlds: Unmaking Gender Binaries, Remaking Gender Pluralities* (Bristol, Multilingual Matters).

Kosciw, J. G., Clark, C. M., Truong, N. L., and Zongrone, A. D. (2019) *The 2019 national school climate survey: the experiences of Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our Nation's schools*. GLSEN. https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NSCS19-FullReport-032421-Web_0.pdf

Leap, W. (2010) Introducing the special issue, *Gender & Language*, 4 (2), 179–185. doi: 10.1558/genl.v4i2.179

Lees, H. (2012) *Silence in Schools* (Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books).

Long, R. (2024) *Provisions to Support Gender Questioning Children in Schools* (London, House of Commons Library).

Mattos, A. R. (2018) Discursos ultraconservadores e truque da 'ideologia de gênero': Gênero e sexualidades em disputa na educação, *Psicologia Política*, 18 (43), 573–586.

McArthur, J. and Ashwin, P. (2020) Introduction: locating social justice in higher education research. In J. McArthur and P. Ashwin (Eds) Locating Social Justice in Higher Education Research (London, Bloomsbury), 1–26.

McCormack, M. (2013) Mapping the boundaries of homophobic language in bullying. In I. Rivers and N. Duncan (Eds) Bullying: Experiences and Discourses of Sexuality and Gender (London, Routledge), 91–104.

Merse, T. (2015) Queer-informed approaches and sexual literacy in ELT: theoretical foundations and teaching principles, *Language Issues*, 26 (1), 13–20.

Merse, T. (2023) Diversifying ELT: future directions for LGBTIQ+ inclusion. Paper presented at the IATEFL conference, Harrogate, UK.

Merse, T. (2025) Queering the EFL classroom: addressing challenges and needs in teacher education. In A. Biel and F. Esleben (Eds) Taking Action: A Journey Towards Social Justice in Language Education (Bristol, Multilingual Matters).

Millers, R. and Lewis, C. (2025) To show or not to show: factors within the school environment that influence the expression of LGBTQ identities, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 72 (2), 272–296. doi: 10.1080/00918369.2024.2320240

Motschenbacher, H. (2011) Taking queer linguistics further: sociolinguistics and critical heteronormativity research, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 212, 149–179.

Motschenbacher, H. and Stegu, M. (2013) Queer linguistic approaches to discourse: introduction, *Discourse & Society*, 24 (5), 519–535. doi: 10.1177/0957926513486069

Moyano, N. and Sanchez-Fuentes, M. (2020) Homophobic bullying at schools: a systematic review of research, prevalence, school-related predictors and consequences, *Aggression & Violent Behaviour*, 53, 101441. doi: 10.1016/j.avb.2020.101441

Pakula, L., Pawelczyk, J., and Sunderland, J. (2015) *Gender and Sexuality in English Language Education: Focus on Poland* (London, British Council).

Parent, M., Johnson, K., Russell, S., and Gobble, T. (2020) Homophobic bullying and suicidal behavior among US heterosexual youth, *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 59 (2), 205–208. doi: 10.1016/j.jaac.2019.08.473

Patterson, J. and Sauntson, H. (in preparation) A review of GSM inclusion training materials for UK schools.

Pawelczyk, J. and Pakula, L. (2015) Constructing gender and sexuality in the EFL classroom in Poland: textbook construction and classroom negotiation? In A. Mustapha and S. Mills (Eds) Gender Representation in Learning Materials: International Perspectives (London, Routledge), 193–211.

Pearson, J. and Wilkinson, L. (2018) School experiences and educational opportunities for LGBTQ students. In B. Schneider (Ed.) Handbook of the Sociology of Education in the 21st Century: Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research (London, Springer), 193–218.

Rawls, J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Rivers, I. (2024) Bullying, rates and effects of. In A. Goldberg (Ed.) The Sage Encyclopedia of LGBTQ+ Studies (London, Sage).

Russell, E. (2019) *The Discursive Ecology of Homophobia: Unraveling Anti-LGBTQ Speech on the European Far Right* (Bristol, Multilingual Matters).

Russell, S., Bishop, M., Saba, V., James, I., and Ioverno, S. (2021) Promoting school safety for LGBTQ and all students, *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 8 (2), 160–166. doi: 10.1177/23727322211031938

Sauntson, H. (2013) Sexual diversity and illocutionary silencing in the English national curriculum, *Sex Education*, 13 (4), 395–408. doi: 10.1080/14681811.2012.745809

Sauntson, H. (2018) *Language, Sexuality and Education* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

Sauntson, H. and Borba, R. (2021) Silence and sexuality in school settings: a transnational perspective In J. Stern, M. Walejko, C. Sink, and W. P. Ho (Eds) The Bloomsbury Handbook of Solitude, Silence and Loneliness (London, Bloomsbury), 174–188.

Smith, M. and Payne, E. (2016) Binaries and biology: conversations with elementary education professionals after professional development on supporting transgender students, *The Educational Forum*, 80 (1), 34–47. doi: 10.1080/00131725.2015.1102367

Snapp, S., McHuire, J., Sinclair, K., Gabrion, K., and Russell, S. (2015) LGBTQ-inclusive curricula: why supportive curricula matter, *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning*, 15 (6), 580–596. doi: 10.1080/14681811.2015.1042573

Steck, A. and Perry, D. (2017) Secondary school leader perceptions about the inclusion of queer materials in the school course curricula, *The Curriculum Journal*, 28 (3), 327–348. doi: 10.1080/09585176.2017.1292180

Stern, J. (2021) Introduction: personhood, alone and together. In J. Stern, M. Walejko, C. Sink, and W. P. Ho (Eds) The Bloomsbury Handbook of Solitude, Silence and Loneliness (London, Bloomsbury).

Stucky, J., Dantas, B., Pocahy, F., de Queiroz Nogueira, P., Nardi, H., and Costa, A. (2020) Prejudice against gender and sexual diversity in Brazilian public high schools, *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, 17 (3), 429–441. doi: 10.1007/s13178-019-00406-z

Ullman, J. (2018) Breaking out of the (anti)bullying 'box': NYC educators discuss trans/gender diversity-inclusive policies and curriculum, *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning*, 18 (5), 495–510. doi: 10.1080/14681811.2018.1431881

Ullman, J. (2021) Free2Be. Yet?: The second national study of Australian high school students who identify as gender and sexuality diverse, doi: 10.26183/3pxm-2t07

Ullman, J. and Ferfolja, T. (2015) Bureaucratic constructions of sexual diversity: 'sensitive', 'controversial' and silencing, *Teaching Education*, 26 (2), 145–159.

UNESCO. (2016) *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Promote Lifelong Learning Opportunities for All*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245656

Warner, M. (1993) *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press).

Correspondence
Helen Sauntson, York St John University, Lord Mayor's Walk, York, YO31 7EX, UK,
Email: h.sauntson@yorksj.ac.uk