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Exploring Homophobia and Transphobia in Primary Schools in Ireland

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Ollscoil Luimnigh

Irish Research Council
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

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The LGBT Helpline offers support to LGBT people and their families. They can be contacted at 1890 929 539 or at www.lgbt.ie

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Glossary of Key Terms

Biphobia: is prejudicial or discriminatory attitudes and/or behaviour directed at bisexual people, whether intended or unintended.

Bisexual: A man or woman who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to people of either sex.

Cisgender: a person whose gender identity and biological sex assigned at birth align.

Coming Out: A term used to describe the process through which a person realises that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender and may begin to disclose this aspect of their identity to others.

Gay: A man or woman who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to people of the same sex. Many gay men prefer to be called 'gay' rather than homosexual.

Gender: A term that is often used to refer to ways that people act, interact or feel about themselves, which are associated with boys/men and girls/women. The term 'gender' is distinct from 'sex', see definition below.

Gender Dysphoria: Refers to strong persistent feelings of identification with the opposite gender and discomfort with one's own assigned sex that results in significant distress.

Gender Expression: This refers to the way a person expresses gender to others through behaviour, clothing, hairstyles, mannerisms, voice, physical characteristics, social interactions, etc.

Gender Fluid: This refers to a gender identity which varies over time. A gender fluid person may at any time identify as male, female, gender neutral, or any other non-binary identity, or some combination of identities. Some individuals refer to themselves as gender fluid, gender queer, or gender non-binary.

Gender Identity: A person's identification as a man or woman, regardless of the sex listed on their birth certificate (assigned birth sex). Some individuals may have a sense that they are some other gender, a combination of genders or gender non-conforming.

Gender Non-binary / non-binary: An umbrella term for gender identities that fall outside the gender binary of male/female, man/woman. This includes individuals whose gender identity is neither exclusively male nor female, man nor woman, a combination of or between genders. Similar to the usage of transgender, the non-binary umbrella may describe people using one or more of a wide variety of terms. It is always best to be led by the individual's preferred identity and pronoun (she/her; he/him; they/them).

Gender Recognition Certificate: This is provided for in the Gender Recognition Act (2015) and issued by the state to an individual who requests to have his/her preferred gender recognised. The Gender Recognition Certificate can be used to retrospectively and prospectively amend all official certificates to reflect the preferred gender. For further information on the specific requirements necessary to apply for a Gender Recognition Certificate see Section 8.

Gender Transition / transition are terms to describe the experience by which a person goes from living in the gender assigned at birth to living and identifying in their preferred gender. For most young people this transition does not involve medical intervention but does involve a process of 'social transition' whereby the young person begins to live and identify as the gender consistent with their preferred gender identity. Transition might include social, physical or legal changes such as coming out to family, friends, co-workers and others; changing one's appearance; changing one's name, personal pronoun and sex designation on legal documents (e.g. birth certificate, driving licence or passport); and medical intervention (e.g. through hormones or surgery).

Heterosexual: A person who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to people of the opposite sex, colloquially known as 'straight'.

Heteronormativity: the assumption that everyone is heterosexual; that men should be masculine and women should be feminine and that men and women are a complimentary pair.

Heterosexism: Giving preferential treatment to heterosexual people through overt and subtle, active and passive, intentional and unintentional means.

Homophobia: Refers to prejudicial or discriminatory attitudes and/or behaviour directed at lesbian, gay and bisexual people, whether intended or unintended.

Homophobic Bullying: Refers to bullying of any form that has the added dimension of being based on actual or perceived sexual orientation.



Homosexual: The formal or clinical term that was coined in the field of psychology to describe a person who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to people of the same sex.

Intersex: An umbrella term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit the typical definition of the female or male sex. Although intersex individuals do not always identify as transgender, or do not consider themselves to be covered by the transgender umbrella, many of the issues experienced by transgender people are common to intersex people and for this reason the guidance in this resource can be applicable to students who are intersex.

LGBTQI: An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex people.

Lesbian: A woman who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to women.

Pansexual: a person who experiences sexual, romantic and/or physical attraction for members of all gender identities and expressions.

Preferred Gender: Refers to an individual's deeply held internal gender identity, as distinct from the sex assigned at birth.

Sex: Refers to the biological status accorded at birth as male or female. The designation of a person at birth as male or female is based on their anatomy (genitalia and/or reproductive organs) or biology (chromosomes and/or hormones).

Sexual Orientation: Refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women or both sexes. Three sexual orientations are commonly recognised – heterosexual (straight), homosexual (gay or lesbian) and bisexual. Some people do not experience attraction to either men or women and define themselves as asexual.

Transgender: An inclusive term describing people whose gender identity, or gender expression, is different from the sex listed on their birth certificate (i.e. their assigned birth sex). People under the transgender umbrella may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms – including transgender. It is always best to be led by the individual's preferred identity and pronoun (she/her; he/him; they/them). The word 'trans' is commonly used by transgender people and it is acceptable to use this shortened term when referring to a person who identifies as transgender. Some transgender people who live in their preferred gender simply see themselves as a man or a woman, rather than a trans man or a trans woman. Some transgender people may be under the care of doctors in undergoing hormone treatment to change their bodies, some undergo surgery as well. But not all transgender people can or will take those steps, and a transgender identity is not dependent upon medical procedures.

Transphobia: Refers to prejudicial or discriminatory attitudes and/or behaviour directed at people who are transgender or people whose gender identity or gender expression differs from the traditional binary categories of 'male' and 'female', whether intended or unintended.

Transphobic Bullying: Refers to bullying of any form that has the added dimension of being based on actual or perceived gender identity.
Transsexual: This is a now less-used term that has its origins in the medical and psychological communities. It is still preferred by some people who have permanently changed, or seek to change, their bodies through medical interventions. However, many transgender people don't like the term transsexual and instead use trans man or trans woman to indicate their preferred gender identity. It is best to use the term which an individual prefers.

Trans boy/trans man: A person who was identified as female at birth but who lives as a boy/man or identifies as male.

Trans girl/trans woman: A person who was identified as male at birth but who lives as a girl/woman or identifies as female.

Queer: Originally a term of homophobic abuse but this was reclaimed as activist insurgence against gender/sexuality oppression. It is now an umbrella term that is sometimes used to refer to all non-heteronormative and gender diverse people. Queer theory and activism is underpinned by non-essentialist and fluid understandings of sexuality and gender and accordingly, some people use the identity 'queer' to resist, reject and/or destabilise the kinds of categorisation and stereotypes that identity labels confer.

Questioning: an individual who is unsure about or is exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Summary of Key Findings

In 2013, the Department of Education and Skills Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools were issued, requiring all primary and secondlevel schools to include homophobia and transphobia in their anti-bullying policies and to document and implement prevention and education strategies. This study was conducted in May and June 2015 with parents, teachers and school leaders - 46 people across six schools. It provides new insight into how primary schools are experiencing and approaching the prevention of homophobia and transphobia as well as educating about gender and sexuality identity. The following is a summary of the key findings from across the cohorts of parents, teachers and school leaders. Questions raised and future directions appear at the end of this report.

Key Finding 1: Addressing homophobia/transphobia and educating around gender and sexuality identity happened in an ad hoc and mostly reactive manner

- There was confusion around what constituted homophobic and transphobic bullying
- Some were proactive but most adopted largely reactive, individualised approaches
- Bullying prevention was uncontested but educating around homophobia, transphobia and sexuality and gender identity was deemed much more challenging
- Including homophobia and transphobia in policy alone was not a guarantor of adequate prevention or education in practice

Key Finding 2: School leaders and teachers were central in schools' approaches

- The school approach was dependent on the individual comfort, confidence and knowledge of school leaders and teachers in relation gender and sexuality identity
- Curricular guidance, resources and meaningful professional support were articulated as crucial in developing adequate prevention and education strategies

Key Finding 3: Dialogue unravelled 'childhood innocence' and yielded the potential for an incremental, holistic education about gender and sexuality identity

- Simplistic understandings of 'innocence' and 'age-appropriateness' closed down opportunities for education around gender and sexuality identity
- Dialogue about 'innocence' and 'age-appropriateness' opened up the potential for education about gender and sexuality identity in an incremental way

Key Finding 4: Assumptions and uncertainties about religious ethos reproduced silences and posed challenges across all school types

- Uncertainties and assumptions regarding the religious ethos of denominational schools in particular legitimised silences around homophobia/transphobia and gender/ sexuality identity
- Across all school types, religious teachings on sexuality and gender identity were perceived to be a barrier to the equal inclusion of LGBTQI people

Key Finding 5: Accounts from several schools revealed norms and practices that did not cater for all children equally

- There were deep silences around the existence of LGBTQI people despite an awareness that some children had LGBTQI family members or were themselves beginning to make sense of identifying as LGBTQI
- Primary schools were not deemed to be safe or supported spaces for children to talk about their sexuality identity or come out as LGBTQI
- Restrictive gender norms at school made life particularly difficult for some children

Introduction

What is this report about?

In 2013, the Department of Education and Skills Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (Department of Education and Skills 2013) were issued following widespread consultation with education stakeholders. The procedures require all primary and second-level schools to include homophobic and transphobic bullying in their anti-bullying policy and to document and implement prevention and education strategies related to homophobia and transphobia.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How are primary schools implementing homophobia and transphobia anti-bullying policies and related resources?
2. What are the perspectives and experiences of primary school leaders, teachers and parents on preventing homophobia and transphobia as well as educating about gender and sexuality identity?

This report provides new insight into key stakeholders' perspectives on and experiences of addressing homophobia, transphobia and educating about gender and sexuality identity in the Irish primary school context. It outlines and discusses five key findings and, in the concluding section, suggestions for future direction are outlined.

Why was this study conducted?

Funded by the Irish Research Council, this study is the result of a collaborative partnership between the School of Education at the University of Limerick and the non-government organisation advocating equality for LGBTQI[1] people, the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN).

There is a dearth of research on primary schools in Ireland, Farrelly et al. (2016) have captured a picture of homophobic bullying in primary schools with 57% of primary school leaders having dealt with homophobic bullying in the previous academic year. Furthermore, the most common age for people to become aware of their LGBTQI identity is 12 years of age — the average age of a sixth class child in primary school (Higgins et al 2016; Mayock et al. 2007). Despite these factors and various others discussed later in this introduction, there are deep silences around sexuality and gender identity in Irish primary schools. And so, this study sought to uncover these silences by opening up a conversation about the current shape of Irish primary schools with regard to gender and sexuality identity, beginning with the perspectives and experiences of school leaders, teachers and parents.

Who will be interested in this report?

This report will be of interest to all education stakeholders including parents, young people, teachers, school leaders, management bodies, school leaders' organisations, teachers, teachers' union organisations, policy makers and anyone involved in curriculum design and support.

What does Irish education policy say in relation to homophobia and transphobia?

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools emphasise the integral importance of preventing bullying in schools to ensure a positive and safe environment for learners. These procedures require all primary schools in Ireland to include identity-based bullying, with specific reference to homophobic and transphobic bullying in their anti-bullying policy. Schools are also required to document in the school anti-bullying policy the specific *prevention* and *education* strategies that the school will implement. This should include documenting the 'measures being taken by the school to explicitly address the issues of cyber-bullying and identity-based bullying including in particular, homophobic and transphobic bullying' (Department of Education and Skills, 2013, p. 26).

These two key elements of the DES Anti-Bullying Procedures - the prevention of homophobic and transphobic bullying as well as education around gender and sexuality identity - provide a critical policy framework upon which schools can build good practice.

1 While the lives and experiences of people who identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or intersex are, of course, different both within and across these identity categories, the acronym LGBTQI is used throughout this report in an effort not to silence any particular identification.

What does the Irish primary school curriculum say related to gender and sexuality identity?

Teaching about sexuality mostly occurs within Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) — a compulsory part of the curriculum at both primary and second level in Ireland. The stated aims of RSE in primary school are:

- to enhance the personal development, self-esteem and well-being of the child
- to help the child to develop healthy friendships and relationships
- to foster an understanding of, and a heathy attitude to, human sexuality and relationships in a moral, spiritual and social framework
- to enable the child to acquire an understanding of and respect for, human love, sexual intercourse and reproduction
- to develop and promote in the child a sense of wonder and awe at the process of birth and new life
- to enable the child to be comfortable with the sexuality of oneself and others while growing and developing

(Department of Education and Skills 1996)

While some of these aims bear scope for teaching about individual sexuality difference, silences abound throughout the curriculum guidelines in relation to LGBTQI, non-heteronormative gender and sexuality identities. These silences are compounded by several other factors.

Since the introduction of RSE, much research has highlighted significant barriers to the implementation of RSE (Mayock et al 2007; Geary and Mannix McNamara 2003; Looney and Morgan 2001; Morgan 2000; Burtenshaw 2003; Millar 2003). These include issues such as time and an already overcrowded curriculum, restrictive assumptions about gender, teacher perception of the status of the subject, teacher discomfort with the subject and gendered decisions about who teaches RSE. The effects of the RSE curriculum coupled with these barriers to its implementation are such that children - who are themselves LGBTQI, who have family members who are LGBTQI and countless others for whom gender and sexuality norms are restrictive - are shrouded in silence in primary schools in Ireland.

What do we already know about homophobia, transphobia and teaching about gender and sexuality identity in primary schools?

Sexuality has long been associated with the private realm (Sedgwick 1990) but schools are at once public and private institutions and they are simultaneously sexualised and desexualised (Epstein and Johnson 1998). In most contexts, gender and sexuality identity are uncomfortable topics. While much research has addressed homophobia, transphobia and heteronormativity in secondary school contexts (Ages 12-18) across the globe, a much smaller body of research has focused on primary school contexts (Ages 4-12). Public/private boundaries work in particular ways in primary schools because of certain interpretations of childhood innocence (VanEvery and Wallis 2000). Invisible boundaries and silences support heteronormativity and close down opportunities for education around gender and sexuality identity (Atkinson and DePalma 2009).

While there is much evidence that homophobia and transphobia exist in primary schools internationally (Guasp 2012; DePalma and Jennett 2010; Renold 2002), as aforementioned, there is a dearth of research related to gender and sexuality identity and the occurrence of homophobia and transphobia in primary schools in Ireland. Whilst not the only structural barrier at work in schools, it must be acknowledged that most primary school contexts in Ireland are complicated by the power of 'religious freedom' and religious ideals around sexuality and sexuality identity (Neary 2017a; Fahie 2016; Norman and McNamara 2010; Neary 2013). Recently, Bailey (2017) has usefully mapped the emergence of anti-homophobic and anti-transphobic guidelines in the primary education system, emphasising the significant tensions between the predominantly religious architecture of Irish primary schools and the state's aim to address homophobia and transphobia.

In a study conducted in primary schools just before the DES Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary schools were made public, 78% of primary school principals stated that their school policies did not make reference to homophobic



or transphobic bullying (Farrelly 2014). Farrelly et al. (2016) detail the occurrence of homophobic bullying in primary schools, finding that 57% of primary school principals had responded to homophobic bullying in the previous academic year. However, importantly, Farrelly et al (2016) also highlight the considerable confusion amongst school principals about what constitutes homophobic bullying.

Across post-primary and primary schools in Ireland, teachers also describe anxieties in relation to preventing homophobia/transphobia and educating around gender and sexual orientation (O'Higgins Norman and Galvin 2006; Neary 2017b). Due to the age of children at primary school level, there is a presumption of innocence that pervades much of the narrative (DePalma and Atkinson, 2006; Ferfolja, 2008). This presumption places an invisible boundary around what is deemed appropriate for the level of understanding of a prepubescent child. It does not, however, take into account that many children are curious and perceptive about the world and people around them and that many children have LGBTQI family relatives. Furthermore, the presumption of uniformity amongst children in relation to both gender and sexuality identity does not serve children who don't fit heteronormative norms. Only 20% of LGBTQI young people feel that they fully belong in their schools due to their LGBTQI identity (Higgins et al 2016). Such cognitive and emotional dissonances do not just begin once they arrive at post-primary level but have built up during all their years in school, including the eight years they spend at primary level.

DePalma and Atkinson (2006) found that while many primary school teachers were willing to respond to homophobic bullying, very few were willing to engage in curriculum based work due to a general fear that parents would understand this as 'promoting' homosexuality. Another layer of emotional labour is present for LGBTQI teachers who fear being seen as 'recruiting' children to identify as LGBTQI (Neary 2017b; Russell 2010). DePalma and Atkinson (2009) emphasise the need to reach beyond the 'passive and disingenuous tolerance' of LGBTQI people to proactively incorporate discussions about sexuality and gender identity and in this way, unravel the often invisible workings of problematic narratives around 'promotion' and 'recruitment', destabilise the systematic workings of heteronormativity and heterosexism and disrupt reductive stereotypes.

What have been the initiatives related to homophobia, transphobia, sexual orientaion and gender identity in Irish primary schools?

School initiatives related to gender in Ireland have primarily centred upon differences in outcome and participation between boys and girls rather than exploring how gender and sexuality norms implicitly order what happens in schools. One initiative in second-level schools — the *Exploring Masculinities* programme — was produced by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and was piloted in 22 single-sex boys' schools from 1996-1999. The report on the programme concluded that gender studies programmes should be made widely available to all schools (Mac an Ghaill et al. 2004). However, inflammatory public debates and opposition resulted in the programme not being implemented across all schools, despite the fact that all of the topics in the programme - including sexual orientation and homophobia - were welcomed by the vast majority of parents of young men (McCormack and Gleeson 2010).

Since the publication of the anti-bullying procedures in 2013, there have been three initiatives aimed at providing support to primary school teachers in relation to homophobia, transphobia, gender and sexuality identity. Two resources involve the leading teachers' trade union organisation at primary level, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). These are Respect: Creating a Welcoming and Positive School Climate to Prevent Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying and Different Families, Same Love. Another initiative, All Together Now, was developed between BeLonGTo and the primary school teacher education institution, St Patrick's College in 2016. All three resources were supported by the DES. The resources aim to support primary school teachers to 'play a central role in creating a classroom and school environment where all children are safe, affirmed and respected. They also play a central role in tackling and preventing bullying' (Nunan, General Secretary of the INTO). They scaffold the implementation of bullying prevention measures as well as strategies for educating about gender and sexuality identity - the two elements required by the DES Anti-Bullying Procedures. This is one significant step in fostering a school climate where LGBTQI people and families are meaningfully and equally included in the everyday of primary school life.

However, as this report shows, there is need for a much broader, more systematic approach for real change to happen in relation to this topic.

Methodology

This study's design was qualitative, in-depth and sought to capture multiple perspectives on preventing homophobia and transphobia as well as educating about gender and sexuality identity in schools. First, ethical approval was granted by the University of Limerick Ethics Committee. Then, a letter of invitation providing information about the study was sent to 200 randomly selected schools within a 50km radius of a city in Ireland. Six schools volunteered to take part – three denominational (Den.) and three multidenominational (MD). Five were co-educational and one was a single-sex boys' school. In each school, the principal acted as a research gate-keeper, communicating with teachers and parents and sending an open invitation to take part in the study. Six schools and a total of 46 people took part. This included six school leaders, twelve teachers and 28 parents. 37 participants were female and nine were male.

Following reading of information sheets and signing of consent forms, one-to-one interviews were conducted with one school leader and two teachers in each school. A focus group was also conducted with parents in each school. Data analysis involved listening back to audio recordings, several readings of transcripts and writing of memos and discussing emerging ideas in the research team. From several analyses of the data, ideas were clustered into categories and themes were constructed. All identifying information was removed from the data and the names and place-names that appear in this report are pseudonyms. In order to protect the anonymity of individual participants within their schools, as each participant is quoted in this report, only the cohort (whether a school leader or teacher or parent) and school ethos type (whether Den. or MD[2]) is revealed.

This study was conducted in May and June 2015 — the time of the Marriage Equality Referendum. As this was very prominent in the media at the time, it is unsurprising that most of the interviews and focus groups included reference to and discussion of the proposed amendment to extend marriage to same-sex couples. The aforementioned anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia supporting resources were available to schools only a few months prior to conducting this study. Nevertheless, this study provides new insight — at a particular moment in time — into how primary schools are addressing homophobic/transphobic bullying and educating abound gender and sexuality identity.

2 While one school ethos was classified as 'Interdenominational', it has been categorised in this report as MD in order to preserve the anonymity of each participant within the school community.

Key Finding 1

Addressing homophobia/transphobia and educating around gender and sexuality identity happened in an ad hoc and mostly reactive manner

Across the schools, there was a spectrum of approaches to addressing homophobia and transphobia and educating about gender and sexuality identity. These approaches ranged from proactive and whole-school orientated to reactive and individ-ualised. The DES procedures name 'prevention' and 'education' as the categories of strategy that should be documented around homophobia and transphobia in schools. One parent alluded to these categories as the two central but separate issues for schools:

> *There's kind of two things involved isn't there. There's normalising the LGBTQI community to the younger kids so that it's acceptable and part of the norm. And there's the zero tolerance of the adversity to it if it does occur in the older classes... And it has to be, to my mind, it has to be zero tolerance at that age. If you're getting to an age where children aren't, don't feel safe to come out then that's a big issue. That would be my massive thing out of this is to allow kids to feel safe*
> *(Parent 2, School B, Catholic Ethos).*

There was general consensus amongst the participants in this study about the necessity for a 'zero-tolerance' approach to homophobic and transphobic bullying 'prevention'. However, 'education' about gender and sexuality identity appeared as a much more complex topic. This section details the variety of approaches used to address homophobic/transphobic bullying and education strategies around gender and sexuality identity, underlining the ad hoc manner in which these aspects are addressed and experienced in primary schools.

'Prevention' of Homophobia and Transphobia

Most schools were aware of the DES Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools and the requirement to specifically mention homophobia and transphobia in bullying policies. This was evident in that four out of the six schools included explicit reference to homophobia and transphobia in their anti-bullying policy which was accessible on their school website. Of the two who didn't, one was a Den. school and one was a MD school. Interestingly, while the MD school had not mentioned homophobia or transphobia in its bullying policy, they had an informal policy that addressed the prevalent use of 'gay' as a term of offence. Those of the staff interviewed were aware of this policy and the procedures to follow if they heard LGBTQI words being used in a derogative manner.

Only a small minority of participants in this study were aware that schools were required to document the specific prevention and education strategies to ensure eradication of such bullying. All schools had outlined general strategies for dealing with bullying but only two schools had documented specific homophobia/transphobia prevention strategies. Only one had included specific educative strategies and this school also had an equality policy and a sexual orientation policy. Four out of the six schools had an RSE policy displayed on their school website but out of these four schools, only one school explicitly named sexual orientation. Finally, very few participants in this study were familiar with the two educational resources — 'Respect' and 'Different Families – Same Love' — that had been circulated to schools prior to the time of interview.

All schools had a 'zero tolerance' approach to bullying in general. Homophobic and transphobic bullying were perceived as just another type of bullying and to be treated in the same manner:

> *The same as any other kind of bullying...I think it's important...to have it in the policy but it's funny to separate it because it's all bullying, you know, if anyone is being bullied you need to deal with it (School Leader, Den. School).*

However, aligning with the findings of Farelly et al (2016), some parents, school leaders and teachers were uncertain about what constituted homophobic and transphobic bullying. For example, it was acknowledged by most participants that 'gay' is used as a term of offence in the everyday lives of children and young people inside and outside of schools. However, there was much uncertainty as to whether this constituted homophobic bullying:

P3: That wasn't about being gay, that was just slagging.
P2: Finding something to insult somebody with, that's all that was.
P4: But is that not homophobia?
P3: I don't think so `cos like the kids aren't aware
P4: I suppose it would be if the person in question was homosexual.
(Parents, Den. School)

This conversation draws attention to how homophobia is often normalised, minimalised and explained in ways that fail to address or interrupt the systematic policing of gender and sexuality identity. Some parents implied that it only constitutes homophobia if the person is mocked because they actually identify as 'gay' while others suggested that the use of this identity label used in a derogatory manner constitutes homophobia of some kind.

Most participants were particularly confused about transphobia: 'I think we're making great progress on the whole gay and lesbian side but it's the transgender I think is gonna be the biggest hurdle for kids and for teachers (Parent, MD School). It follows that there was more silence in relation to talking about or addressing transphobia:

I think teachers need to be more informed of issues such as children identifying as transgender, or struggling with, coming to terms with that, or even questioning that. And I can say hand on my heart, there would be one or two in this school who appear to be going through that (Teacher, MD School).

Given the confusions around homophobia and transphobia, it is unsurprising that there were a variety of approaches to dealing with homophobia and transphobia. For example, approaches to hearing the use of the word 'gay' in a derogatory manner differed dramatically across schools. One school approached this by proactively ensuring it was treated in the same way as another identity insult:

So we decided we were literally going to use the word homophobia in the same way as we use the word racism... The homophobic stuff is the equivalent of racism in our school and we're going to treat it exactly the same...It's almost disappeared. It's worked, it's really really really worked (School Leader, MD School).

However, having a policy wasn't a guarantee that homophobia would be interrupted in practice. For example, some parents identified significant gaps and silences in addressing homophobic language:

Parent 1: Do you think they know about it (homophobic name-calling)?
Parent 2: Yea, of course they do.
Parent 3: I'd say they've so much else going on in the yard though, that would be way down the list
(Parents, Den School)

Equally, not mentioning homophobic bullying in policy was not an indicator of apathy and silence. One school did not mention homophobia explicitly in their bullying policy yet focused heavily on proactively interrupting homophobic language through an informal policy in their school.

Most schools adopted a more reactive approach to homophobic and transphobic bullying. Some took a hard-line, punitive approach to particular incidents when they happened:

She [The Principal] brought the boys who had done it down to the office individually and just basically told them it's not on, it's not appropriate, it's not, it's just not to happen again. And it didn't, it hasn't happened since (Teacher, Den, School).

Others interrupted homophobic language in their classroom/school but chose not to explain or educate children in relation this: 'I have stopped it bluntly any time, you know, the child says "oh, gay, oh"...I was like "now, that's not a nice thing to say". And I'll leave

it at that' (Teacher, Den. School). Others' first step was to take a more educative approach to homophobic and transphobic name-calling and bullying:

> *my personal first step — and I would say it would be the same across the staff — would be...to stop the child who used the terms and kind of say "what does that mean?" and most likely I would expect they'd say either they don't know or they'd say, like, "girly" or something like that. And then to just kind of talk it through with them and get to the root of what the word actually means and just kind of go "oh right, okay, so is being gay a bad thing, like?" and hopefully get them to come around to the fact that, "oh, right, no, it isn't, that's not what I actually meant when I said that". But obviously that only works the first few times. If some body keeps using the term in a derogatory way then that's a more serious issue and that's malicious so that has to be dealt with in terms of our anti-bullying policy*
> *(Teacher, MD School).*

It is clear that the prevention of bullying was a priority across the schools. However, some participants pointed to how a heavy emphasis on bullying prevention can overshadow important education around gender and sexuality identity and reflected on the need for education alongside a bullying prevention strategy:

> *Myself and a fellow colleague were saying last week...next year, when there's less maybe emphasis on anti-bullying, that we'd like to address things like...mental health, body image and also...the gender-stereotyping...about toys, and colours, boys' colours, girls' colours, boys' toys, girls' toys. I mean, generally, a lot of the kids kind of do fit this stereotype...as in...the boys play sport. But, as well there are spaces where, for those children who aren't the typical, follow the typical boys' things and girls' things. But I don't think we proactively do things to challenge stereotyping in the school (Teacher, MD School).*

This teacher's reflection on the over-emphasis on bullying without significant attention to education underlines how this element of the DES procedures has not been implemented. The following section provides focused insight into these schools' approaches to education in relation to gender and sexuality identity.

'Education' About Gender and Sexuality Identity

While there was consensus across schools about preventing homophobic and transphobic bullying, most schools were much more uncertain when it came to educating in relation to gender and sexuality identity. Many preferred to wait until they were met by situations that required some education around the topic and this resulted in many silences:

> *It hasn't come up as a staff and it hasn't come up with parents so it's not something that we have addressed. But like...it's not something that we have avoided...it has not come up from parents, it hasn't come up with the principal as you can see, it hasn't come up at board of management, it hasn't come up at staff level, so it's not something that I'd say would be addressed. Now, maybe it's casually, I don't know about teachers (School Leader, Den. School).*

One teacher explained how they navigated carefully using this reactive approach:

> *Obviously, you might go "a mam on her own" or "a dad on his own" but I've never gone "a mam and a mam" or "a daddy and a daddy". Never...if a child asked me and said "can't you have two mammys?" I'd say "yea, yeah you can" but I wouldn't volunteer that information, if you know what I mean, because, em, and it's not in the curriculum. So, you have to stick with what's in the curriculum as well (School Leader, Den. School).*

One teacher highlighted how having a student who was not conforming to gender norms was a catalyst for reflecting on gender segregation practices at school:

> *We had a sports day...they did a race for the boys and the girls, then all other races, like the egg spoon or whatever were all together. They did a race for boys and girls and so [Principal] was like "All the boys" and [the child] ran up and joined the boys. [Principal] was like "no, no, no, it's just for the boys". So then she was like "oh, my God, I can't believe I just did that, that's terrible...oh I feel so bad"* (Teacher, MD School).

A minority of schools took a very proactive stance on educating in relation to gender and sexuality identity. One school described how they teach using books that tell stories of diversity, including same-sex parented families:

> *I think the story books are working well, they're kind of bringing it down to their level and it's just...another story book from the library. It's nothing...spectacular or special or "we're doing this really new exciting book today", it's just another book from the library and we just chat about it in the same way we chat about any other book* (School Leader, MD School).

Another school described how they organised educational campaigns around sexual orientation identity and equality:

> *We did have a very strong campaign where we had a lot of visible posters saying LGBTQI people are welcome in our school and that sort of thing...It was prompted by, every year we do human rights month and we take the nine grounds of discrimination and each class level study that in more detail...sexual orientation, as one of the grounds that you can't discriminate against, we always put that in sixth class. The children in sixth would learn all about sexual orientation and why, stories like, say of Harvey Milk or things like that, and how it's wrong to discriminate against people because they're gay* (School Leader, MD School).

Conclusions and Questions Raised from Key Finding 1

The spectrum of approaches presented here highlights the ad hoc manner in which schools are approaching the prevention of homophobic/transphobic bullying and education around gender and sexuality identity. The result is such that some schools have developed their own structures and approaches that appear to be somewhat successful while others have cited a lack of formal instruction and direction as some of the reasons behind silences and inaction. The fact that most schools name and address homophobia and transphobia in policy and that some educate around gender and sexuality diversity is promising. However, the risk with the reactive and individualised approaches described above is that these approaches can serve to further minoritize and often victimise certain children as 'others' to the norm while failing to address silences around LGBTQI identities and the systematic gender restrictiveness and that has implications for all children.

The homophobia and transphobia bullying guidelines in the Irish education system are undoubtedly a state investment in the incontestable topic of bullying but, as Bailey (2017) points out, these guidelines are no guarantor that the heteronormative and heterosexist practices and structures of many primary schools will be challenged. And so, significant questions remain around establishing a proactive approach to bullying 'prevention' and 'education' that actually accounts for the uniqueness of each child and family rather than reproducing some children as 'others' or victims of the norms of school life. This finding also emphasises the need for further dialogue and work with the various education stakeholders and practitioners around the specifics of the DES procedures and how they might be supported in achieving these goals.

Key Finding 2

School leaders and teachers were central in shaping schools' approaches

Across all schools, school leaders and teachers were central in shaping the school's approach. This section unravels some of the key issues at play in determining their influence - comfort and confidence, knowledge, curriculum and resources.

Comfort and Confidence

The schools' approaches were first and foremost shaped by the principal. Taking a proactive stand on homophobia/transphobia and educating about gender and sexuality identity involved a pointed conviction, confidence and knowledge on the part of the school leader. One school leader talked about his conviction: 'One privilege of being the "boss" in the school...is that you get to dictate that mood around it and I am taking advantage of that' (School Leader, MD School). A consciousness of parental reaction was always present and one school leader displayed a confidence and steadfastness in the face of adverse reaction from parents:

> *in his [the parent's] eyes, the same-sex couple who are raising a child are criminals. He would see them as criminal. All you can do is say to someone "you're completely out of step. You're living in Ireland. This is the law of the land and that doesn't fit for us"...this is who we are, and we are not going to change for you. We are not going to change' (School Leader, MD School).*

Some leaders were not so confident and were generally uncertain about homophobia and transphobia:

> *I don't know an awful lot about homophobia, presumably it's just a treatment of gays, lesbians...and I suppose...lack of acceptance of their sexuality, etc. etc. But to be honest it's not something I've done a lot of study on (School Leader, Den. School).*

Parents also acknowledged the powerful place of the principal as shaping the climate and approach of the school: 'So if [Principal] has the equipment to deal with the different situations...it filters down and the teacher, everybody toes the line then' (Parent, Den. School). Many thought that teachers were willing and open but the principal needed to set the tone and that there needed to be formal guidelines and training in place for this to happen:

> *Parent 3: You could only imagine that they'd be quite open to it.*
> *Parent 4: Especially the teachers, anyway, I dunno about the School Leader but the teachers absolutely.*
> *Parent 2: I think he will follow any guidelines.*
> *...*
> *Parent 4: But the teachers are all brilliant (Parents, Den. School)*

While principals appeared to be the most dominant factor in shaping the whole-school approach, teachers were also a very significant factor in shaping their school's approach. In dealing with an incident of homophobia or transphobia, teachers largely followed the anti-bullying policy. However, while homophobia and transphobia were mentioned in most school anti-bullying policies, teachers often weren't aware of this or the detail of strategies to be followed. Many teachers were also uncomfortable because they feared parental reaction:

> *'I'm sure parents would definitely come in if you started giving a lesson on it. It's just an uncomfortable topic within the classroom, even for myself' (Teacher, Den. School).*

Some teachers who identified as gay highlighted how their identification caused another layer of discomfort: 'I feel it's nearly more difficult to tackle these issues sometimes. Because I don't want to be seen as only doing them because I'm gay' (Teacher, MD School). The presumption of negative reactions of parents were very much in teachers' minds when it came to what teachers were prepared to say about gender and sexuality diversity in the classroom (This is discussed in more detail in Key Finding 3). One teacher also highlighted how the presumption of reaction from certain children resulted in silences: 'But I know if this topic is brought up, it would open a can of worms in the classroom and it would turn into a very aggressive and negative thing' (Teacher, Den. School).



Teacher Education, Curriculum and Resources

Teachers who were uncomfortable in teaching about gender and sexuality identity also cited a lack of education in their teacher education programmes as a significant reason for uncertainty:

> *Well, say, I'm just out of college...And there was very little done on it...we could have done a whole module on how to deal with LGBTQI, how to encourage it in schools...and go through this set of work...Now actually, we had two, two lecturers, one from, one speaker from GLEN and then we had an SPHE lecture. But in four years of college, I had, you know, two hours essentially* (Teacher, Den. School).

One teacher underlined how, in particular, she didn't know enough about transgender identity: 'to be careful, to be like careful of what I'm saying...I don't know what I'm supposed to be saying. Like, I don't know what's wrong and what's right...I don't know' (Teacher, Den. School). In one school, the discomfort and uncertainty around 'sensitive topics' such as gender and sexuality identity was potently illustrated by the fact that a clause of the RSE policy allowed teachers to opt out of teaching certain unspecified topics in RSE:

> *The approach to the teaching of RSE will be kept as normal as possible and will usually be delivered within the child's class by the class teacher. A teacher who is concerned about teaching a particular topic within the R.S.E. programme should talk to the School Leader about his/her concerns. Such concerns will be handled discreetly* (RSE Policy, Den. School).

The curriculum and resources available to school leaders and teachers were viewed as central factors in how well schools could prevent homophobia/transphobia and educate about sexual orientation and gender identity. It was argued by most that official curricular guidelines would be crucial for change: 'because if it's not something that's laid out as strictly in the curriculum for me... I'd probably shy away from engaging the children specifically in that type of conversation (Teacher, Den. School). For some this was heavily linked to the hold of the Catholic Church: 'Unfortunately in Ireland, where the Church is concerned, and their hold on the people, and their hold on them...there's no, there will be very few schools who will go boldly there unless, you know, they're handed a revised curriculum and told to deliver it (Parent, Den. School). It followed that a lack of resources around this topic contributed to school leaders' and teachers' lack of knowledge and confidence:

> *we need more really good...children-friendly books. And as I say, I keep saying resources, resources, resources, so that, you know, you just feel comfortable approaching it, and he language, it's so important to have the right language* (Teacher, MD School).

While curriculum and resources were clearly viewed as central, it must be noted that very few teachers documented having used the GLEN and INTO resources to educate for gender and sexuality diversity in primary schools. One school leader acknowledged that use of these resources came down to the comfort of the teacher:

> *It really depends on the teacher. And for some people it might be too, they wouldn't be comfortable discussing it. I know the idea where they sent out lesson plans...I know some teachers took that up and they dealt with it* (School Leader, MD School).

And this was largely the opinion of parents also: 'They are and there's going to be teachers that'll be, won't talk about it and don't want to talk about it and you'll have another teacher that's much more open' (Parent, Den. School). Furthermore, several teachers and school leaders described struggles with fitting curricular and resource changes into an already overloaded timetable:

> *But the problem is the curriculum, teachers are so, they're so overworked. You know, and there's more and more demands for paperwork which takes away from you your joy of teaching and what you really want to do. That's just the way it's going* (Teacher, MD School).

Conclusions and Questions Raised from Key Finding 2

The variety of factors mentioned above — comfort and confidence of school leaders and teachers, teacher education, the presumption of parental and child reaction, curriculum and resources — all underscore the complexity of adequately educating about gender and sexuality identity and family diversity. Changes in policy, curriculum and resources alone are no guarantor that school leaders and teachers will adequately prevent homophobia and transphobia or educate for gender and sexuality diversity. Professional support that moves beyond simplistic solutions to prevention or inclusion to provide generative opportunities for dialogue amongst and across cohorts of families, teachers and leaders in school communities will be required if meaningful change is to occur in relation to educating for gender and sexuality identity.

Key Finding 3

Dialogue unravelled 'childhood innocence' and yielded the potential for an incremental, holistic education about gender and sexuality identity

At first, in conversations with most participants, there was an undercurrent of anxiety and reluctance around childhood innocence in relation to educating about homophobia/transphobia and gender and sexuality identity. Many participants proposed a move away from the current isolated focus on (hetero)sexual reproduction in 5th/6th class towards a more incremental, holistic and age-appropriate approach to understanding about gender and sexuality identity from earlier years. Through dialogue and reflection in interviews and focus groups, many participants moved beyond initial anxiety-laden assumptions around childhood innocence to discuss how this education was possible and, in many cases, desirable.

Fears about Childhood Innocence and Parental Reaction

Many participants described the current approach to sex education in primary schools as focused on biology and sexual reproduction in fifth and sixth class: 'most sex education is about the mechanics really' (Parent, MD School). Some parents pointed out that sex education appeared to be a sensitive topic: 'Some parents don't want their ten-year-old child to be exposed to that. I'm telling you that there are children in sixth class who are not attending the talk about the birds and the bees next week because their parents have decided that they don't want them to attend it' (Parent, Den. School). Given the general discomfort of teachers outlined earlier, it is unsurprising that several schools (Den. and MD) called upon external agencies to talk to parents and children. This positioning of sexuality as external to everyday school business underscores the 'sensitive' nature of this topic.

Given the current predominantly biological approach to sex education, it is unsurprising that many of the participants, at the outset, held significant anxieties about educating in relation to gender and sexuality identity in primary schools: 'you don't want to be, their young little brains, putting too much information' (Parent, MD School). The topic was a source of caution: 'there's also...a great respect for the innocence of children so you're careful' (School Leader, Den. School). This resulted in silences in many classrooms and schools: 'at the age of my children there would never really be any reference made to that in the classroom' (Teacher, Den. School).

Sexuality identity or sexual orientation was a concept that some participants did not feel children were ready for in primary school: 'I think the whole idea of sexual orientation at that age is just a concept that might be...beyond the scope of their understanding' (Teacher, MD School). One school leader suggested that while every human being has a sexual orientation, sexual orientation was often interpreted as meaning 'homosexuality' and 'homosexuality is perceived as not child friendly... something that is completely sexualised' (School Leader, MD School). Recent research indicates that one in five people thought that it was possible to promote children into becoming LGBTQI (Higgins et al 2016) and while this was not a view expressed by any participant in this study, some alluded to this concept as a barrier to change:

> *Well I can tell you when I told my mother that I was coming here to do this today...`oh for God's sake' she says, `that's it now, put the idea into their head, talk about it in school, and put the ideas into their head'...`and then they'll definitely be gay' [laughter]. So you're dealing with that mentality and there's going to be a certain number of parents, not necessarily grandparents, who have that mentality (Parent, Den. School).*

Another school leader explained how childhood innocence and age-appropriateness closed down opportunities for education because such powerful concepts made it very difficult to find a way into educating about gender and sexuality identity:

> *You can have people who will say "that's not age-appropriate"...That comes up a lot with any issues we might deal with, like say death or something like that. Somebody will say, "well, they're too young to learn about this". People have different viewpoints as to how things are...Who decides whether something is age-appropriate?...for a long time here and in any other school I worked in, sexual orientation was a taboo subject. It wasn't spoken about. The children were too young was the basic thing. And that's what some of these people who would criticized what we've done would have said but...I don't agree' (School Leader, MD School).*

Across most schools, it emerged that assumptions about parents further limited the shape of sexuality education in schools. Some school leaders and teachers had had experiences of bad reactions from parents:

that incident not that long ago where the parent came in complaining about the portrayal of two fathers, that certainly kind of was a reminder that "oh, wait, no, this, we aren't as free as we thought we were"...or this isn't as open and accepting as we thought it was (Teacher, MD School).

For many these incidents had instilled a watchfulness and caution about educating about gender and sexuality identity:

Well I just, I got a rap on the knuckles there a few weeks ago...because we mentioned the Referendum...And a parent complained about me to the Board because they thought I was trying to push a 'Yes' within the class. And that was totally not what I was trying to do. And that's why I'd be scared to mention any other...gay stuff in the class because parents would come at you (Teacher, Den. School).

Some teachers pointed out that while the Marriage Equality Referendum signalled a change in Irish society, it also made visible that many people (and potentially parents of children in schools) are not comfortable with LGBTQI identities or same-sex relationships:

But I think society does have a way to go. And I think if our school was to completely embrace and talk about homophobia and talk about being gay and be really open about it I think there would be a lot of challenges from parents, I'm assuming. There is still a percentage of the 40% in [the county] that probably wouldn't be too impressed if their child was exposed to a conversation about being gay. And there probably still is, like that attitude that the father had in [city], "I don't want a gay teacher in case it turns my child gay", not thinking that you're born gay. I think that's a huge, that's a huge discrepancy (Teacher, Den. School).

It had first appeared to many participants in this study that childhood innocence was a clear-cut issue and the concerns and barriers outlined above took centre-stage. However, as the interviews and focus groups progressed, many participants teased out and talked in a more nuanced way about the concept of child innocence. For example, some talked about how they had originally conflated sexuality identity with sexual activity but now saw things differently:

Teacher: ...they are at an age where they can understand That if two people love each other that's okay, that's the way it is, it's like your mom and dad loving each other. If two men love each other, two women love each other, I do think that's acceptable for their age range.
Interviewer: And do you think you thought that at the beginning of our conversation?...
Teacher: I suppose in my head I was nearly thinking about the, I suppose the sexual education side of things. Like when you think about our RSE it's, when I think of up the older class I'm like `I wonder how, how will that be taught, how will they teach sex education you know?' (Teacher, Den. School).

Despite the concerns and barriers, most participants revealed that they believed that an age-appropriate model of education around gender and sexuality identity was both possible and desirable. The following section outlines the participants' perspectives on what this education might look like.

Holistic and Age-Appropriate Education is Possible and Desirable

For most participants in this study, the central issue was not *whether* to educate primary school children in relation to gender and sexuality identity, but *when*. Some parents feared an early introduction: 'if you were to introduce about different relationships, I don't think a lot of parents would want it introduced at junior infants, maybe' (Parents, Den. School). Others outlined that even children in middle school might not be 'ready':

He just made his communion and the whole referendum went over his head, like. He'd no idea. So as well...you don't want to tell kids sometimes things before their time or before they're ready for it...because you know, the way they think about things. So you just kind of, I think sometimes you just let it happen and then they can, they'll notice and they might ask you (Parent, Den. School).

Some participants reflected that this topic could be introduced later in the RSE programme: 'I think 10, yea, it's an age where you do start talking to them about puberty and that's a natural precursor to others, other topics, I suppose, isn't it' (Parent, Den. School).

However, many parents, teachers and school leaders acknowledged that children were receiving messages about sexuality and gender at a very young age through the media and outside of school: 'they pick up things from programmes that they watch on TV...Real life is reflected on TV' (Parent, Den. School). In this light, several argued that schools should be proactive in supporting students in this learning: 'Some people might think it's spoiling kids innocence but they are going to find out eventually so why not learn now' (Teacher, Den. School). Many also saw this as a necessary step in ensuring that students who were beginning to identify as LGBTQI saw that their school was a place of support and belonging: 'I do think, I actually think it would be great to start talking about it at the ages of ten, eleven and twelve, absolutely, and give them the confidence to talk to somebody in the school' (Parent, Den. School).

Many participants saw the current model of RSE as inadequate and outdated:

> *this is a huge opportunity to change policy...most sex education is about the mechanics really...And that doesn't matter and I think the opportunity now is for equality and to talk about sexuality as part of our everyday life...I think it would be amazing to just turn the whole thing on its head so you're not talking about the old-fashioned sex education (Parent, MD School).*

Many reflected on how age-appropriate education around sexual gender and sexuality identity was possible and asserted that children are very accepting:

> *she was telling me that her aunt is getting married. And she said "but to a girl, like to another girl". And so another boy was like "a girl? Is she mad?" And the little girl was like "no, a girl can get married to a girl". And then another boy was like "yea, they can and boys can marry boys" and the little fellow was like "oh right". And he was playing and then he just went back to it and it was just totally accepted. So I think when it's that age like they're at that age, they're open to anything (Teacher, Den. School).*

Some schools' approach was to educate about sexuality identity within a 'human rights' but thoroughly de-sexualised frame:

> *We found here...deal with it the same as racism. Take it as nothing to do with sex. Take sex out of it. Stop thinking that you're going into a "This isn't age-appropriate thing", take that out of it...it isn't our role to discuss sex in homosexual relationships and that sort of thing. We don't do that. We come at it just from a human rights perspective. You know, so we don't go into all of the detail, nor do I think that that's important for us to do. But we would stick completely to the RSE policy as it stands. So we don't see, in a primary school, our role as talking to children about their own sexual orientation. That's not where we come from. I know, `cos a number of us have done courses with Belong To, I know that they say the average age a child knows that they're gay is 11...but we don't try and go that route of, you know, well you might be or might not be because I don't particularly think that's our role. I think our role is to say that we all know people who are gay. It's normal. It's very important to talk to people and that sort of thing. But we don't try and, we don't even try to have the children question, you know, I would normally say to children, even in sixth class that you're way too young for relationships. We ban girlfriends and boyfriends . (School Leader, School D, MD School).*

The School Leader above vehemently asserts that the emphasis is not on asking children whether they identify as heterosexual or LGBTQI but rather in ensuring that children are taught from an equality and human rights perspective about the existence and acceptance of LGBTQI people and same-sex parented families in Irish society. This education involved a process of normalising and equalising as opposed to exploring personal sexuality identity:

> *We are doing relationship and sexuality education it's all SPHE and it's about identifying your body parts, identifying your feelings, identifying your privates, then learning about sexual intercourse for the, you know, for reproduction. And you're very much naming you and your body. And so we're trying to find a place for teaching about sexuality outside of that [mechanics of sex education] because we're not asking them to name anything of themselves. We're just teaching them about, we're just Teaching them how normal it is, first and foremost, but thenabout Harvey Milk or, this is now later on down the line, this is what we envisage we'll do in fifth and sixth class. But we're not asking them, like that parent said, to choose a sexuality*
> *(School Leader, MD School*

Several participants were also concerned that this education would not be done in a way that highlighted certain children as 'other' or different':

> *I mean, it's okay for them to see that they see it's the norm. But yet you're not going to say `well, that child over there has two mammies and that one over there has one mammy'. Like, you know, you're not going to pick them out (Parents, Den. School).*

While there are obvious reasons why some schools attempted to address gender and sexuality identity diversity through such a de-sexualised and de-individualised approach, there was a palpable tension between their attempt to enact a de-sexualised approach alongside teaching about heterosexual reproduction in the RSE programme in fifth or sixth class. Some parents identified this and reflected on how these lines weren't always so clear-cut, outlining how they feared an opening of Pandora's Box if sexuality identity became part of the RSE programme:

> *Parent 4: But how do you explain to child, just say there was a kid in the school that has two dads, well where did the child come from, like, how do you explain? Like, the IVF and the surrogate mother and I just, I just find that hard...To go into detail about it...*
> *...*
> *Parent 3: But they don't really need to know that `till*
> *secondary school, do they?*
> *Parent 2: No they need to ask, they ask!*
> *Parent 4: It's fifth and sixth, as soon as their hormones start kicking in and as soon as they, I would just find that hard to explain. That would be my issue around the whole thing.*
> *(Parents, Den. School)*

The tensions discussed in this section are mirrored in the RSE guidelines themselves (Department of Education and Skills 1996). For instance, to what extent can the aim of encouraging each child 'to be comfortable with the sexuality of oneself and others' be achieved alongside 'understanding of and respect for, human love, sexual intercourse and reproduction'? Or, put another way, how can primary schools truly educate for gender and sexuality identity equality if RSE is understood only in heterosexual, biological and heteronormative terms? These are questions that merit significant thought and discussion if all children are to be valued equally in schools.

Conclusions and Questions Raised from Key Finding 3

Knee-jerk reactions to discourses of childhood innocence and age-appropriateness have undoubtedly constrained the type of education that has been possible in primary schools. The accounts presented here draw attention to how unpacking and unravelling these concepts and the tensions that abound yields real possibilities for a more holistic and equal education about gender and sexuality identity. Furthermore, the fears and assumptions of teachers and school leaders about parental reaction when placed alongside the openness of most parents to discuss tension-filled topics emphasise the need for open, informed and supported dialogue between all the stakeholders involved in primary schools.

Key Finding 4

Assumptions and uncertainties about religious ethos reproduced silences and posed challenges across all school types

The accounts in this study revealed how uncertainties and assumptions about religious ethos reproduced silences and posed challenges in relation to homophobia, transphobia and educating about gender and sexuality identity in all school types. This section unravels some of these uncertainties and assumptions and underlines the need for more clarity and transparency about how exactly the DES procedures can be implemented amidst religious/sexuality tensions.

Uncertainty and Silence

Religion was largely understood to be in constant tension with the notion of educating about homophobia/transphobia, sexuality and gender identity: 'there is a clash and I don't know how that changes. Either the church has to change or, like, how do you have two philosophies going hand in hand, when they are completely at odds with each other' (School Leader, MD School). The over-representation of Catholicism in primary school patronage was deemed to be particularly problematic in this regard:

> *8o odd percent of schools in the country are Catholic...And they're not pro-gay marriage. So how do you reconcile ... the government is paying for these children to be educated... the people of Ireland basically have voted for the country to be equal, therefore, we have to have equality in what we teach the children. But, at the same time, the Church doesn't believe that it's right. So how do you reconcile that?* *(Parent, Den. School).*

In the Catholic schools in this study, there was acute caution and watchfulness in relation to educating about sexuality and gender identity:

> *I'm very conscious...that the Catholic Church are against it [LGBTQI identities and relationships] - something I don't agree with, obviously, but when you're teaching in a Catholic school you need to be very careful that you're not going against the teachings of the Catholic Church...the Catholic ethos really has huge limitations on what we do. I mean the RSE programme in sixth class, we don't talk about, we don't talk about gay people, we don't about contraception, we don't talk about basically all the things that the Catholic Church don't agree with. We don't do, we just don't touch on it at all* *(Teacher, Den. School).*

However, several participants highlighted how this caution was primarily because of uncertainty. It was never explicitly stated by anybody in Catholic schools that educating about sexuality and identity was contrary to the ethos of Catholic schools. Rather, it was the ambiguities and uncertainties around religious 'ethos' that caused deep silences:

> *In a Catholic school that we, essentially, we're not allowed talk about the subject in school like that was some kind of unwritten law that the Church has said. But that wasn't conveyed to us by any kind of, our Principal or Vice-Principal or anything, we, there was no, well I didn't get any kind of guidance on what we're supposed to say...about same-sex couples, yea, nothing. So it just hasn't been discussed... I suppose as a Catholic school, essentially the Church might be influencing us to have a certain opinion but it's not something that's given to us either. There's no curriculars from the Church that come to us that say you need to do this or that...my only confusion is how much of an influence does the Catholic Church have or where does this directive come from, where does the guideline come from?* *(Teacher, Den School).*

It was also assumed that MD schools were more conducive to acknowledging and educating for gender and sexuality diversity. Some teachers who taught in Catholic schools envied those who taught in MD schools because of the school ethos:

> *I just know, most of my friends are in Catholic schools. I have one in Educate Together [MD] but I think it's more open in that you talk about everything there and there's no discrimination whatsoever. Or no hushing of things really, they just talk, if it's asked they try answer as best they can. Which I would like to see here as well in these type of schools* *(Teacher, Den. School)*

Furthermore, those who were in multi-denominational school settings considered themselves lucky not to be in a school under one religious patron:

I'd have 100% confidence that if they did hear something [homophobic commentary] it would be nipped in the bud straight away [Agreement from all parents]...Yea, whereas I think that if they were in another school I don't think they would have been picked up on (Parent, MD School).

These accounts underscore how uncertainty about the connectedness between religious teachings on sexuality and school ethos bred and legitimised particular silences around homophobia/transphobia and sexuality/gender identity in denominational schools.

Religious/Sexuality Tensions Across all School Types

While interpretations of ethos caused particular silences in denominational schools, at the same time, it must be acknowledged that many staff in denominational schools continued to be committed to educating about homophobia/transphobia and gender and sexuality identity:

The fact that a huge proportion of the schools in Ireland are Catholic is obviously a huge barrier but I don't think that's necessarily going to stop the staff of those schools becoming more, not even becoming, being more accepting and open. Like...I was at a meeting in _____recently about Relationships and Sexuality Education and how to address that, particularly with fifth and sixth class...so much of the day was spent with teachers in Catholic schools discussing together how they could get around the policy of their school and have the books in their library representing all sorts of diversity...it's clear that schools are trying, trying to tackle homophobic bullying and transphobic bullying. And I think to be fair to the Catholic Church and to Catholic schools I think most, most are very open to that (Teacher, MD School).

Furthermore, the assumption that a MD ethos was a guarantor of gender and sexuality equality was dispelled by the accounts of several participants. In fact, such assumptions often resulted in silences and inaction:

Because the Educate Together is so inclusive in its ideals...perhaps it was felt that in a school like this, there is no need to be very specific about it. And I'd say, you know, in an ideal world that probably is the case, d'you know. However, I've given you examples there of when I really felt like things should have been said [about homophobia] (Teacher, MD School).

Significant tensions were prominent and sometimes even more pronounced in multi-denominational settings. The following frank discussion amongst parents in a MD school community is illustrative of the tensions between embracing religious differences while maintaining an ethos of gender and sexuality diversity and equality:

Parent 3: So probably they will have to cross that bridge at some point of getting the balance between equality and beliefs and bringing...And bringing the two together to say `look, the belief might say that being gay or lesbian is wrong but the school says...'
Parent 2: But people have choice.
Parent 3: And choice, freedom of choice, and they shouldn't be victimised, bullied, or even perception
Parent 2:...It's not the school saying "it's okay being gay", no, no, no, no, no...the rules should be for all of them and works for all o us, whatever our background is. Whether they like it or not, they're playing outside together.
Parent 6: Can I ask you though, if the school is saying it's okay to be gay and you're child comes home
Parent 2: We are all saying it.
Parent 6: Yea, no, no, no, but, I'm just trying to understand. If the school is saying it's okay...and they support it, but your child comes home and asks you..."is it okay to be gay?"
Parent 2: Yea...in our religion it's not and I will put all the proofs that I have that I know
Parent 6: Okay.
Parent 2: but as a human being they have the right to be, I don't care. It's fine, okay, be whatever you want to be.
Parent 6: Okay, yea, yea, yea. I just wanted to understand how you can explain it to the child.
Parent 2: But it's not okay, the teacher should, I don't want being gay is the only word used. I want the teacher to be talking about being whatever you want is fine. D'you understand? [Lots of nods.]
(Parents, MD School)

These tensions were echoed by a MD school leader who underlined the difficulty in managing the task of simultaneously embracing equal rights based on religion and sexual orientation, as espoused by the nine grounds of discrimination named in the Equal Status Acts:

> *And, you know, me respecting and acknowledging and trying to cater for our Jehovah's Witnesses in the same space as trying to include Muslims and families from gay backgrounds or, all this was just, oh my God, this is all in one building. And everybody is supposed to feel respected and included and their values and we say in our mission statement we respect your values and that and I was questioning then how possible is that? And how naïve is that statement?...But at the same time, within that policy it's al about normalising homosexuality, transgender, gender issues, stereotyping, and that all belongs in one policy and...the religion policy, for example for our Muslim parents, is great and they absolutely love it and we just got parental feedback there on an online survey we sent out and it's just overwhelmingly positive but the one thing that came back, "this school would be better if...if you just took sexual orientation out", "take sexual orientation out", "why would they have to choose their sexual orientation in primary school"* *(School Leader, MD School).*

These accounts outline the prominence of religion in MD as well as Den. schools, emphasising that tensions between sexuality equality and religion are present across all school types. One school leader was particularly delighted in how they'd moved from labelling themselves as 'multidenominational' to 'equality-based' because it depleted the centrality of religion:

> *I'm delighted we've moved from `multi-denominational' to `equality-based' because at the time I would have been saying to th parents `but this is the law of the land, like, the nine grounds of discrimination are in our legislation. That's the law of the land Human rights will always trump one person's religion' (School Leader, MD School).*

Conclusions and Questions Raised from Key Finding 4

It is often assumed that religious ethos is the biggest barrier to education about homophobia/transphobia and gender and sexuality identity. It is also often assumed that MD schools are more progressive than Christian denominational schools. The accounts above provide a more nuanced perspective on how the ambiguity and arbitrary nature of school 'ethos' establishes an unwritten code that silences and inhibits in subtle ways. Furthermore, they illustrate that the tensions between religion and sexual orientation are an issue for all school types. The ways in which assumptions and uncertainties about religious ethos legitimised silence around homophobia and transphobia underline the need for clarity regarding exactly how patrons and school leaders are implementing DES policy around transphobia and homophobia amidst the apparent tensions between religious teachings and sexuality and gender identity equality.

Key Finding 5

Accounts from several schools revealed norms and practices that did not cater for all children equally

Across all of the schools in this study, there were many examples of how norms and practices made life particularly difficult for many children in primary schools. This section outlines and discusses some of these norms and practices.

Deep Silences in Relation to the Existence of LGBTQI People

In most schools there were silences around the existence of LGBTQI people:

> *I'm going to fully admit that it hasn't really been, it's not something that's really been spoken about. We haven't, I think obviously, seeing as you're here, we might be coming into the age of having to come up with these policies ourselves (Teacher, Den. School).*

In most schools, relationships other than heterosexual ones were not proactively mentioned and the heterosexual family model was reinforced to the exclusion of other family types despite several school leaders and teachers being aware that many children might have had family members who identified as LGBTQI. For example, children's songs and rhymes were saliently heteronormative in nature: 'from junior infants up, it's just mammy, daddy sort of families, or single mammy or single daddy, there's no such thing as daddy daddy or mammy mammy' (Teacher, Den. School).

Despite that twelve is the most common age for children to begin to identify as LGBTQI (Higgins et al, 2016 and Mayock et al 2007), there were no accounts of children who 'came out' or talked about their sexuality identity with an adult in a primary school. The following conversation underlines the extent of this silence:

> *Interviewer: You've seen thousands of boys over the last 15 years...So have you not come across any boys who have identified as gay or bisexual, transgender, in all those years?*
> *Teacher: ...No boy has ever come and said I'm gay.*
> *Interviewer: Do you think that there are boys, but don't say it?*
> *Teacher: Oh yes, yes.*
> *(Teacher, Den. School)*

Many participants acknowledged that some children might have been aware of identifying as LGBTQI but would have chosen to remain silent because of the 'tough time' (Parent 2, Den. School) they might get from peers. In general, there was a discourse of vulnerability and pathos around children who might be identifying as LGBTQI because of the silences at school. Primary schools were not generally viewed as particularly safe spaces for children to disclose if they did identify as LGBTQI:

> *I'd say the child could be very confused, not having a clue what they're feeling and why they're feeling it because it's not being taught or not being spoken of the whole way up. The only way they'd see it really is in the media at the minute, or friends, maybe friends of friends or older brothers that might be, but in this school they would have no education at all towards it (Teacher, Den. School).*

Higgins et al. (2016) assert that there is a link between the experience of LGBTQI school-based bullying and a higher risk of self-harm and suicidality and some school leaders and teachers in this study demonstrated an awareness of this:

> *But they can't always tell their friends, they don't always want to tell their parents, they have literally got no one to talk to. And that was one of the things. And that can be where a lot of suicides can be linked to, or suicidal thinking can be linked to, and that was one of stark things, certainly for me (Teacher, MD School).*



Most parents, teachers and school leaders outlined that homophobic behaviour happened through name-calling both inside and outside of school. For example, the word 'gay' was used commonly as a term of offence amongst children:

> *I can't believe how much the term gay is used to slag somebody off. Even outside of school in our estate, like, there's kids from the other national school there and there'd be kids from the secondary school there, you know, I couldn't believe how much it is used as a put down... "Your walk is gay", you know, and yeah it's a big issue I think* *(Parent, Den. School).*

However, it was perceived by the vast majority that the term 'gay' was used as an insult without fully understanding its meaning:

> *Parent 2: They are insulting the person....but they're insulting the person the same way as they'd be saying "you're ginger" or "you're fat".*
> *Interviewer: You're point is they use the term as an insult but without understanding what it means?*
> *Parent 2: Yes. And without really understanding that it might upset somebody. Or that it might be a term that might devastate somebody.*
> *(Parents, Den. School)*

One group of parents described stories whereby a gay teacher was experiencing a difficult time because of an undercurrent of homophobia in his class:

> *Parent 1: the teacher is given a tough time. And my son is coming home with some pretty horrific poems about men on men sexual activity...they are kind of bullying*
> *Parent 2: ...Now it may be that fifth class kids are into singing...horrible rude songs anyway, whether it's man on man or woman and man, I don't know...*
> *Parent 4: It's hard to address as well for the teacher.*
> *(Parents, Den. School)*

Across most schools, there were deep silences around LGBTQI identities and same-sex attraction and it was seen as impossible for children to express an LGBTQI identity. However, while there were many references to incidents of homophobia through name-calling, one of the most potent mechanisms for policing sexuality was through particular enforcements of gender ideals and norms.

Problematic and Restrictive Gender Norms

There was significant evidence of restrictive gender norms both inside and outside of schools, causing particular difficulties for some children. Gender ideals and norms were upheld and reinforced through the everyday minutiae of school life. For example, the following teacher highlights the strict gender divide:

> *there kind of is the core set of boys in the class and they all do football and all that kind of thing, and then you've got the girls an they do their thing. And I think generally for girls the way it's going is it's so focused on body image and social media*
> *(Teacher, MD School).*

For many schools, if there was a uniform in place, it followed gender norms. In co-educational schools, a minority of girls chose to wear trousers. One parent described how the practices of a teacher in one school reinforced gender segregation and norms in a particularly vehement manner:

My older son is involved in a class that is quite divisive on gender...And they are treated very differently...the teacher...has split the class into boys and girls and therefore divided the class....so say for example, this is just an example, the kids can bring popcorn in to eat and it was spilled on the ground and the instructor, the teacher felt that it was the boys that did it so therefore the boys were not allowed to bring popcorn in but girls are. And, you know, I don't think that promotes working together (Parent, Den. School).

While most participants were unaware of the ramifications of restrictive gender norms, there were some participants who were acutely aware of the damaging effects. For example, one parent commented on how restrictive gender norms can be for children who don't conform to traditional gender norms: 'I wasn't aware of how strongly children were put into their gender box until I had a child that is non-conforming' (Parent 3, Den. School). This parent also noted that gender norms were policed more acutely for boys:

When you're talking about gender, there are terms. Like, I could say to my daughter 'you're a tomboy', and she was like 'great, I'm a tomboy'. But can you think of one positive term for a little boy who is more likely to be interested in traditional girl terms, they're all very derogatory (Parent, Den. School).

Generally, there was complete confusion and silence around gender-diverse and transgender identities:

Parent 4: I never heard the term transphobia before I got the email to say we were coming here today.
Parent 1: I had to look it up.
Parent 2: I asked my daughter...what was transphobia.
(Parents, Den. School)

However, there were several stories about transgender and gender-diverse children and young people. In one school, there were several references amongst parents and teachers to one child who was not conforming to gender norms. Expectations around traditional gender norms were making it difficult for this child, as articulated by the parent:

when I see how upset she is if she is forced [to wear a dress]...It's not like, you know if somebody was to say wear that dress, and a child would say I don't want to wear that. But it's more upsetting for her to be. And when I see her like that, that's what makes me think to hell with the world, because I want her to be who she is...And of course I would like to see her in fairy princess dresses...I have another little boy and I love to see her...in my eyes, she is the most beautiful little child ever. She's this gorgeous long...hair, which she wants cut. We make, kind of, we make middle grounds. I let her have a bob, I won't let it go any shorter than that. She'd love it all cut off. There's a lot of things I would like to see her be but then she is a living creature who has to find her path in the world. And if I don't accept her, if we as parents don't accept her, for who she really is, how will her self-esteem ever evolve, how will her self-confidence? (Parent, Den. School).

Interestingly, once one parent opened up about her gender non-conforming child, other parents spoke freely about fears and concerns related to children's decisions around gender and its connectedness to sexuality identity. These accounts reveal conscious and unconscious investments in gender norms as a necessary step in following the path of heterosexuality. These conversations also underscore the necessity to create spaces for more open dialogue between families and school staff regarding about young children's experiences of navigating gender norms and negotiating their gender identities.

Conclusions and Questions Raised from Key Finding 5

It is clear from these accounts that, for many students and teachers, primary schools are places of on-going struggle because their sexuality or gender identity is not represented or is actively silenced. Many children find gender norms to be very restrictive and for some, this causes great difficulty and upset on an everyday basis. Furthermore, the silences that surround LGBTQI identities and same-sex parented families underscore how many schools are not spaces of belonging for children who are identifying as LGBTQI or trying to make sense of same-sex attraction.

Concluding Words and Future Directions

This study has provided in-depth insight into how primary schools are implementing policies and resources related to homophobia/transphobia and educating about gender and sexuality identity in primary schools in Ireland.

Most schools were familiar with the DES procedures and most mentioned homophobia and transphobia in their bullying policies. However, there was a lack of awareness that the DES procedures require schools to document particular prevention and education strategies. While all schools appeared to have a zero-tolerance approach to bullying there wasn't consensus or certainty in most schools about what constituted homophobic or transphobic bullying. Furthermore, while some schools were proactive in addressing homophobia/transphobia and educating in relation to gender/sexuality identity, most schools adopted largely individualised, reactive and ad hoc approaches that resulted in much silence and inaction on an everyday basis. This underlines the need for the DES Inspectorate to build on the positive work of the DES Anti-Bullying Working Group to systematically evaluate the implementation of the DES Anti-Bullying procedures in both primary and post-primary schools, ensuring specific examination of the prevention as well as the education strategies being implemented in relation to homophobia and transphobia.

In this study, some individual school leaders and teachers were particularly proactive and confident in addressing homophobia/transphobia and educating around sexual orientation /gender identity. However, most described discomfort for reasons ranging from lack of education, to fears of parental and pupil reaction to lack of guidelines, to curriculum and resources, to fears and assumptions around religious ethos. While already taking place in the second-level sector, there is need for professional support in the primary sector so that school leaders and teachers will not be left 'reacting' to individual cases. As mentioned in the introduction, there are currently three resources for primary schools: *Respect: Creating a Welcoming and Positive School Climate to Prevent Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying, Different Families, Same Love* and *All Together Now* but primary school leaders and teachers need to be supported professionally and in a comprehensive manner to use these resources, for example, through the Professional Service Development for Teachers (PDST). There is also the potential for the Centre for School Leadership to explore the role of school leadership in relation to supporting good practice related to gender and sexuality identity.

This study has also revealed that the powerful concepts of 'childhood innocence' and 'age-appropriateness' have acted as barriers resulting in many silences in primary schools. The time for reflection and dialogue that this study afforded allowed participants to unravel these concepts in a more nuanced manner, revealing that many participants saw the potential for a more holistic and incremental education about homophobia/transphobia and sexuality/gender identity as entirely possible and desirable in primary schools not least because children are learning about these from a variety of other sources in their lives. This suggests that opportunities for such generative dialogue between parents and school staff would be welcomed and has the potential to foster and support a more equal and diverse school culture. The National Parents Council would be ideally placed to create such opportunities for generative dialogue.

It is often assumed that religion is the largest barrier to adequately preventing homophobia/transphobia and educating about gender and sexuality. Certainly, this study reveals tensions between religious teachings and gender/sexuality identity as well as particular silences in denominational schools. But the accounts of the participants in this study powerfully draw attention to how it is the ambiguities, uncertainties and assumptions that surround religious ethos that result in deep silences, reluctances and fears. There is an urgent need for school patron bodies to provide clarity on how exactly the DES procedures can be implemented in schools so that all children can feel that they and their family are recognised equally and belongs in the school community.

Underpinning the accounts in this study is the reality that many schools, whether consciously or unconsciously, actively maintain silences around the existence of LGBTQI people and reproduce restrictive gender norms that make life particularly difficult for many children and their families. There are children in primary schools who are themselves identifying or their family members identify as LGBTQI. For some, homophobia or transphobia is not interrupted in their schools. For many, their schools do not reflect their everyday existence in a positive manner and many children are left to make sense of these issues at a potentially vulnerable time in their lives. This study has clearly outlined that bullying policies and prevention measures alone are not sufficient. Alongside, there is need for meaningful education about and disruption of the heteronormative and heterosexist nature of everyday practices and structures in the vast majority of primary schools in Ireland.



This study took place in May 2015 at the height of the Marriage Equality campaign and referendum. This was a potent moment where debates about gender and sexuality were commonplace in the public sphere. The vast majority of participants in this study articulated support for the Marriage Equality referendum and it was largely viewed as a milestone of progressive change. However, in many of the participants' accounts, primary schools were characterised as apolitical, neutral spaces that would change slowly and passively in response to society. It followed that some made the assumption that gay teachers and school leaders would be the ones to change school environments without acknowledging the need for more systemic action where the onus wasn't on those who identified as LGBTQI to be the trailblazers. Real change in relation to these issues requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses alterations related to curriculum, resources, teacher education, CPD, parent education, patronage, policy, philosophy and atmosphere. Following this study, it would seem that a necessary component of this is open dialogue across all education stakeholders underpinned by an acceptance that there will always be tensions when engaging with human difference.

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