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16 LGBTQI+ Teachers in Ireland

Dilemmas of Visibility, Age-Appropriateness and Religion across a Period of Rapid Legislative Change

Aoife Neary

16.1 Introduction and Literature Review

Many LGBTQI+[1] teachers feel the weight of heteronormativity at school and detail experiences ranging from overt homophobia and harassment (Ferfolja 2008) to subtle everyday assumptions in language (Neary 2013). LGBTQI+ teachers engage in significant emotional labour, constantly checking themselves in making decisions about whether or how to let their LGBTQI+ identity be visible at school (Neary, Gray, and O'Sullivan 2016; Neary 2017b). A key concern amongst LGBTQI+ teachers is how to be 'authentic' and 'honest' about their LGBTQI+ identities whilst surveying the personal/professional divide and ambiguities around 'childhood innocence'. These teachers are very often concerned with presenting a correspondence with what is valued by their schooling contexts and thus preserving their professional legitimacy and security (McCarthy 2003; Ferfolja 2008; Gray 2013; Neary 2013, 2017a; Harris and Jones 2014).

In managing all of this, LGBTQI+ teachers adopt a spectrum of approaches in disclosing or 'coming out' at school, and their everyday negotiations are an ambivalent, messy mix of transgressing boundaries and reproducing normativity (Ferfolja 2008; Neary, Gray, and O'Sullivan 2016; Neary 2017b). Some try to perform as the 'super' teacher, detracting from their LGBTQI+ identity (Rudoe 2010; Neary 2017a, 2017b). Such commitments to this extra work to be the 'super' teacher increase professional legitimacy and act as a bulwark against the constant threat of illegitimacy, but also have their compromises, including the reproduction of heteronormalising effects (Neary 2017b). Many LGBTQI+ teachers maintain tight control over relations with students and parents because of the unpredictability of student and parent attitudes and beliefs. For some, this adversely affects their pastoral relationships with students (Neary 2017a; Hooker 2019), but others negotiate these relations with transformative effects for students (Mayo 2008). Some LGBTQI+ teachers even resort to leaving the teaching profession (Jones et al. 2014; Connell 2015).

Many teachers appear to feel an acute pedagogical responsibility to be a LGBTQI+ 'role model' (Russell 2010; Connell 2015). Such acts have been analysed for their refusal of victimhood and transformative potential (Ferfolja 2007; Wells 2017), but the imperative to 'come out' places inordinate responsibility on

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and poses further risks for the already potentially vulnerable LGBTQI+ teacher (Neary 2013; Meyer et al. 2015; Wells 2017). It can have essentialising and normalising effects (Khayatt 1997; Mayo 2014) and can silence the notion that disclosure is not possible or desirable for everyone (Rasmussen 2004). Moreover, taking another angle on 'coming out' in education, Brockenbrough (2012, p. 759) explains how Black queer male teachers "dimmed the spotlight on their queerness" and thus maintained a masculine authority with and connectedness to their students, instead taking up subtle and strategic opportunities to enact anti-homophobic resistances.

A significant theme in research with LGBTQI+ teachers internationally is the impact of policy and legislative frameworks. Across contexts, structural factors such as strong school leadership, combined with LGBTQI+ inclusive policy, have a positive impact for LGBTQI+ teachers (Ferfolja and Hopkins 2013). Changes in legislation have also been cited as crucial (Ferfolja 2009). Some research highlights how when anti-discrimination legislative protection has been introduced, LGBTQI+ teachers describe new feelings of safety and security (Ferfolja 2009). Across all contexts, non-permanent or non-tenured teachers are particularly vulnerable, and this is accentuated in contexts where legislative gaps remain (Neary 2013; Fahie 2016). Legislative deficiencies are felt in potent ways by LGBTQI+ teachers in religious or faith schools across the globe. Religious exemptions give legislative power and credence to the concept of religious ethos in schools (Neary 2013; Fahie 2016, 2017). In several contexts, religious exemptions have resulted in the dismissal of LGBTQI+ teachers on ethos grounds (see, for example, Callaghan 2015). Through religious exemptions, heteronormativity is maintained and a kind of 'holy homophobia' is facilitated (Callaghan 2015). In contexts such as Ireland, where there is such intertwining of church and state in education, religious exemptions take on a particularly stark hue. Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act 1998/2004 protected schools against unfair dismissal or recruitment litigation in cases where the purpose was to maintain the religious ethos of an institution under religious patronage. While Section 37.1 was never used in court, it historically acted as a 'chill factor' for LGBTQI+ teachers, bolstering heterosexism and homophobia (Fahie 2016).

This chapter presents three key themes from a meta-analysis of four separate qualitative studies exploring the everyday lives and concerns of LGBTQI+ teachers in Ireland between 2010 and 2019.[2] First, I outline key methodological details. Following this I outline and discuss three meta-themes: 'heteronormative politics of visibility and legitimacy', 'age-appropriateness and childhood innocence' and 'religious identifications and structures'. Finally, I raise pertinent questions for teacher education and the teaching profession.

16.2 Methodology

The illustrative data drawn upon in this chapter have arisen from four studies conducted since 2010 in Ireland. Study A (2010) was a small qualitative study comprising in-depth interviews with 8 lesbian and gay teachers, exploring their

experiences of 'coming out' in their school contexts. Study B (2011–2014) was an in-depth qualitative study that included 15 LGB teachers who were entering into a Civil Partnership (CP) (the relationship structure that existed for same-sex couples prior to Marriage Equality). In this study, teachers took part in a first interview and then completed diary entries across a 6-week period, followed by a second interview. Study C (2015) was conducted during the Marriage Equality Referendum and focused on school leaders', teachers' and parents' perspectives on preventing homophobia and transphobia in primary schools. Semi-structured interviews took place with 6 school leaders and 12 teachers, and six focus groups were conducted with a total of 28 parents. Finally, Study D was a thematic analysis of LGB teachers' stories and testimonies in the mainstream Irish media between 2012 and 2019. These accounts captured 17 LGB teachers' voices ranging from those who contributed to media outlets anonymously, to those who were publicly visible through their advocacy work in the LGBT teachers' union groups. In total, the voices of 43 LGB teachers were captured across these studies. Unfortunately, the voices of trans, non-binary or intersex teachers were not captured empirically. I proceed, nevertheless, with using the term LGBTQI+ throughout because to do otherwise runs the risk of erasing trans and gender-diverse identities. The four studies capture a rich snapshot of LGB teachers' lives in a time of rapid change with regard to the politics of sexuality and gender in Ireland.

16.3 Findings

16.3.1 Heteronormative Politics of Visibility and Legitimacy

Aligned with the field of work with LGBTQI+ teachers internationally, LGBTQI+ teachers across the four studies I have conducted in Ireland describe constant self-surveillance work to manage their identities at school. Of course, all teachers manage personal/professional, public/private relations at school, but there are extra layers of work for LGBTQI+ teachers because the politics of visibility and appropriateness at school hinge on silent and invisible heterosexual and cisgender norms. Under such conditions, teachers are largely presumed to be heterosexual or cisgender and must 'come out' in order to be recognised as otherwise. Some choose to remain silent, and these teachers talk about the extra vulnerabilities that this silence causes. For example, some teachers describe situations where they overhear casual homophobia. Others even describe situations in the past where their secrecy was manipulated by others to control and maintain silence around their LGBTQI+ identity. Even when they do come out, LGBTQI+ teachers continue to carefully negotiate the silent heteronormative and cisgender logics of what is appropriate for discussion at school: "I'm not going to be kind of shying away from it … Saying that, I'm not going to be waving a flag either" (Steve, Educate Together Primary, Study B). Many work extremely hard to hone their professional effectiveness and classroom management and are acutely aware that this is part of protecting themselves in the event that their LGBTQI+ identification delegitimises them in some way. In the absence of an official announcement, there is continuous work involved in 'coming out' to people in school communities. Furthermore, many oscillate

between thinking and worrying about who knows what, and a kind of defiant positionality and pride in identifying as LGBTQI+. This is particularly intense work for early career, non-permanent teachers whose precarious working conditions make them extra conscious and watchful of the heteronormative, cisnormative personal/professional divide governing the teaching profession:

> If I was permanent, I probably wouldn't be afraid then that I'd lose my job … if I was permanent/full-time I would not have hidden the fact that I was gay … It would give me some sense of security that I wouldn't be unemployed because I said I was gay. So, it does make a difference.
>
> (Elaine, Catholic Second-level, Study B)

Legislative changes in recent years in Ireland have had an impact on the ways that some teachers can negotiate their visibility at school. Celebratory traditions such as engagement announcements, wedding presents and cakes have opened up to LGBTQI+ teachers. For some teachers, this has been the very structure that has facilitated their 'coming out' process, and many describe surprise and joy at the reactions of their colleagues. Such changing politics of visibility are indeed empowering for some but, for others, they signal a reliance on a particular kind of relationship structure, one that is coupled and conforms to the heteronormative legitimising structure of marriage: "the women who were straight problematised the whole thing … 'what are you going to wear? Who is the best man? Who is this …', you know, they read the whole thing as a straight wedding" (Richard, ETB Second-level, Study B). Some teachers describe difficulties fitting within this heteronormalizing/homonormalising framework on offer and note the conforming work that they do in return for their legislative recognition and collegial supports. Such dynamics of gratefulness signal the power relations at work and the ways in which spaces like schools continue to orientate around heterosexuality and cisgenderism. These dynamics also signal the continued difficulties for those who fall outside of this homonormative/cisnormative frame. They remind us of the power of the politics of respectability and legitimacy at work in and through schools, pulling some LGBTQI+ people into the charmed circle of inclusion while 'others', such as trans and nonbinary people, or those who identify as bisexual, pansexual or polyamorous, fail to be visible or apprehended.

16.3.2 Childhood Innocence, Age-Appropriateness and Student/Teacher Boundaries

A powerful meta-theme intersecting all four studies concerns the way that discourses of childhood innocence and age-appropriateness cause reluctance and silence. This is particularly potent for LGBTQI+ primary school teachers who are always cognisant of the unpredictability associated with how knowledge of their sexuality or gender identity will be understood and perceived by young children and their parents. When they are made visible in primary schools, LGBTQI+ people are most commonly represented within negative or punitive anti-bullying frameworks. School leaders and teachers describe reluctances around what is

appropriate for discussion at what age. The legacy of overly biological and heavily outsourced education around Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) contributes to and reproduces uncertainties and confusion around what is suitable for discussion in primary schools. One gay principal explains one point of tension here: "homosexuality is perceived as not child friendly … it's [understood as] something that is completely sexualised and … that isn't child friendly, the sex part of it isn't child friendly". Some teachers even experience overt homophobia from children but the power of their fears around being openly LGBTQI+ at school result in inaction and further silence. These fears appear to be experienced particularly potently by gay men primary school teachers who have the extra threatening layer of reductive ideas around gay men's sexuality, mixed with historically internalised fears around accusations of paedophilia. One teacher talks about his cautiousness:

> I'd be scared that some parents know, being a male teacher as well you just have to be very careful. And being male and gay, just, you get this caution about you to be careful and don't say too much in class or bring too much or your personal self into the class. You try separate yourself a little bit.
>
> (Donnacha, Catholic Primary, Study C)

Such fears spill over into second-level schools too, as some LGBTQI+ teachers describe concerns about the subtle, normalised working of homophobia at school and the unpredictability of young people's as well as parents' reactions and attitudes towards gender and sexuality diversity.

At both primary and post-primary level, most teachers struggle with conflicts between the pedagogical impact of being open about their LGBTQI+ identification and their tendencies towards self-preservation. On the one hand, teachers describe strong desires to be visible and open LGBTQI+ role models for children and young people who are identifying as LGBTQI+ and to take up opportunities to teach about gender and sexuality diversity at school. On the other hand, however, they display a constant tempering of these desires as they struggle to manage the potential risks involved. This careful consideration of student/teacher boundaries has impacts for developing pastoral relations with their students. Some invest heavily in discipline strategies that prevent students straying into personal questions, but this watchfulness has subtle and lasting effects for the shape of their rapport with their students, as one teacher explained:

> … one teacher—because we were pair teaching together—the ease with which she was able to speak about her family, her husband and her children, it's fantastic, because when you, it helps build your relationship with the kids, not only with your colleagues, but being able to talk about yourself you … actually helps build a better relationship with the children.
>
> (Fiona, Catholic Primary, Study A)

Again, these boundaries are policed particularly closely by those in precarious, non-permanent employment. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are more examples of

teachers doing pedagogical work to interrupt heteronormativity and cisnormativity in second-level schools, and legislative changes such as Marriage Equality appear to have given a legitimising frame through which this kind of equality work can be done. However, the emotional work of putting their own identities front and centre in their teaching, coupled with the risk associated with their work being read as furthering a personal agenda at school, cannot be ignored.

16.3.3 Religious Structures and Identifications

As aforementioned, Section 37.1 is a religious exemption clause in the Employment Equality Act 1998/2004 in Ireland that, in its original form, permitted schools to recruit and dismiss teachers using 'religious ethos' as a legitimate criterion. LGB teachers across these four studies described fearing Section 37.1 and the power of religious ethos in some Irish schools. Section 37.1 has undoubtedly contributed to the silences around gender and sexuality diversity in many school contexts. Some teachers described worries regarding employment status, and some teachers explained that they had invested in backup careers. As many LGB teachers began entering into Civil Partnerships (CP) between 2011 and 2015 and some were involved in political campaigns, they were acutely conscious that there was risk with regard to Section 37.1:

> I think the Board of Management would have said 'Look, you have a teacher on the staff, she had a CP and she's here in a Catholic school. And she really is … upfront about her CP … which is contrary really to the Catholic 'ethos' and what are we going to do about it as a Board?'
>
> (Darina, Catholic Primary, Study B)

Following many years of campaigning, Section 37.1 was amended in 2015, explicitly cross-referencing the nine equality grounds (including 'sexual orientation') on which discrimination is not permitted. However, mirroring EU law, an 'occupational requirement' clause was inserted, explaining that

> … a religious organisation shall not be taken to discriminate against a person … by giving favourable treatment on the religion ground to an employee or a prospective employee where the religion or belief of the employee constitutes a justified occupational requirement.
>
> (cf. Employment Equality (Amendment) Act, 2015)

This clause, intended to protect religious freedom in the patronage of a minority of European schools, has very different connotations in a country where 96 percent of primary schools are under religious patronage and teachers are required to teach religion in a faith formation model. And so, many of the same ambiguities that surrounded Section 37.1 continue to linger. Such ambiguities, combined with the long-lasting effects of legislatively legitimised discrimination, are such

that 'religious ethos' continues to reproduce reluctances around gender and sexuality diversity in school communities. Further, the reluctances, silences and compromises that abound continue to have a significant impact on the everyday lives of many LGBTQI+ teachers:

> The law is changed but there are still schools where you feel you cannot be yourself. I now have permanency, and this is the first time I've been openly out and comfortable being out as a gay woman … it's 2018 … Do I show who I really am, or do I protect my job?
>
> (Member of INTO LGBT Teachers' Group, Study D)

Thus, while the magnetic pull to the promise of legislation is strong, the teachers across these four studies reveal the limited reach of legislation in the face of deeply cultural and institutionalised heteronormativity and cisnormativity. This is further complicated in Ireland by the ways in which these deeply engrained logics are fundamentally intertwined with a kind of Catholic normativity that is also embedded in the structure of the Irish education system. The teachers in these studies inevitably embody a Catholic cultural habitus, and this was particularly evident as some teachers entered into CPs and marriages. Some LGBTQI+ teachers had themselves been in religious life, while several teachers described having deep religious faith. For many teachers, their religious affiliations and/or relationships with their faith orientated them towards religiously inflected ceremonies in celebrating their CPs/marriages. Some also believed that Irish society continued to signal certain marriage frames as more legitimate than others and were acutely conscious of this in approaching their own celebrations. All of these complications further reveal the limits of an orientation towards secularism as a solution for LGBTQI+ inclusion.

16.4 Discussion and Conclusion

Clearly, several themes across the four studies referenced in this chapter echo themes in the research internationally. The extent of the work done by LGBTQI+ teachers in Ireland, in managing a personal/professional divide that is unique to the teaching profession, is a resounding feature of the work LGBTQI+ teachers do everywhere. We are also left in little doubt about the particularly layered vulnerabilities of early career teachers who are in precarious employment.

So, what are the pertinent questions for the teaching profession? Building on and aligned with the work of some who point out the limits of policy solutions that are enacted in reactive and tokenistic ways (Gray et al. 2016; Rudoe 2018), and those who note that enacting anti-discrimination legislation is no guarantor of LGBTQI+ teachers feeling safer (Ferfolja 2009; Connell 2015; Heinz et al. 2017; Lee 2019), the findings from the four studies presented in this chapter caution against an over-reliance on policy or legislative solutions for LGBTQI+ teachers. The watchful, self-surveillance work that they do to achieve an appropriate visibility and legitimacy at school underlines how the personal/professional divide of the

teaching profession hinges on the presumption of heterosexuality. The work that teachers do in return for the acceptance and legitimacy they receive via their CPs/marriage also reveals the power dynamics that are at play as LGBTQI+ inclusion is approached in schools. These dynamics impart powerful lessons about the limits of simplistic solutions for approaching these issues and remind us to stay with the complexity of gender and sexuality at school. Echoing some scholars who have noted the limits of anti-discrimination legislation as a mechanism for improving the lives of LGBTQI+ teachers (Khayatt 1997), my research has provided an illustrative example across time in focusing on Section 37.1. A legislative issue that remained at the heart of union campaigns for many years and that many teachers worked to change, has, as predicted by several teachers, not just magically 'disappeared' the ways that religious ethos polices the lives of many LGBTQI+ teachers. Furthermore, many stakeholders are drawn towards secularism as a solution for questions of gender and sexuality diversity, but the ambivalent attachments that LGBTQI+ teachers have to religion, coupled with the ways in which religiosity is inextricable from the ways that normativity and legitimacy operate in some contexts, reveals such orientations as cruel fantasies. These findings alert us to a need for close attention to the nuances of these cultural factors at work in schools and help to orientate us sideways from the simplifying, teleological allure of policy and legislation. A final aspect that my research with LGBTQI+ teachers has underscored is the powerful ways that discourses of childhood innocence and age-appropriateness work to hold back progress with regard to gender and sexuality diversity. The effect is such that many schools—primary schools in particular—continue to render LGBTQI+ people invisible, and their lives and identities are not seen in positive terms but are instead predominantly reflected within punitive and negative frameworks of bullying (Bryan and Mayock 2012; Ging and Neary 2019).

Teacher education presents itself as an ideal site to explicate and complicate some of these fine-grained dynamics of gender and sexuality diversity. Such education needs to continue to attend to the workings of diversity at school and to prepare teachers to educate for gender and sexuality diversity. In doing this, however, we need to resist the slippage into neoliberal, identitarian models of recognition that seek acceptance and tolerance and achieve legitimacy and normalisation for some whilst excluding others. Such reductions can fail to reflect the spectrum of gender and sexuality identities and can have the effect of bolstering the logics of heteronormativity and cisnormativity rather than destabilising them. I believe that consideration of emotion and affect are central to this work, and I have argued elsewhere for a *queer pedagogy of emotion* (Neary 2020) in teacher education. Following Quinlivan (2018), who explicates the generative potential of attending closely to emotionality in pedagogical situations, a *queer pedagogy of emotion* puts emotionality at the heart of teaching about diversity. Instead of a focus on including the 'other' or respecting difference, exploring the ways that humans have common feelings and emotions across borders and differences can sidestep some of the conundrums of identity politics. Furthermore, approaching this work *queerly* involves a continuous commitment to staying with dissonance, tension and discomfort—concepts that will always abound when teaching about gender and sexuality diversity.

Note

1 The acronym LGBTQI+ is used throughout to refer to a spectrum of gender and sexuality identities.
2 This chapter aims to provide an overview of meta-themes across four studies I have conducted in Ireland. For further empirical and methodological detail, see: Study 1 (Neary 2013); Study 2 (Neary et al. 2018; Neary, Irwin-Gowran and McEvoy 2016; Neary 2017a, 2017b, 2020); Study 3 (Neary and Rasmussen 2020); and Study 4 (Neary 2020).

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