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Paper Title: Lesbian and gay teachers' experiences of 'coming out' in Irish schools

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Introduction

Heterosexuality is presumed and 'encoded in language, in institutional practices and the encounters of everyday life' (Epstein and Johnson 1994, 198) even though the battles of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex (LGBTQI)[1] movement worldwide have reshaped some of our basic social institutions such as family, marriage and work (Bernstein, Marshall and Barclay 2009). Butler (1990) outlines society as operating within a heterosexual matrix; a 'grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders and desires are naturalised' (Butler 1990, 151). This matrix is a hegemonic system that assumes that for bodies to make sense, gender must be a stable concept that is structured and defined through the practice of compulsory heterosexuality (Butler 1999; Rich 1981). Warner (1993) coined the term heteronormativity to denote the normalising processes which support heterosexuality as 'the very model of inter-gender relations' (Warner 1993, xxi). These systems and processes render lesbian and gay sexualities as 'other', while in most forms,

[1]I use the acronym LGBTQI throughout this paper in general commentary about sexual identities alternative to the norm of heterosexuality. However, when referring to empirical research, I use the terms with which the participants identified.

heterosexuality is unnamed, unexamined and needs no justification because it is normalised (Jackson 1999).

LGB teachers face many complexities and challenges in their professional lives (Griffin 1992; Harbeck 1992; Khayatt 1992; Epstein and Johnson 1994; 1998; Ferfolja 2008). In Ireland, LGB teachers have struggled with managing their sexual identity in a context where policing of normative sexual identities has resulted in deep silences and misrepresentation (Gowran 2004; Lynch 2001). Drawing on qualitative research with eight self-identified lesbian and gay teachers who have engaged with the process of disclosure or 'coming out' in their schools in Ireland, this paper provides new insight into how sexuality is shaped in an education system that has embodied a unique and complex relationship between church and state.

Context

Sexuality and education

Sexuality has always been in an 'uncomfortable relationship' with schooling (Youdell 2005, 251). Mirroring wider societal attitudes, the Irish education system has played a central role in policing and reproducing norms of (hetero)sexuality through practices of silence, non-recognition and misrepresentation that impact on both students and teachers (O' Carroll and Szalacha 2000; Lodge and Lynch 2004; O' Higgins-Norman 2004; O' Higgins-Norman, Galvin and McNamara 2006; Minton et al. 2008; O' Higgins-Norman 2009). There have been some efforts to address sexuality issues in Irish schools. The Department of Education and Skills introduced the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme in 1995 as an aspect of the Social, Personal and Health Education subject. This programme aims to promote an understanding of sexuality while fostering positive attitudes towards one's own sexuality (S.P.H.E. Support Service 2011). Although there are no initiatives that address

alternatives to heterosexuality at primary level, there have been several initiatives related to second level schools. The Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) have worked with key education partners and published guidelines for second level school principals, guidance counsellors and teachers on including homophobic bullying in school policies and creating inclusive school environments for LGB people (GLEN 2012). The Equality Authority have also published a report on addressing homophobic bullying in second level schools (Equality Authority 2012).

Despite these efforts, there appears to be a disconnection between policy and its implementation in the everyday practices of second level schools. In 2004, a survey of second-level teachers outlined that 90% of school policies on anti-bullying did not explicitly mention homophobic bullying (O' Higgins-Norman 2004). Minton et al (2008) confirmed that homophobic verbal abuse was frequently experienced by 32.4% of respondents while 30% had been subjected to homophobic bullying in the previous 5 days. With regard to sexuality education, Lodge, Gowran and O' Shea (2008) found that many schools mentioned sexual orientation in their RSE policies but few provided any detail of the content to be followed. In light of research elsewhere that idenitifes a focus on danger prevention and a missing discourse of desire in sexuality education (Allen 2007), it follows that few students in Irish schools actually experienced discussion of LGBTQI issues (O' Higgins-Norman, Galvin and McNamara 2006). Given that second level teachers do not generally receive formal training in RSE until they enter the teaching profession (Mayock, Kitching and Morgan 2007), the lack of involvement of male teachers in subjects such as RSE (Geary, McNamara and Brennan 2007), the difficulties with implementing programmes such as *Exploring Masculinities* (Stoddard 1997) and the lack of attention to the affective domain in education in general (Lynch 2001), it is unsurprising that many parents perceived that teachers lack the necessary expertise to deal with issues of sexuality in Irish second level

schools (Gleeson and McCormack 2010). It also comes as no surprise that schools are deemed to be failing to adequately address issues of sex and sexuality in Ireland (Minton et al. 2008; Dáil na nÓg 2010) while the everyday experiences of LGBTQI teachers and students in Irish schools remain largely unchanged and unseen (Gowran 2004; BeLonGTo 2005).

The Catholic church

The Catholic church is central in considering sexuality in Irish schools (Inglis 1998) given its powerful 'zone of influence' in education (Lynch 1989, 131). In an increasingly secular Irish society, Catholic religious traditions occupy shakier ground [2] and continue to be diluted by the teachings of other religious traditions (Bacik 2004). However, in Ireland at present, 92% of primary schools and 49% of second level schools continue under Catholic patronage. At primary level, the topic of homosexuality is not part of the RSE programme, although teachers may answer questions once they 'articulate the ethos and value system' of the school (Primary Curriculum Support Programme 2007). At second-level, the teaching of RSE is at the discretion of the individual 'school's ethos or characteristic spirit (Department of Education and Skills 2012).

The Catholic church holds very tangible power in employment equality law in Ireland. The Employment Equality Act (1998, 2004) and the Equal Status Act (2000, 2004) have included sexual orientation as one of the nine grounds of discrimination. However, paradoxically, Section 37.1 is an exemption clause of the Employment Equality Act (1998, 2004) that allows dismissal on the grounds of non-compliance with the ethos of an institution. Given the Roman Catholic position on homosexuality (Libreria Edittrice Vaticana 2003), this

[2] The relationship between church and state in Ireland is experiencing turbulent change in the wake of a large-scale cover up of child abuse within the Catholic church and the historically dominant position of the Catholic church within the education system is currently under review. A taskforce has been appointed to oversee the divesting of up to 50% of Irish schools to patronage other than the Catholic church.

clause is of concern for LGBTQI teachers who are employed in schools under Catholic patronage. The primary school teachers' union, Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) set up an LGB teachers' group following the requests of some union members in 2004 and now holds the central political aim of quashing Section 37.1 of the Employment Act (1998, 2004). The group published and disseminated guidelines on creating an inclusive staffroom for all (INTO 2009). The second level teachers unions, Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) and Association of Secondary School Teachers of Ireland (ASTI), subsequently set up support groups for LGB second level teachers. In February 2012, a bill to amend Section 37.1 was published but it was defeated in the Seanad (Senate) in May. Meetings are convened regularly between these three teachers' groups as they attempt to keep the deletion of Section 37.1 firmly on the public agenda.

LGBTQI teachers

Although there is a dearth of research on the experiences of gay and lesbian educators (Duke 2008), some international research has been concerned with LGBTQI teachers' experiences of their school environments. In the U.S., Griffin (1992) noted that fewer that ten studies had focused on the experiences of LG educators. The U.S. had historically legislated against homosexual teachers, however, definitions of 'immoral' conduct were changing as sexual mores were evolving (Harbeck 1992). Much of the research that followed explored how LGB teachers negotiated their everyday lives and found they employed identity management strategies in their school environments (Griffin 1992; Harbeck 1992). Research in Canada and the UK highlighted the complexity of the teaching profession for LGB teachers in particular because teachers were hired as 'models of the ideological values they represent' (Khayatt 1992, 146) and as moral guardians living 'exemplary' lives (Epstein and Johnson 1998, 123). More recent research in Australia (Ferfolja 2007a; 2007b; 2008; 2009) explored

lesbian harassment and the workings of heteronormativity and heterosexism in schools while acknowledging the processes of resistance employed by these teachers in negotiating their sexual subjectivities.

There has been just one empirical study dealing with LG teachers' professional lives published in the Irish context (Gowran, 2004). This study outlined the silence and secrecy that surrounds LG primary and post-primary school teachers and highlighted the processes of self-censorship and strategies of identity management they employed. However, further investigation of LGBTQI teachers' experiences is paramount, not just to provide LGBTQI students with much needed public role models (Forest 2000) but to interrogate hierarchies of sexuality and challenge processes of heteronormativity, heterosexism and homophobia in Irish schools.

The process of 'coming out'

Despite a myriad of constraints, many teachers engage with a process of 'coming out' or disclosure in their school environments. Griffin (1992) identified a continuum of disclosure in the U.S. that illustrates how teachers range from passing as heterosexual, to covering and hiding sexuality, to being implicitly out and to being explicitly out in their schools. Along this continuum, each teacher operates at different levels and holds different motives and ideals. Consequently, this process is more public for some than others.

The concept of 'coming out' in school contexts has been informed by queer theoretical approaches (Rasmussen 2004; Youdell 2004; 2005). Rasmussen (2004) cites problems with valorising the act of 'coming out' as a political action and criticises giving privileged status to the LGB teacher who is 'out'. Youdell (2005) articulates how identity categories shape and constitute subjects, subjecting them to 'relations of power circulating within the discursive practices that frame a particular context' (Youdell 2005, 252).

However, although acutely aware of the dangers of identity politics, the political necessity and merit of the identity category as a political platform has also been highlighted (Butler, 1991; 1995; Rasmussen; 2009).

This research sought to explore LGBTQI primary and second level teachers' experiences of 'coming out' or disclosing a sexual identity alternative to heterosexuality in their school environments in Ireland. The central question guiding this research was: how are LGBTQI teachers negotiating their teacher identity while engaging with the process of 'coming out' in their school contexts in Ireland?

Approaching and theorising teachers' experiences of 'coming out'

Feminist standpoint theory presents the idea that those who are oppressed have a unique source of insight into social relations; a 'double consciousness' where they can produce knowledge about their own situation as well as the structures that place restraints on their existence (Harding 2004). An epistemological alignment with a revised conception of feminist standpoint theory - where experiences are the starting point in the production of knowledge about the structures that perpetuate privilege -helped shape the methodological approach to this project (Harding 2004).

In this research, the experiences of lesbian and gay teachers were the starting point for knowledge production and the approach to this project was qualitative, inductive and interpretive (Patton 1990; Miles and Huberman 1994). The research sample consisted of eight teachers ranging in age from 27 to 54. Snowball sampling (Patton 1990) was used through initially contacting personal contacts as well as the chairperson of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) LGB group. The sample consisted of six female and two male teachers, five were teachers at primary level and three at second level. All the primary school teachers were employed in schools that were under religious patronage. One second

level teacher was employed in a school under religious patronage. Four of the five primary school teachers were prominent members of the INTO LGB Group. All of the teachers identified as either lesbian or gay. It is not assumed that this sample is representative of primary and second level teachers in Ireland, nor is it assumed that generalisations might be made from their perspectives (Miles and Huberman 1994). Rather, the findings of this research are the starting points of a conversation about the complexity of everyday life for LGBTQI teachers in Ireland.

Data collection involved a one-to-one semi-structured interview with each of the eight teachers, each approximately one hour in duration (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). A thematic analysis approach (Patton 1990; Miles and Huberman 1994) was used in the interpretation of the data. Data were initially coded by reading and re-reading the transcripts. The codes were then merged and reorganised through re-examining the content of each code and looking for similarities and differences. Finally, codes were clustered to produce categories and from these categories, two main themes were constructed in relation to the central research question. Pseudonyms were assigned to preserve anonymity and member checking involved initial sharing of interview transcripts with participants and subsequent sharing of findings with the INTO LGB group.

Teachers' experiences of 'coming out' in Irish schools

The teachers' experiences of negotiating their teacher identities while engaging with the process of disclosure in their schools are presented around two key themes. These themes are: 1. Identity Conflicts 2. Struggles with School Culture. Far from being monolithic entities, these themes and the elements within them exist as overlapping dimensions that are constitutive of each other. Their interconnectedness is a testament to the complexity of the process of disclosure within which these teachers operate. In the following sections, each

theme is presented and discussed separately in relation to key literature. Subsequently, an overall discussion attempts to weave these threads together to address the complexity of the process of disclosure.

Theme 1: Identity conflicts

All of the teachers in this research described identity conflicts related to their sexuality that affected their day-to-day lives as teaching professionals in Irish schools. This section presents the various conflicts that these teachers experienced in their negotiation of their teacher identity. Although preceded by either/or questions, the teachers' experiences presented are confirmation of the instability of these apparent polarities.

Professional or personal?

Many teachers in this research articulated difficulties with what they perceived as the line separating their professional and personal identity. Most outlined the teaching profession itself as posing unique difficulties for teachers who do not comply with the heterosexual norm. Typical descriptions included the school as a 'closet' that provoked 'stifling' feelings. Some teachers felt restricted by the teaching profession and experimented with other occupations: 'I went and marched in my first Gay Pride in Dublin…I wouldn't have done it as a teacher…I thought there was a greater freedom outside the teaching profession' (Mairéad, Primary School Teacher). Several teachers were aware of negative attitudes in Irish society about the suitability of the teaching profession for LGBTQI people and one teacher experienced this discrimination directly: 'one of the teachers in an adjoining school in the parish went to…. the manager of my school and said a lesbian should not be teaching' (Anna, Primary School Teacher).

Some teachers referred to the difficulties caused by a 'split between public and private' identities (Anna, Primary School Teacher) while others offered a menu of identities, depending on the suitability of the person: 'it's like an onion layer…with some teachers you might just be talking on the top layer and with others you might go a layer deeper' (Catherine, Post- Primary School Teacher).

Several teachers expressed frustrations at wanting to be a good role model for the students while managing their own personal identity in the process. One second level teacher was asked to help some students in forming a support group for LGBTQI students but, like other teachers in this research, worried about being perceived as the gay teacher that deals with gay issues: 'nor do I want to be known as the gay teacher who the gay kids go to if they have a gay problem because that could ghettoise it even more to be honest!' (Seán, Second Level Teacher). Many expressed a real concern that their pastoral and affective relationships with the students were seriously influenced by their fear of being seen by the school and parents as 'recruiting' for the LGBTQI community (Róisín, Second Level Teacher).

To disclose or not to disclose?

The teachers in this research held different motives for disclosure and approached this process in different ways. Some teachers disclosed to other teachers so they might gain support in avoiding 'awkward conversations' or incidents (Catherine, Second Level Teacher) while others articulated a sense of vulnerability and isolation in hiding their sexual identity and referred to the invisibility that forced them towards the process of disclosure in search of visibility:

> One teacher on the staff when I was principal…she disagreed with a decision about classes so she went over to the other school and said she thought I was gay

> and I had made a pass at her and I heard it back. But I was absolutely scared out of my wits whereas if I had been open and said - yes I am a lesbian, I didn't make a pass at you, you disagreed with it - there'd have been nothing to go and tell….But because I wasn't open at that stage, I think it made my position more vulnerable (Anna, Primary School Teacher)

The personal and political value of disclosure in the process of change was recognised by all teachers. On a personal level, some teachers wanted to be 'honest' (Amy, Primary School Teacher) with their colleagues or thought that they would not be 'authentic' beings if they were silent: 'if I'm … a champion for justice and human rights but I'm not completely out myself, well then I'm a bit of a fraud (Róisín, Second Level Teacher). Other teachers were more politically orientated in their approach to disclosure. The teachers who were prominent members of the INTO LGB group displayed a sense of certainty and pride and a commitment to change that wasn't as consistently evident in the testimonies of the other teachers. They worried about younger teachers who hadn't the same security of tenure and displayed confident and fearless attitudes: 'if any issue comes up about sexuality or if any issue of bullying comes up or anything I'm actually able to discuss it much more openly' (Darragh, Primary School Teacher). One teacher's sense of pride in being open is particularly poignant:

> I think I'd have been very disappointed if I retired from teaching and that I didn't get the chance to be a teacher who is a lesbian…And it makes me just easier in myself as a person. If I think they'd dismiss me, I now say, let them, let them take me on (Anna, Primary School Teacher)

All teachers recognised the political importance of disclosure as a mechanism for affecting change in society. Many believed that meaningful, personal connections with people on an individual basis helped break down the societal stigma attached to alternatives to heterosexuality.

Privacy or secrecy?

The issue of privacy arose among many of the teachers. Several were adamant about the right to a private life: 'you don't bring private things up in the staffroom' (Seán, Second Level Teacher). However, others acknowledged the concept of privacy as a repressive force: 'you're private life's your private life but that doesn't mean you live in secret' (Mairéad, Primary School Teacher). Here, although privacy offers 'a form of protection against discrimination, it also obscures the inequities experienced by lesbian and gay teachers in the public sphere of the school' (Sparkes 1994, 111). However, some teachers even found that the normalising power of privacy did not disappear following disclosure. One teacher disclosed to her colleague and was met with a 'reassurance' that she 'wouldn't tell anybody'. This left the teacher in a state of disillusionment: 'Please tell people, it would make my life easier!' (Fiona, Primary School Teacher). Following disclosure to some or all members of staff, several teachers witnessed a reorganisation of the hierarchical power entrenched in heterosexuality where colleagues were now conscious and careful not to 'offend' (Mairéad, Primary School Teacher) or afraid to 'put their foot in it' (Fiona, Primary School Teacher) because of this new information. In these ways, the colleagues of these teachers were formative actors in policing the boundaries of heterosexuality through the perpetuation of new silences in the staffroom environment.

Defiant or worried?

Most teachers suffered internal conflict that betrayed an outward pride or certainty of purpose. Even following disclosure, continuous self-policing, self-consciousness and sensitivity characterise these teachers' delicately balanced negotiation of school life. These processes took their toll and many teachers at times embraced an attitude that was defiant of the heterosexual imperative while being conversely worried about the judgement of others. A telling example can be found in one teacher's assertion that if people had negative attitudes towards alternative sexualities 'it's their own problem' while he privately worried that the children in his school would be bullied by children from other schools because of his sexuality (Darragh, Primary School Teacher). Also, the language used by many teachers in relation to disclosure confirmed that they both expected and accepted the judgement of others: 'I'm afraid of the initial reaction' (Róisín, Second Level Teacher); 'All the girls (colleagues) have been lovely about it' (Amy, Primary School Teacher). Another teacher even wondered whether he was overly sensitive about the issue of homophobic comments:

> I have tackled it and I don't know whether maybe I've jumped in too fast sometimes or maybe I've been a little…I don't think I've been defensive… (Seán, Second Level Teacher)

The complex interplay between outward defiance/resistance and internal anxiety/fear raises necessary questions about the extent to which teachers have internalised the discourses of heternormativity in ways that obscure their perceptions and shape their decision-making in their school contexts.

Talk or be silent?

The continuously cyclical nature of the disclosure process caused frustration for the teachers. Many continuously attempted to 'engineer' situations where they could disclose and some facetiously wondered how they might tell everyone at once without standing up in the staffroom and making an announcement (Fiona, Primary School Teacher). Many seemed exhausted from the process: 'It is an effort because I think you always have to deal with someone's reaction, where it's so much easier not to bother with that' (Mairéad, Primary School Teacher) and some chose to distance themselves emotionally:

> you limit your conversation because you know if you expand it too much…I'll happily talk about my own sister having her baby or, you know, family weddings…but that's my way of kind of getting in on the rest of the conversation…but don't ask me about my own personal relationship (Fiona, Primary School Teacher)

Articulating the exclusionary nature of staffroom conversations about heterosexual weddings and families and pointing out that negative attitudes to alternative sexualities are not confined to just one generation, all teachers were acutely aware of their vigilant processes of self-surveillance and censorship that monitored what they talked about, how they talked about it and who they chose to talk to about it.

(Un)Balancing the conflicts on the identity tightrope

The complexities apparent in negotiating school life and the deep personal conflicts that these teachers faced in trying to be 'normal and to be natural and to be honest and open' (Seán, Second Level Teacher) illuminate the multifaceted processes of power and privilege at work through both overt and invisible means within the heterosexual imperative. The heterosexual

imperative flows through everyday interactions privileging certain 'sexed' identification while excluding and foreclosing others (Butler 1995). Unquestioned privilege is bestowed upon those who are heterosexual (McIntosh, 1988) and this is epitomised by the idea that those (such as the teachers in this research) must engage in a process of 'coming out' and stating 'what' they are in order to achieve a 'true' sexual identity. In order to do this, they must negotiate the identity tightrope, never fully occupying a safe or secure space within their school environment. They must continuously assess whether they can reveal that part of themselves that is so central to their identity, occupying ambiguous transitory spaces where the consequences of 'remaining true to themselves' – such as the impact on their future careers – remain uncertain. While the value of disclosure to these teachers at a personal level is clear, it is still questionable whether their positioning can withstand the dominant heteronormative discourses shaping the schools in which they teach. These teachers each used a variety of methods to negotiate school life. Each approach was influenced by personal positioning in relation to sexuality but it was also coloured by their individual school contexts. Given the palpable complexity of negotiating an alternative sexual identity, the challenging task of supporting LGBTQI teachers to negotiate their everyday professional lives must involve careful consideration of the culture of individual school contexts.

Theme 2: Struggles with school culture

All of the teachers in this research described overt elements of their school culture that affected their experiences of engaging with the process of disclosure. The Catholic church and school policy were issues raised by the teachers in this research.

The Catholic church

All of the teachers were aware of the powerful position of the Catholic church in education in Ireland. Some were very conscious of the unequivocal position in relation to alternatives to heterosexuality:

> At one stage it was described as an intrinsic moral evil and that homosexual people are disordered. And then the Church moved a bit and said alright you can be homosexual but can't engage in homosexual acts' (Anna, Primary School Teacher).

Others were acutely conscious of the power afforded religious bodies by Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act: 'Because it's a Catholic school, if you're not following…their way of doing things, you might be asked to leave…or put in a position where you didn't feel you were kind of welcome' (Amy, Primary School Teacher).

The teaching of religion in schools was a concern for some teachers. As all primary school teachers taught religion, all developed mechanisms for avoiding certain questions and have found ways to stay 'true' to themselves while teaching the subject but noted difficulties with dealing with interview situations were a member of the clergy sits on the interview panel (Róisín, Second Level Teacher). The issue of the power of the Church is particularly evident in the school where one teacher works:

> One of the girls that I work with got married but didn't have a religious ceremony…she was basically told to keep that quiet…that really shocked me when she told me that because God, if they're that backward about straight people getting married God only knows what they'd be like if something else came up (Amy, Primary School Teacher)

Although all teachers acknowledged the powerful legal and symbolic position of the Catholic church that leaves many LGBTQI teachers feeling very vulnerable in their schools, primary school teachers in this research seemed particularly concerned about Section 37.1.

School policy

Most of the teachers acknowledged that school policy is an extremely important part of the process of deconstructing the privilege of heterosexuality. Some teachers were adamant about the necessity of explicitly mentioning sexual orientation in school policies and described difficulties with the absence of such policies in schools. A lack of official discussion of policies on diversity and inclusiveness meant that some teachers believed they were teaching in hostile environments. One teacher approached the vice-principal about supporting the students in setting up an LGBTQI support group and received the reply: '"Well we don't have a fat club, why would we have a gay club?"' (Róisín, Second Level Teacher).

Vagueness and lack of explicit policy created several difficulties for teachers. Some primary school teachers were reluctant to discuss issues of sexual orientation because of ambiguity around what was appropriate for discussion (Anna, Primary School Teacher). Many teachers identified difficulties with having no official sanction for homophobic bullying: 'I find it hard at times, because you know, the kids make remarks about gay children …and in our school we're not supposed to have much dealings with that' (Amy, Primary School Teacher). As a result, homophobic slurs among students in the school playground were often not reprimanded. They worried that this sent a subtle message that 'it's ok to call a person by this name, and it's ok to use it as a term of offence' (Anna, Primary School Teacher). Other teachers at second level were reluctant to play a supportive role with students because of uncertainties around policy:

> I'd love to be absolutely open with kids, I'd love to feel comfortable enough that if they asked me a personal question and I feel it might help them to know the answer… but I'm not sure how management would feel… (Seán, Second Level Teacher)

Overt and subtle struggles intertwined

The teachers in this research were particularly concerned about the power of the Catholic church in employment equality law and the lack of explicit policy in schools. The fact that three of the four primary school teachers in this research were members of the INTO LGB group and are politicised around quashing Section 37.1 may account for the fact that the primary school teachers seemed more concerned about the impact of Section 37.1. However, the worries and concerns of all teachers regarding the potential for discrimination on the grounds of non-compliance with the religious ethos of the institution confirm the very real threat to the livelihoods of LGBTQI teachers in Ireland. Also, the vagueness of school policy seems to muddy the waters, leaving teachers unsure and unwilling to take on issues around sexuality (O' Higgins-Norman, Galvin and McNamara 2006). And so, it seems clear that if Section 37.1 were repealed or the Catholic church were no longer involved in education in Ireland, the threat felt by these teachers would lessen. It also seems clear that policy explicitly mentioning sexual orientation and homophobic bullying in schools would improve teachers' agency in supporting students and dealing with homophobic bullying.

In schools, homophobia and heterosexism operate in overt and material forms but - as illustrated by the conflicts of the teachers in this research - they also work in subtle 'diverse and slippery forms that can be dismissed, overlooked and ignored' (Browne 2007, 1012). This is a form of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1991) where privilege is legitimated and

maintained 'by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 4). Bourdieu's concepts of the *habitus* and *field* provide insight into the intricacies of the power relations at play for these teachers in their schools. The *habitus* is a web of socially acquired systems of preferences, predispositions and dispositions that are internalised unconsciously and continually defined and regulated by the individual. It is shaped by the economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital available to each individual (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1990). Bourdieu (1990, 1993) viewed society and social life as a series of autonomous and overlapping fields. A field has particular rules, procedures, roles, positions, behaviours and hierarchies and in order for it to function, 'there have to be stakes and people prepared to play the game, endowed with the *habitus* that implies knowledge and recognition of the immanent laws of the field' (Bourdieu 1993, 72). Together with our embodied history, the fields of our experiences create deeply internalised dispositions that generate action. Bourdieu believed that the field of education parallels the social world. Success is determined by how one plays the game and by presenting a convincing correspondence with what is valued.

As heterosexuality is the valued ideal within their schools, successful correspondence is an impossible process for the teachers in this research. Although products of the same education system and subject to the same cultural bias (Gowran 2004), their 'habitus is displaced; a fish out of water (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989, 43). These teachers' staffrooms are desexualised spaces conversely embedded with assumptions of heterosexuality where symbolic messages are received about morals, reputation and respectability that align with the heterosexual imperative. These messages are invisibly deployed defining alternatives to heterosexuality as 'most definitely not respectable' (Skeggs 1997, 122). The internal conflict the teachers experienced in trying to negotiate an identity position that corresponds with what is valued within the heteronormative space of the staffroom illustrates the pain of occupying

this insider/outsider position. Complex identity conflicts, overt heterosexism and the workings of heteronormativity in veiling the social processes and structures (Bourdieu 1991; Skeggs 2004, 23) in their individual school contexts reduced the teachers in this research to a state of incessant self-questioning about the validity and methods of approaching issues of heterosexism and homophobia in their schools. Many also articulated uncertainty around their moral and pastoral relationship with the students, avoided staffroom conversations and opted out of social situations altogether. In this light, it is reasonable to question the extent to which, because of the weight of heteronormativity, these LGBTQI teachers had become complicit in a system that perpetuates heterosexual privilege.

The process of disclosure: chasing the impossible?

It would be spurious to suggest that 'hegemonic heterosexuality passively exists as a form of dominance' (McNay 2004, 185) or that LGBTQI teachers are passive victims of symbolic violence (Clarke 2006; Ferfolja 2007b). Similarly, it must be acknowledged that one does not need to be 'out' in order to have agency (Rasmussen 2004; Ferfolja 2007b). Just as children resist heterogender boundaries (Renold 2006) and LGBTQI students engage in processes of resistance to negotiate their identity positions within hostile learning environments (Quinlivan and Town 1999), LGBTQI teachers are agents who engage with processes of resistance at different levels as they negotiate their identity positions within the school. The teachers in this research have forged 'particular positions of identity for themselves' (Mills 1997, 91) and employed forces of resistance through the techniques of identity management (Gowran 2004; Ferfolja 2007b) and the disclosure act itself.

However, the identity conflicts and struggles with school culture that these teachers faced confirm the process of disclosure as a multifaceted one. The concept of 'coming out' in the school environment has been suggested to be a positive starting point in the

questioning of heteronormativity in society (Sears and Williams 1997; Griffin 1992; Harbeck 1992) and the 'most effective way to change homophobic attitudes is through one-to-one personal contacts' (Williams 1997, 7). Although the continued need for an identity politics in education is acknowledged (Ramussen 2009), the notion of coming out and labelling oneself with a fixed 'lesbian' or gay' identity requires a leap of faith (Butler 1991; Giffney 2009) because as soon as the label is assigned, it conjures up all that has already constituted that label in society, rendering the act of disclosure as both liberating and limiting at the same time. Youdell (2010) articulates the impossibility of this queer/liberal binary and the consequential irresolvability of the process of disclosure. Through practicing an 'uncomfortable reflexivity' she recalls deliberating between a moment of 'coming out'/articulating a 'true' sexual orientation and 'staying in'/hiding (even if that position was resisted) (Youdell 2010, 97). Reflecting upon her attempts to 'do' queer politics in an ethnographic study in a school, she found that the unintelligibility of *queer*, the persistent pull of the coherent subject and the increasing conflation of *who we are* with *what we do* reduced her to a moment of 'outing' despite her intentions (Youdell 2010, 89). The teachers in this research embody this sexual identity conundrum and their experiences of conflict and struggle exemplify the intricate enactment of the heterosexual matrix upon the bodies of those who identify as alternative to the norm of heterosexuality.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented the experiences of teachers who engaged with the process of disclosure within their school contexts in Ireland. Their testimonies paint a vivid and detailed picture of the challenges faced by teachers who do not fit the heterosexual norm. Spurred on by different motives and ideals, most teachers expressed feelings of elation and relief following disclosing to some or all of their colleagues and most saw the potential for change

inherent in the process of disclosure. However, these positive experiences sit uneasily with evidence of internal conflict and extreme self-consciousness, continued difficulties with identity management and potent fears about the influence of the Catholic church in relation their employment contracts. These teachers' experiences provide new insight into the Irish education system as a key site where the intersections of church and state have ensured the societal inscription of the heterosexual matrix. This – coupled with the intelligible evidence of the difficulties associated with the irresolvability of the process of disclosure – incite the urgent need for inquiry into how policy is enacted within local contexts with consideration of the unique position held by the Catholic church within the Irish education system. However, it is clear that policy changes and investigations into levels of religious influence alone will not change the everyday lives of individual LGBTQI teachers and students. Change at this level will depend on a shift in thinking around alternatives to heterosexuality and the creation of new spaces to 'resist, subvert and reimagine' everyday realities within teacher education (Ryan 2011); a reimagining of queer identity politics for education (Talburt and Ramussen 2010; Youdell 2010). It will be necessary to (re)educate school communities through whole-school approaches that interrupt assumptions around heterosexuality, uncover silences and break down the dangerous stereotypes and misrepresentations that have been the tools of the heterosexual imperative. The positive experiences of being part of a network such as the INTO LGB group also draw attention to the need for LGBTQI teachers to be supported as they negotiate their everyday professional lives. Because, as long as LGBTQI teachers continue to experience internal and external, overt and invisible challenges 'managing' their sexual identity in the teaching profession, heterosexism and homophobia will remain the problem of the few rather than the many (Sparkes, 1994) and little progress can be expected in the creation of an education system that actually prioritises the promotion of equity and inclusion.

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