

Exploring Performances of LGBTQ Sexualities in Irish Primary Schools

Darragh Horgan

Professional Master of Education

Marino Institute of Education

I graduated in 2011 from UCD with a BA in Sociology, English and a Structured Elective in Social Justice. The following year I further pursued my interest in gender, sexuality and queer theory through the Masters in Women, Gender and Society in UCD. I most recently graduated from the PME in Marino, where I have had the opportunity to allow my interest to be further broadened to its intersection with education. This keen curiosity has been a constant drive of my academic career. This hunger to critically understand how oppressive structures work, and as such destabilise them has been a drive through this research. I am currently working as a teacher with Senior Infants.

KEYWORDS: Sexuality, Performance, Queer Pedagogy, Primary Education

INTRODUCTION

This research set out to explore the performances of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer) sexualities in a selection of Irish Primary Schools in 2019, looking specifically at how performances of sexuality are negotiated by teachers. When looking at the experience of Irish LGBTQ teachers, it is necessary to examine the educational context in Ireland and the influence of legislative change particularly the Marriage Equality Referendum, the Gender Recognition Act and the Amendment to 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act (EEA) enacted in 2015. It is also necessary to provide a brief description of the theoretical orientation that underpins this research, queer theory. I explore this shortly, but queer here is understood to be an ideology which seeks to critically examine normativity and in the process be liberated from oppressive ideologies.

In conducting this research, I sought to add a queer perspective to the current literature in the fields of education and sexuality (Neary, 2013, 2014, 2016; Egan, 2016). Performances of sexuality are examined with a lens of authenticity and a specific focus on four key anchors that influence how LGBTQ teachers perform their sexuality in an educational context: security of tenure, school climate, authentic disclosures and authentic performances. For the purpose of this brief research article, I examine the influence of security of tenure and authentic disclosures using empirical data from study participants. The intersection between these anchors and the other anchors themselves are developed in more depth in my thesis.

CONTEXT

EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

The development of Ireland's education landscape has been closely interwoven with the Catholic church for much of our recent history (Inglis, 1997). Roughly 90% of Irish primary schools and 50% of secondary schools are under Catholic patronage, (DES, 2015; Coolahan, Hussey & Kilfeather, 2012). Alternative models of patronage are slowly entering into the educational field (Darmody, Smyth & McCoy, 2012), facilitated by the New School Establishment Group who understand parental preference as the means of supplying patronage to schools (DES, 2019).

All schools must teach according to the ethos of the school Patrons. In the majority of Irish primary schools, this is a Catholic ethos. Ethos is understood to be the "distinctive range of values and beliefs, which define the philosophy or atmosphere of an organisation" (Darmody et al., 2012, p. 3). Ethos infiltrates and trickles down into how the school operates and effects how the school operates (Monahan, 2000). Teachings of the Catholic Church state that homosexuality is sinful and "always a violation of divine and natural law" (Carr, 2004). Heteronormativity is therefore the norm, which can be understood as a presumption that heterosexuality is "the very model of inter-gender relations" (Warner 1993, p. xxi). In schools under Catholic patronage, heteronormativity becomes the limiting norm for LGBTQ teachers (Neary, 2013), pervading all aspects of social life (Hall & Jagose, 2012) as the ethos 'trickles down the school'. A recent INTO survey has found that 10% of teachers identify as LGBTQ (Donnelly, 2020), yet in the Irish context, all teachers are expected to teach from the heterosexual matrix defined and inscribed with the values of the Catholic church. Those who deviate from the norm of heterosexuality encounter challenges within the school environment (Neary, 2013).

2015 AS A YEAR OF LEGISLATIVE CHANGE

2015 was a year of legislative optimism for LGBTQ people as well as teachers in Ireland. On 22nd of May 2015, 62% of the Irish electorate (Ryan, 2015) voted to extend the Irish constitution to allow marriage to occur between “two persons without distinction as to their sex” (Thirty-Fourth Amendment of the Constitution [Marriage Equality] Act, 2015). Two months later, on the 15th of July, the Gender Recognition Act (2015) was approved by the Irish Government, allowing transgender people to achieve legal recognition of their gender identity and secure appropriate documentation. These legislative changes mark a shift in attitude towards the LGBTQ community in general (Rhodes, 2015).

In 2015 LGBTQ teachers also benefited from a legislative amendment (Equality Act, 2015), though this change was overshadowed by the emotionally charged Marriage Equality Referendum. The amendment, was product of the hard work of LGBTQ community activism through lobbying and groups like the INTO LGBT Group as well as a result of a “trickle down” effect of a shift in attitude (Rhodes, 2015). Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act (EEA), provided a unique caveat and protection to educational, medical and religious institutions who chose to discriminate against employees based on ethos (Gowran, 2004; Fahie, 2016). This meant that institutions could discriminate in the name of ethos preservation (Fahie, 2017) when it came to job appointments and promotions as well as dismissals occurring within an institution. This effected all teachers but particularly teachers who were framed in juxtaposition against the values and ethos of the institution, especially LGBTQ teachers or other ‘deviant’ sexualities. This was the reality for Irish LGBTQ teachers until there was an amendment of the EEA (1998). The amendment in 2015 elaborated and made 37.1’s caveat less subjective, further stating that discrimination could only occur in cases which are “objectively justified” placing the emphasis on conduct of the individual rather than the individual’s identity itself (Equality Act, 2015).

QUEER PEDAGOGY

Queer can be used as an umbrella term for the myriad of sexualities that exist, queer sexualities. Though when I use it, it relates to a perspective or ideology which seeks to call critical and undermine the oppression of normativity. Queer is a term of identification which has political connotations, it is the appropriated insult which is “thrown back in the face of the oppressor...to undo oppressive gender/sex designations” and is centred on opposition to resisting discourses which normalise and reify (Morris, 2005, p. 10), seeking to liberate and give expression. Such queer-framing enables us to better understand how we can approach

and dismantle schools as sites of problematic heteronormativity for Irish LGBTQ teachers (Higgins et al., 2015; Neary, 2013). Heteronormativity can be understood as a presumption that heterosexuality is “the very model of inter-gender relations” (Warner 1993, p. xxi), which is understood to be problematic from a queer perspective.

This research is queerly framed by authenticity, and how LGBTQ teachers perform a sense of authentic self in relation to security of tenure, school climate, authentic disclosures and authentic performances. Authenticity can be understood “as an ‘inherent quality of some object, person or process’ and cannot ‘be stripped away, nor can it be appropriated’” (Vannini & Williams, 2009, p. 2). In adapting a queer perspective, it draws on queer pedagogy that “aims to analyse discursive and cultural practices that create identities and privilege some over others” (Oswald, Kuvalanka, Blume & Berkowitz, 2009, p. 52), namely that identity of the Irish LGBTQ teacher. Though at times engaging queerly may seem abstract, it is very centrally “about competing narratives and entertaining the unthinkable (Morris, 2005, p. 11). It is through this unthinkable, that ruptures occur, allowing people to express themselves by non-normative means and it is this authentic expression that this research aims to examine.

METHODOLOGY

The research as a whole is framed by queer theory and queer perspectives. This framing is an essential aspect of the research as well as informing the methodology and analysis of the research. Data was collected through semi structured interviews, resting between a structured schedule of questions and *carte blanche* approach (Brown & Danaher, 2019). The semi-structured interviews became more akin to a conversation and had natural flow. Participants were allowed the space and time to let their experiences and narrative be heard and represented in the data. I practiced a form of reflexive interviewing which meant sharing personal information, namely my own sexuality and experiences (DeVault, 2007).

The participant sample was purposive, “so that only people with certain experiences...would respond” (Murphy, 2015, p. 266), in this case, LGBTQ teachers currently employed by the Department of Education and Skills. I recruited participants through a variety of contacts, networks and organisations affiliated with education, including those providing supports to the LGBTQ community. See Table I for a breakdown of the sample demographics. I used Griffins “continuum of coming out” as a framework for examining one’s identity (1992) and. This framework lists different nexus’ of coming out on a continuum, ranging from; closeted (hasn’t disclosed sexuality) in private life and/or public life, implicitly (that their sexuality is

assumed without disclosing) and ending at explicitly (having disclosed one's sexuality). I allowed participants to self-identify their sexual orientation

It should be noted that recruitment for this study was difficult and the data presented is from a small number of participants. Accessibility was an issue in that when recruiting through networks and organisations, participants had to be 'out' in some capacity, be it a personal one or within a work environment. The views of people who are fully closeted are not represented in the data. In this research I felt it was important to use pseudonyms rather than numerical denotation as it is counterproductive to the essence of carrying out queer research. Each participant interviewed is a person with a lived experience. The written description of a pseudonym helps to embody and reflect the approach in how the data was collected, with methodological care and through interaction, not by quantitative means. Denoting LGBTQ teachers as numerics is akin to the marginalisation and making invisible of their identities which LGBTQ teachers experience in schools. It constructs the participants as person-less, when in fact they sit in our staff room and teach in our schools.

Data analysis was conducted by treating data in a naturalised approach, with "idiosyncratic elements of speech, involuntary sounds and non-verbal signals" included (Brown & Danaher, 2019, p. 80). Informed by my paradigm, I approached coding the data heuristically, meaning to discover it and explore, rather than just the act of labelling. In doing so it led me "from the data to the idea, and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea" (Richards & Morse, 2007, p. 137). I coded in two cycles, the first to discover themes and the second to prepare and organise these themes.

Name	Sex (self-defined)	Age	Contract Type	School Type	Continuum of coming out (Griffins, 1992)	Sexuality (self-defined)	Interview Duration (mins)
Michael	M	31	P	Catholic Boys	Implicitly out	Gay	83
David	M	32	P	Catholic Co-ed	Implicitly out	Gay	37
Kevin	M	32	P	Multidenominational Co-ed	Implicitly out	Gay	51
Patrick	M	54	P	Catholic Co-ed	Closeted in public life, out in private life	Bisexual	26

Alex	X	25	P	Minority Faith Co-ed	Explicitly out	Queer	58
Moira	F	34	P	Minority Faith Co-ed	Explicitly out	Lesbian/ Queer	56

Table 1: Sample Demographics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

SECURITY OF TENURE

A key finding in this research is that security of tenure facilitated five of the six participants to perform authentic performances of themselves through disclosing their sexuality. This is echoed in recent empirical research by the INTO research which locates security of tenure as an important feature for 43% of those who have come out (Donnelly, 2020). Signing a permanent contract allowed the teachers to feel more capable of performing their sexuality and being more authentic: “having permanency is a relief, they can’t get rid of me.... It’s a huge difference. I let my guard down, but it only came down when I had the contract signed, that was the defining moment” Moira. The process of gaining permanency allowed Moira to disclose their sexuality and perform a more authentic understanding of themselves in the work environment for the first time in nine years.

Apprehensions can surround ‘precarity’ (Egan 2016), and result in modulating and editing behaviour prior to disclosure in the upkeep of performance of an inauthentic self (Clarke & Turner, 2007). Michael and Alex reinforce this saying they left out LGBTQ volunteer work from recent job applications, minimising LGBTQ indicators, minimising their sexual identity to make themselves seem more professional and competent (Rumens & Kerfoot, 2009). Moira also notes that in future interviews she would go back into the closet “No, ummmmm, I don’t think I’d be out in the interview”. Their hesitation conveying a self-annoyance and disappointment at having to performing an inauthentic version of themselves and go back into the closet. This is echoed in a recent INTO survey (Donnelly, 2020).

Michael and Alex suggest even in light of an amended 37.1 (EEA, 2015), that job precarity still exists as an LGBTQ teacher. Michael indicates that the amendment to 37.1 though is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough, “I’d still be conscious of 37.1” and that a misinformation has led some teachers into a sense of job security that on closer examination, is still a threat to LGBTQ teachers. Of the five participants who are out in school, all recognise the impact of their legal permanent contract on their disclosure of their sexual identity, even in schools with hospitable school climates. Though interrelated, permanency is a more important feature than ethos and school climate for these participants. This directly

contrasts with Connell (2014) who suggests that legal protections have a limiting effect, whilst school climate has a more important impact on how LGBTQ teachers perform their authentic sexualities.

AUTHENTIC DISCLOSURE

Like Egan's research in 2016, the majority of participants in this study (2019) are out in some sense in their school environment. This represents an optimistic contrast to earlier research produced in the Irish context (Gowran, 2004). Even though disclosing one's sexuality is an authentic performance, it can lead to a post-coming out or post-gay rhetoric, which influences how LGBTQ teachers. To tease these terms out and differentiate them, I use both more akin to how postmodernism is a particular perspective, instead of the chronological "after" period of coming out. When I use post-coming out, I am discussing one's lack of importance and/or relevance denoted in coming out or the need to come out surrounding one's sexuality. Similarly, post-gay when used refers to the lack of importance and relevance one accredits to their sexuality and identity. These terms both are centred on the rejection of the idea of coming out and of the importance of one's sexuality.

Kevin says he never came out at school, but was always out, "I don't think I felt the explicit need to come out.... it's not a big deal for me". By not coming out, Kevin is trying to reduce the need for explicitly disclosing sexuality, undermining the closet and coming out as oppressive experiences. By marking himself through sameness, he works in a manner to "expose heterosexuality as an incessant imitation of its own naturalization" (Butler, 1990, p. 22-23). Kevin is in no manner the same as his peers when it comes to his sexuality, yet this façade of "sameness" operates to deligitmise heterosexuality as the norm. Kevin's sexuality not being "a big deal" captures his understanding of his sexuality as not requiring enormous mental and emotional inputs, as it may for other people, or as it may be at other stages in his life. Allan et al., notes that heteronormativity subtly infiltrates the school environment (2008) and in a similar manner Kevin employs the same subtle strategy by informing his sexuality through discussing his "night out in the George...RuPauls Drag Race" or his boyfriend.

In practicing a post-coming out ethic, teachers are avoiding marking themselves as a LGBTQ teacher and as 'other' (Ferfolja, 1998), they are equating themselves to their cohort. For Kevin coming out has become inconsequential to himself as a process, but that does not mean the process is absent from his practice. Gray's claim of coming out as a multi-contextual practice (2013) becomes evident here through using indicators and identifiers which are built off of stereotypical assumptions. This post-coming out rhetoric involves LGBTQ teachers

carefully treading on the 'bayonets blade' (Sedgwick, 1990), that calls for him to be out in his private life but professionally closeted. Similarly, David elaborates that his sexuality "is one facet of me, I don't think it's that important". It's hard not to think of LGBTQ teachers who edit and minimise their presentation to seem 'less LGBTQ' and more competent in the process (Rumens & Kerfoot, 2009). In practicing a post-coming out ethic he is equating sameness with non-LGBTQ teachers.

Even though post-coming out undermines the function and role of the closet, it erodes the difference that separates LGBTQ teachers and straight colleagues. LGBTQ teachers are treated through this lens of sameness, when in fact they should be celebrated through Sedgwick's Axiom 1 : "People are different from each other" (1990, p. 12). This lens of sameness is focused on "equality and inclusion" but in fact becomes essential in "the maintenance of the status quo" (Neary et al., 2016, p.16). Through this sameness and invisibility of LGBTQ identities, these LGBTQ teachers are seen to be working to maintain heteronormativity, a practice known as homonormativity (2003). Homonormativity doesn't allow for difference to be extolled but works from the ideas and structures of heteronormativity and produces what Duggan understands as "conventional gays" (2002, p. 179). Sexualities which don't fit in with 'conventional' gay sexualities, become tarnished as unacceptable, deviant and other. Though post-coming out and post-gay rhetoric are authentic performances of sexuality, these performances can reinforce the oppressive regime and structures of heteronormativity in schools for Irish LGBTQ teachers.

CRUCIAL RESONATIONS

An important resonance occurred whilst carrying out this research, that I feel is important to share. As I waited for one of my participants to join me, I noticed a homophobic slur engraved onto a notice board (Figure II). The dissonance of this casual homophobic inscription and the reason why I was present in the room, was profound. It reminded me with a sharp tinge, of my own heteronormative environment as a student and soon to be NQT teacher. As I sat there and waited, I was reminded of the importance of conducting queer based research and constructing a space in which non-normative performances, sexualities and identities could be liberated and expressed. The alienation and othering, generated by this slur meant that even the interview space was not a queer safe space, and I was reminded of work yet to be done.



Figure II – Engraved Homophobic Slur

CONCLUSION

This research exposes key aspects of LGBTQ teachers disclosing their sexuality and performing a more authentic version of themselves. What is clear is that security of tenure plays a vital role in these performances. The research also found that by playing down one's LGBTQ identity, LGBTQ teachers become complicit in reproducing heteronormative structures. The research exposes the need for LGBTQ teachers to celebrate their own uniqueness of identity to create a shift from reproducing heteronormative society through homonormativity. This queer celebration inherently involves marking oneself as other, as different. This project will and should strike difficult conversations, in the staffroom and hallways, yard and classroom. It is a conversation that isn't in the job description of a teacher but one that might be necessary to rewrite the story of Irish LGBTQ teachers.

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