

# **LGBT Teachers' Negotiations of Schools in Ireland**

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## **Abstract**

*In negotiating their everyday lives in schools in Ireland, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) teachers experience deep identity conflicts and struggles with school culture that involve continuous self-censorship and emotional investment (Neary 2012; Gowran 2004). Given the deep silences that have surrounded LGBT sexualities in Irish schools, initiatives that have raised awareness among education partners, school leaders and guidance counsellors about the importance of explicit mentioning of homophobic bullying and sexual orientation in school policies (GLEN 2012) and the recent action plan for tackling homophobic bullying have been welcome progress (Department of Education and Skills 2013). However, it is clear that a gap exists between policy and its implementation in schools where teachers' struggles with normative and cultural practices are evidence of the working of heteronormativity in Irish schools. In this paper, I will present an overview of research with LGBT primary and second-level teachers in Ireland and highlight some central issues and complexities in relation to the conference theme School 'Ethos' and LGBT sexualities.*

## **Introduction**

This paper addresses three central themes drawn from a review of the research on LGBT teachers in Ireland and raises questions for further exploration. This is not intended to be a systematic review of all research related to the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) teachers in Ireland. Rather, the exploration of three central themes serves as a starting point for exploring the complexity of LGBT teachers' everyday lives.

## **Methods and Focus**

A small body of research exists on LGBT teachers in Ireland (Gowran 2004; Lillis 2009; Sheils 2012; Neary 2013). The fact that none of the participants in any of this research identify as transgender is illustrative of the deep, multifaceted layers of silence that surround transgender identities in the Irish education system. This paper proceeds with the acronym 'LGBT' while being cognisant that there is a necessity for in-depth research on the experiences of transgender teachers and students in the Irish context.

Gowran's research used qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 2 primary school and 5 second-level LGBT teachers to explore 'the general climate of schools in relation to lesbian and gay issues, the level of safety to be 'out'<sup>4</sup> in schools; how teachers manage their lesbian or gay identity in relation to their role as teacher; participants' own experiences as lesbian or gay educators' (Gowran 2004, p.42).

Lillis's research was with primary school teachers who were members of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) LGBT Teachers' Group. 6 in-depth interviews with the teachers sought to 'explore the specificity of heteronormative values and attitudes in the primary school context; to examine how LGBT primary school teachers negotiate their sexual orientation with colleagues and to examine the strategies employed by the LGB Teacher to resist heteronormativity within the school setting' (Lillis 2009, p.12).

Sheils's research drew on 9 qualitative interviews with primary school teachers who identified as lesbian or gay and 171 questionnaires sent to primary schools around Ireland to explore the impact of Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act (an "ethos" exemption) on the personal and professional lives of primary school teachers, particularly lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers (Sheils 2012).

In my own research (Neary 2013), I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 8 teachers who identified as lesbian or gay (5 primary and 3 second-level) to explore teachers' experiences of "coming out" in Irish schools. This paper will also draw on my current research with 15 (7 primary and 8 second-level teachers). Over a 15 month period, initial in-depth interviews with each teacher, diary and retrospective reflections and semi-structured follow-up interviews explore how teachers negotiate their

personal and professional identities in Irish schools while planning/entering into a civil partnership (CP).

What follows is presentation and discussion of three central themes across this research: 1. Being a Teacher, 2. Constant Emotional Work, 3. School Ethos

## **1. Being a Teacher**

The teaching profession is unique because teachers are products of the schooling system and therefore subject to the same cultural bias of that system (Gowran 2004). LGBT teachers have embodied the uncomfortable relationship between sexuality and schooling, making the negotiation of a teacher identity a complex one. Many LGBT teachers see the teaching profession as a 'closet' that provoked 'stifling' feelings because of the complexities associated with disclosing an identification with a sexual identity other than heterosexual (Neary 2013, p.589). Feelings such as these sit alongside the fact that teachers have 'played the game' of education and have been successful at it because they are 'endowed with the habitus that implies knowledge and recognition of the immanent laws of the field' (Bourdieu 1993, 72). And so, on one hand, LGBT teachers have the capital required to negotiate the field of education but on the other hand, they cannot adequately present a complete correspondence with what is valued by schools: heterosexuality. In this way, their 'habitus is displaced; a fish out of water (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989, 43). This conflict is borne out in the following quote from one of the teachers in Lillis's research: 'The teacher has such a role in the life of the child and you obviously are going to have to be perfect. And that's the role of a teacher and [being lesbian or gay] totally messes everything up' ('Aoife' cited in Lillis 2009, p.24).

Much recent research in the sociology of education confirms schooling systems as having 'privatization tendencies [that] have undercut the idea of education as a collective and public good and established it as a saleable commodity and an asset to be competed over by self-interested individuals' (Youdell 2011, p.13). Teachers, as part of this competitive environment, feel pressure to comply with the 'business-as-usual' of education but are aware that - in the delicate negotiation of the professional/personal boundary in relation to their sexuality - always lurking in the background is the idea that 'you just need one parent to complain...' (Sarah VEC School

Teacher). The following section provides a glimpse into the constant emotional work of LGBT teachers in their school environments.

## **2. Constant Emotional Work**

There is much evidence in other contexts to show that LGBT teachers labour over the construction of an acceptable teacher identity in their school contexts (Griffin 1992; Harbeck 1992; Khayatt 1992; Ferfolja 2007; Rudoe 2010). Aligned with the international context, the research reviewed here highlights several factors that are indicative of the complexity of this negotiation in the Irish context.

### ***The Public/Private Boundary***

Many teachers, in order to successfully negotiate the private/public boundary, have valued privacy as a mechanism of protection and some see this privacy as an issue of appropriateness (Neary 2013). However, many teachers note that the concept of privacy can also be a cloak that covers the more subtle negotiations of identity:

*I think people don't realise, they think your private life is your private life, and that nobody shares their private life really at work, and they don't realise how much they really do share. Like, I know whether my colleagues are married or not, often although not always, whether they're going out with someone or not. If they are they usually feel free to have that partner, or lover, or whatever, come and collect them or drop them off. And they get all kinds of little approvals. ('Sheila' cited in Gowran 2004, p.45)*

Here, Sheila points to the myriad of ways that heterosexual teachers subtly and unconsciously lean on their heterosexual personal lives as capital in their school environment. Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic violence' helps us to understand the subtleties of these negotiations. 'Concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 4) ensures that the privilege of heterosexual teachers is legitimated and maintained.

### ***Risk Evaluation***

Many teachers are conscious of the potential negative reactions of others if they disclose: ‘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 cited in Neary 2013, p.592). Some teachers bear the result of entrenched ideals of appropriateness around sexuality: ‘I’m not going to put it in anybody’s face’ (Eimear, Catholic Primary School) while other teachers have reflected that this kind of sentiment is an “internalised homophobia” which ‘leads to the projection of our own negative thoughts and feelings about our sexuality onto other individuals’ (Lillis 2009, p.53). There are other fears that teachers experience that colour and shape their approaches to school life. One of these is the very potent fear of the misconception of gay male sexuality as being somehow related to paedophilia. Some teachers admit that they are ‘incredibly cautious’ (Simon, Primary School Principal) or that “a child will say that they are the victim of some sort of abuse from me – that’s my biggest fear and I don’t know how the school, the system would back me’ (‘Orla’ cited in Gowran 2004, p.49).

The concept of the ‘superteacher’ (Rasmussen 2006) is corroborated in the research I am currently conducting with LGBT teachers who are having a civil partnership. LGBT teachers work extremely hard to ‘compensate’ for their ‘alternative’ sexual identity in an effort to prevent potential risk. Teachers attempt to have a ‘strong enough presence’ (Steve Primary School Teacher) so that they can “create a scenario where people won’t mess with you...strict boundaries because of the sexuality thing being such a risky thing in school” (Bev, Voluntary Secondary School Teacher). This continuous emotional work of self-surveillance in constructing a finely tuned teacher identity is evidence that teachers have embodied the rules of the apparatus of sexuality deployed in this context (Foucault 1978).

### **3. School “Ethos”**

Given the complex history of the relationship between church and state in relation to education in Ireland, it is unsurprising that a religious exemption exists in employment equality law. Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act permits ‘favourable treatment on the religion ground’ to an employee or prospective in order to maintain the ethos of the institution and ‘action which is reasonably necessary to prevent an employee or a prospective employee from undermining the religious ethos of the

institution' (*Employment Equality Act* 1998, 2004). Sheils (2012) research highlights the difficulties that this legislation has posed for many teachers. Of those who responded to questionnaires, 29 % felt their lifestyle not compatible with ethos of school and 10% articulated antagonistic responses to Church involvement in education. All nine of the LGBT teachers interviewed felt a conflict between their personal lives and the ethos of school (Sheils 2012). This legislation causes fear on a daily basis for many of these teachers:

*“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....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' cited in Neary 2013).*

All of the research on LGBT teachers in Ireland points to the particular vulnerability of early career LGBT teachers: 'Because I wasn't permanent there was no way even regardless of the principal I was going to come out because you wouldn't know if it would change things, you don't know who's on the interview panel' (Steve Primary School Teacher). However, it must also be noted that a majority of teachers experience difficulty with tackling homophobia or interrupting heterosexism (O' Higgins-Norman 2004) often because of a vagueness around ethos and school policy but for many LGBT teachers there is a desire not to be seen 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!' ('Conor' in Neary 2013, p.589). It is clear that current equality law is a significant barrier for LGBT teachers and so, the distinct possibility that this law will be repealed or amended this year is significant progress. However, the repeal of Section 37.1 will not be a magic wand that removes the presence of homophobia or heterosexism. For example, currently, the principal of a school plays a very important role in shaping how the ethos of the school is acted out in local contexts and a myriad of factors will affect the lives of LGBT teachers in a post-religious exemption era.

## Conclusions and Questions

The three themes touched upon in this paper – the teaching profession itself, the emotional labour involved in constructing a teacher identity and the weight of school ‘ethos’ – are slices of the complexity of everyday life for LGBT teachers and thus, confirm the matrices of power/sexuality relations present in the Irish schooling system. I would like to raise some questions in light of this complexity. The participants in the various research projects are perhaps not representative of all LGBT teachers and nor do the authors claim that they are. However, it might be useful to think about the research in the Irish context in terms of ‘who’ is doing the speaking and the kinds of sexual subjectivities that might remain cloaked in silence in the Irish schooling system. Questions might also be raised about ‘progressive’ discourses that promote ‘coming out’ as a the best or only way forward for LGBT teachers given the power imbued complexity of the politics of visibility (Rasmussen 2004; Neary 2013) and the very real implications of legislation (Sheils 2012). A caution might also be offered here in relation to seeing the removal of the religious exemption (Section 37.1) as a definitive answer to the problems of LGBT teachers teaching in the 91% of primary schools and 52% of second-level schools that are currently under religious patronage. Furthermore, it might be useful to point out that a simple dichotomy of ‘secular’ versus ‘religious’ rights is unhelpful and that many LGBT teachers have strong religious faith and spirituality that is often overlooked in the move for a ‘progressive’ politics of sexuality. What becomes clear in a review of the research on LGBT teachers in the Irish context is that a myriad of multifaceted factors shape their everyday negotiations of school life.

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