

Faith of Our Fathers – Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual teachers’ attitudes towards the teaching of religion in Irish denominational primary schools

Abstract

Owing to a variety of complex historical and socio-cultural factors, the Irish education system remains heavily influenced by denominational mores and values (Ferriter 2012), particularly those of the Roman Catholic Church (O’Toole 2015; Faas, Darmody, and Sokolowska 2016). Unsurprisingly, with the declaration by the Church that homosexuality was “intrinsically disordered” (Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church 2003), the professional identity and practice of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) teachers working in denominational schools is often (in)formed by fear, as well as perceived, or actual, harassment and discrimination (Gowran 2004; Fahie, 2016). This paper examines the lived-experience of twenty-three self-identified LGB teachers who work(ed) in Irish Roman Catholic primary schools. Their unique experiences and perspectives of faith-based schooling are examined against a backdrop of the complex processes of rationalisation and reflexivity these teachers undertake as they endeavour to reconcile their sense of personal integrity - as members of the LGB community - with their professional responsibilities. The study draws particular attention to those LGB teachers who hold deeply-felt, and sincere, beliefs in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church but who, nonetheless, express a level of discomfort at the language and tone of church dogma in respect of minority sexualities.

Key Words: sexuality, teachers, religion, denominational education

Introduction

On Friday, May 22nd, 2015 more than 62% of the Irish electorate voted to permit marriage between “...two persons without distinction as to their sex” (Thirty-Fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Marriage Equality) Act 2015). Preceded in April 2015 by the Children and Family Relationships Act (2015) which provided for adoption rights for same-sex couples, this new law represented, not just a victory for supporters of marriage equality, but also a fundamental shift in attitudes among the Irish people towards lesbian, gay and bisexual people in general (Rhodes 2015; Boland 2015). Ireland had become the first country in the world to legislate for same-sex marriage following a popular vote; a fact which is even more extraordinary given Ireland’s complex socio-historic relationship with the Roman Catholic Church and its influence on shifting values and mores (Elkink, Farrell, Reidy, and Suiter 2015).

The Roman Catholic Church's response to the referendum outcome was mixed, while Archbishop Martin of Dublin stated that the result indicated that the church needed a "reality check" (Irish Times¹ May 23rd), the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin argued that the vote represented a "defeat for humanity" (Irish Times² May 30th). Nonetheless, activists in the gay rights movement have heralded the results of the referendum as both a concrete validation of LGBT rights in Ireland and a type of *psychic uncoupling* from the deeply embedded (and some would argue, dysfunctional) interplay between Irish civil society and Roman Catholicism (Healy, Sheehan, and Whelan 2015). However, while more hard-line, conservative attitudes towards homosexuality may have softened, national and international studies have consistently argued that considerable tensions remain for those who learn and work within schools in respect of the complex matrix that is human sexuality (Endo, Reece-Miller, and Santavicca 2010; Rudoe 2010; Connell 2015; GLEN 2016).

Drawing on the twenty-three in-depth interviews, **this paper highlights the unique experiences of Irish LGB primary teachers who work, or worked, in faith schools. The study underlines the strategies of reconciliation undertaken by this cohort as they strive to resolve the determining discord which often characterises the lived expression of their professional and professional identities. By excavating the complex and enduring relationship between Irish education and the Roman Catholic Church (particularly in terms of curriculum content, management structures and employment law derogations), the paper reveals a unique emotional topography; one which is hidden in plain sight and populated by a cohort of**

¹ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/diarmuid-martin-catholic-church-needs-reality-check-1.2223872> retrieved 16.12.2015

² <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/marriage-referendum-a-defeat-for-humanity-does-the-vatican-just-not-get-it-1.2231184> retrieved 16.12.2015

teachers whose distinctive perspectives and experiences have resonance for national and international scholars of queer pedagogy and beyond.

Schools and Religion in Ireland – A Vivifying Relationship?

While there is evidence of a diminution of the influence of the Roman Catholic church over wider Irish society's values and mores (Inglis 2007; Moran 2010; Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2014), it still retains and, indeed, exercises, significant power over systems and structures of education at all levels (Hogan 2011; Smyth, Darmody, and Lyons 2013; Rougier and Honohan 2015; O'Toole 2015; Faas, Darmody, and Sokolowska 2016). This is particularly true of primary schooling, with over 96% espousing a denominational ethos and 92% of primary schools under the direct, or indirect, control and/or ownership of the Roman Catholic Church (Devine 2012). Despite these schools being publically funded, the Roman Catholic Church, as a patron body, retains a significant role in the appointment of principals, for example, and also controls the selection and appointment of the Chairperson of every school's Board of Management. In addition, as a patron body, it also appoints two other board members as *patron nominees*. The Board of Management is responsible for the overall management of the school and, critically, is the legal employer of every teacher in that school. In addition, it is the responsibility of the Board to "uphold, and be accountable to the patron for so upholding ...the characteristic spirit of the school... (in respect of its) ...moral, religious...and spiritual values and traditions..." (Education Act 1998, 15.-1(b)).

As well as its influence at Initial Teacher Education at primary level (all but one of the mainstream colleges of education in Ireland were founded by Roman Catholic religious orders), religious instruction and religiosity permeates every aspect of school life. Indeed, Rule 68 of the Rules for National Schools, which was only rescinded in early 2016 (see Circular Letter 0009/2016, DES 2016), underlined this clearly when it stated that

Of all the parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important...Religious Instruction is, therefore, a fundamental part of the school course, and a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school (Department of Education 1965, 38).

However, there is concrete evidence of a fundamental shift in the structure of schooling in Ireland over recent years, specifically in respect of the remarkable growth of the multi-denominational system of schooling (Darmody, Smith, and McCoy 2012). Under the patron body *Educate Together*, there are currently seventy-seven primary and nine second-level multid denominational schools in Ireland. Demand for such schools is high and several more are in advanced planning stages. These schools do not have a denominational ethos and teach a broader Ethical Education curriculum which focuses on social justice, equality, ethics and offers an understanding of the belief systems of a variety of world religions.

Religion and the “revised” Curriculum

Replacing an earlier national curriculum (Department of Education 1971), the current Irish primary school curriculum was introduced in 1999 and is comprised of 11 discrete subject areas. The teaching of each of these subjects is informed by two official curricular documents, published on behalf of the then Department of Education and Science by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), which prescribe the subject content/assessment strategies as well as recommended teaching methodologies for every class level (NCCA 1999). Religion is not one of these 11 subject areas. However, as part of this suite of departmental publications, the “*Primary School Curriculum Introduction*” (NCCA 1999), which provides a contextual preface to the overall curriculum, offers some suggestions on how the teaching of religion can be accommodated within the primary classroom and, specifically, within a broader timetabling framework. In the document’s foreword the then Minister for Education, Míchaél Martin, wrote that “The development and implementation of the curriculum in religious education in primary schools remains the responsibility of the

relevant church authorities” (NCCA 1999, vi). However, later statements within the document point to the profoundly *embedded* relationship between Irish primary curricular structures and faith formation.

The importance that the curriculum attributes to the child’s spiritual development is expressed through the breadth of learning experiences the curriculum offers, through the inclusion of religious education as one of the areas of the curriculum, and through the child’s engagement with the aesthetic and affective domains of learning. (NCCA 1999, 27)

While this introductory document acknowledges the importance of recognising religious diversity, it explicitly situates the curriculum within a Judeo-Christian framework which “...acknowledges the centrality of the Christian heritage and tradition in the Irish experience and the Christian identity shared by the majority of Irish people” (NCCA 1999, 28). In practical terms, it also suggests that, out of a five hour and 40-minute school day, thirty minutes be spent on religious education in all Irish state-funded primary schools. Though there has been some criticism about the amount of time spent teaching religion (IPPN³ 2015), the recommended half-hour of instruction is somewhat elastic, and considerably more time is dedicated to faith formation at different times of the year (e.g. Christmas and Easter) as well as for those classes preparing for the sacraments of First Communion or Confirmation.

In theory, parents can choose to withdraw their children from religious instruction under Section 30, (2)-(e) of the Education Act 1998 which, though not referring to religion specifically, allows parents to withdraw their child from any subject that is contrary to the conscience of the parent of the student or, in the case of a student who has reached the age of 18 years, the student themselves. A recent case indicates that this, however, is not always easily facilitated⁴. Critically, in respect of teachers, there is a facility to *opt-out* from the

³ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/survey-of-principals-shows-support-for-less-religious-teaching-1.2511506>

⁴ In November, 2015, Castletroy College, Limerick, which comes under the patronage of the local Education and Training Board, with the local Catholic Bishop as a joint patron, agreed to allow a student to withdraw from religious education. The student and her father had previously been told that religion was a mandatory subject

teaching of religion. However, according to the *Irish National Teachers' Organisation* (INTO), many (49.1%) continue to consider the teaching of religion as integral to their responsibilities as a teacher and do so willingly (INTO 2012). Indeed, only 7.7% of teachers from this INTO survey indicated that they would prefer not to teach religion, with just 0.28% choosing not to do so.

Section 37.1

Up until November 2015, Irish employment legislation, which was designed ostensibly to protect workers from discrimination and harassment across nine named grounds, contained within it an *opt-out* clause which applied solely to workers employed by organizations which have an explicit denominational ethos (Coen 2008; Fahie 2016). As a result, denominational organizations like hospitals, nursing homes and schools, for example, were permitted to shape their appointments and promotions policies/procedures to ensure that their religious ethos was protected from being “undermined” (Section 37.1, Employment Equality Act 2004-2011). As has been noted, with the vast majority of primary schools having a denominational ethos, this legislation meant that most teachers employed in Ireland did not enjoy the same legal protections as those working in other sectors. It represented what the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) termed, a regulatory “chill factor” (GLEN 2015) for LGB teachers, many of whom monitored and regulated their own behaviour in order to “pass” as, **what they considered to be**, straight or “normal” and purposefully divert attention away from their sexual minority status (Mawhinney 2007; Neary 2012; Fahie 2016). The controversial section 37.1 was addressed on December 10th, 2015 by the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2015. This amendment now requires that any employer who wishes to invoke Section 37.1 must satisfy three tests: (1) religion is a genuine occupational requirement of the position (2) the action is objectively justified and (3) the means of

and that she would have to participate in religion lessons. (see <http://www.rte.ie/news/2015/1123/748507-schools-religion> retrieved 22.03/2016)

achieving the aim are appropriate and necessary. Underlining the rights of those employees who work in religious run institutions, the amendment demands that any action taken under Section 37.1 must relate to the *conduct* of the employee and not their sexual orientation. The data collected for this study was gathered prior to the repealing of Section 37.1

Queer Theory and Education

Early feminist scholars like Friedan (1963) and Greer (1971) rejected traditional research paradigms, the existence of which, they argued, scaffolded a patriarchal and hegemonic interpretation of society. In turn, these writers, along with other second-wave feminist scholars, were criticised heavily for their unwillingness to acknowledge (or even address) the intersectional impact of critical contextual and political factors like gender, social class, race, sexuality, (dis)ability and age in framing feminist discourses (see Hooks, 2000, for example). Indeed, Sandoval (2000) argues that the overwhelming *whiteness* and middle-class profile of the second-wave fostered a form of hegemonic feminism (Thompson, 2002) that supported the very structures that feminists were battling to challenge and invert. Nonetheless, building on the emancipatory underpinnings of feminist research and early African-American/Black studies (see Philips 2010, for example), Queer Theory emerged in the late 1970's as a conceptual framework for studies of emerging discourses on sexuality and non-traditional relationships. Indeed, the word *queer*, itself, was reclaimed from its pejorative genesis and became particularly popular with young gay, lesbian and bisexual activists who sought "to resist the more institutionalised and reformist politics sometimes signified by 'lesbian and gay'" (Butler 1993, 174). In this context, the seditious repossession by the LGBT community of *Queer* may be seen as an act of defiant resistance and a subversive rejection of previous technologies of control (Foucault 1991, 2001)

Queer theory rejects the "taken for granted" (particularly in relation to traditional binary conceptualisations of sexual attraction and gender identity) and represents an **organic**

development from earlier contestations regarding the limitations of language within broader discourses of sexuality (Sedgwick 2008). Queer Theory deliberately disrupts, and destabilises, unquestioned understandings of gender, sexuality and identity and, at its core, represents a form of anti-normativity and anti-identitarianism (Wiegman and Wilson 2015). As a conceptual framework, it challenges the assumptions that underpin the epistemological foundation of *a priori* knowledge and seeks to highlight the relations of power and disciplinary technologies of control which are replicated within, and through, these discourses. Queer Theory is, by its very nature, subversive. It does not represent a cohesive movement/paradigm or a 'cosy' conceptual scaffold. In fact, through its interrogative, reconstructive and reclamatory essence- which constantly challenges received wisdoms and questions its own existence - it resists normative, logical understandings of sex and intimacy.

Reflecting this subversive perspective, Foucault viewed schools as critical agents in the process of ordering, categorizing and naming. Comparing schools and prisons, he argued that "The prison was meant to be an instrument comparable with – and no less perfect than- the school...acting with precision upon its individual subject." (Foucault 1980, 40). He contended that, in so doing, schools circumscribe how pupils and teachers "be" by defining and confirming "what is", as well as "what is not". For Foucault, schools act as instruments/agents of disciplinary regulation, explicitly designed to perpetuate and maintain existing regimes of power (both good and bad) by means of validating and rewarding specific values/mores and, indeed, 'ways of being' (Claiborne et al. 2009). In so doing, an easily identifiable *other* i.e. one who do not share/uphold these values and transgresses (sins) is made visible and identifiable. Schools, with their control of time and space, formalised systems of reward and punishment, conscious shaping of (appropriate) knowledge, may be seen as incubators for existing loci of power. Contemporaneously, schools are also seething sites of resistance. Reflecting the circuitous nature of the manner in which power is exercised, pupils and,

indeed, some teachers, regularly challenge existing school systems and structures, as they attempt to realign the systems of power and authority.

Queer Theory, at its post-structuralist core, argues that the ‘self’ is constructed in, and through, its relations with others and with systems of power and/or knowledge (Sullivan 2003, 41). Then schools, as (con)structural agents resonant with cultural discourses, are critical in the shaping of the *selves* of those who inhabit that space. Queer Theory seeks to challenge this and draw attention to these processes of subjectification, in which the exercise of power may be seen as a formative or creative force and which are instrumental in the negotiation of identity (sense of self) for teachers and pupils alike.

Method

This study examines the experiences, both positive and negative, of a cohort of LGB teachers who work, or worked, in Irish denominational primary schools. A semi-structured interview schedule, informed by national and international literature, was devised which questioned interviewees on their perceptions of, what Wardle (2009) calls “Prejudice, Acceptance and Triumph” while working in a Catholic school system. Given the contentious nature of the topic, and the potential negative repercussions should identities be revealed, all interviewees’ names, as well as some potentially identifying details, were changed to protect their anonymity and privacy.

Access for sensitive areas of research can prove challenging (Fahie 2014) and, unsurprisingly, sourcing interview participants for this study was particularly difficult given the sensitivities that surround LGB teachers working in religious schools (Fahie 2016). In 2014, a general article on LGB teachers was published in the primary teachers’ union magazine. The article, entitled “*Gay teachers? Seriously!*” explored issues relating to the experiences of LGB teachers in Irish primary schools and concluded with an invitation to any

interested parties to make contact with the author by email with a view to participating in the research project. Following publication and, perhaps reflective of the level of fear/discomfort which sometimes surrounds the topic of LGB teachers (Duke 2007), only eight individuals agreed to participate. In order to maximise sample size, a snowballing purposeful sampling procedure was employed (Mertens 2010; Punch 2009), the eight original interviewees were asked to invite LGB friends or colleagues to participate in the study. In addition, the Fahie also employed his own personal contacts and, as a result, a total of 23 teachers who self-identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual were interviewed. While this type of sampling methodology has been employed previously with difficult to access groups (see Salaam and Brown 2012; Iecovich 2011; Donkor 2012, for example), there are, nonetheless, obvious implications for any claims to generalisability and representationality of the data and findings (Gobo 2004). Nonetheless, as argued by Mertens (2010), the *transferability* of the data remains unaffected by this approach.

All of the interviewees identified as either male (n.11) or female (n.12) and, at the time of interview, none of the sample self-identified as queer, transgender or intersex. Only one of the sample, a female teacher, identified as bisexual. (Thus, the acronym, *LGB* is used throughout this paper in reference to the sample profile). The absence of teachers who self-identify as queer, transgender and/or intersex, as well as the under-representation of the bisexual *voice* amongst interviewees, may be due to the difficult-to-access nature of the sample along with a perception of potential negative professional and personal outcomes for those who participated in the study. Paradoxically, it is this representative imbalance that underscores the evolving nature, and critical importance, of studies such of this, both nationally and internationally.

All interviewees had experience of working in schools with a denominational ethos and twenty were still working within these schools. The denominational system in question was exclusively Roman Catholic. No teachers working in schools aligned to any of the other minority faiths were represented in the study. Four were working in multi-denominational school settings. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews took place, lasting between 90 minutes and 2½ hours. Interviewees were questioned as to their experiences and perspectives as Irish LGB teachers with a particular emphasis on their attitudes towards the teaching of religion. Emergent themes were identified and the software package *MAXQDA*® was then employed to assist in the effective and efficient analysis of the raw data.

Religion and Teachers – Tensions in the field?

All of the twenty-three teachers interviewed for the study were anxious to articulate their own diverse attitudes towards religion in general and, specifically, towards their professional obligations in respect of the teaching of religion in Irish denominational primary schools. A commonality among the sample was an acknowledgement of the invidious position in which they found themselves. The majority of the sample (twenty-two out of the twenty-three) had been raised Roman Catholic and all were now teaching in schools, or had at some time in their careers, with an explicit Roman Catholic ethos. As members of the LGB community, they were particularly sensitive to the publically espoused attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards homosexuality and, what they saw as, the potential negative repercussions for their professional careers should it become public knowledge that they were gay.

Some of the teachers were, in response, pragmatic, arguing that teaching was just their job and that the trade union would protect them should any issue arise. For others, however, there was a palpable sense of unease which underpinned their attempts to rationalise their own role in “passing on the faith”, a faith that actively campaigned, they believed, to discriminate

against them as teachers in Roman Catholic schools. A sense of exasperation was also articulated; that by teaching religion they were in some way complicit in perpetuating a dogma that positioned LGB teachers and, indeed, pupils, as sinners and deviants. Analysis of the interview data revealed a number of key themes. Each one will now be considered in turn.

Sense of Entrapment

Most of the teachers interviewed were anxious to point out that they did not *choose* to teach in a Roman Catholic school and that, given the denominational nature of Irish schooling at primary level in Ireland, they continued to work in these schools solely because of, what they saw as, restricted opportunities for employment elsewhere. This was especially the case for those living in rural communities where there were a limited number of multi-denominational schools. This view was articulated by Ann who teaches in a small rural community. “I could have tried to teach in a multi-d (multi-denominational) school, but there are so few of them down the country and I got a job here first. This is my home. I like living here. Why should I have to move to a city?” (Ann). Interviewees expressed a sense of entrapment due, they maintained, to geography, family circumstances, age or, for some, a fear of losing their seniority and the implications this would have for promotion. “I’m stuck. Where can I go at nearly 50 years of age? Anyway, if I leave, I have to start at the bottom again. I’m deputy principal. I’m not giving that up. I’ve worked too hard...” (Jerry). For one of the sample, Ruth, there were implications for her own mental health “I feel so trapped. I can’t sleep, I know I’m obsessing over it. I hate working here. I’d love to get out. At my age, where would I go?”

During the course of the interviews, the possibility of securing employment within the multidenominational school system took on a type of mystical quality, with teachers

expressing the view that such schools manifested, what they considered to be, a liberal and inclusive ethos which contrasted starkly with that of faith-based schools. One member of the sample who now works in a multi-denominational school detailed what this meant for him “I remember my first day (in the multi-denominational school). I felt so free. After 13 years in (a Roman Catholic school) I really felt that my teaching life was starting again. I could be myself finally. It’s been great” (Paul).

Personal Sense of Religiosity – Consensus and Dissonance

There was no consensus among the teachers in respect of an articulation of their own personal beliefs in, and commitment towards, the teachings of the Roman Catholic church. Perhaps reflecting patterns in the wider Irish population, individual teachers had diverse attitudes towards the Roman Catholic church and their professional/personal responsibilities in perpetuating the doctrines of that organisation. Nonetheless, the majority of the interviewees described themselves as either spiritual or actively religious. Only three of the sample described themselves as atheists or having no belief in any religious/faith system. Critically, the depth of the teachers’ own commitment to their own religious beliefs, or their sense of personal spirituality, impacted significantly on their attitude towards the teaching of religion in schools.

Some of the teachers believed it was both their moral and professional duty to *pass on the Faith*. There was a sincerity and simplicity in their espousal of their own religious conviction. “I believe in God. I was reared a Catholic and I think every teacher has a responsibility to pass on their religion. I had great teachers in school and religion was really important...I don't think that has changed?” (Claire). They saw no contradiction or tension between their personal commitment and the church’s attitude towards homosexuality. They carefully distinguished between the church as an institution and as a community of people. “The

Catholic church is made up of people and people are human and humans are flawed. We all are. Some of the stuff they say about being gay and all that is wrong, wrong, wrong. It's dangerous too. But it's said by people...not by God" (Michael). They viewed the church as having an important role in codifying morality and preserving traditional type of behaviours, particularly in terms of respect, position and the public good. The loss of this type of behaviour they attributed to the waning of the church's influence and they saw the role of schools as critical in the reservation of these traditional values. Pat, a senior teacher in an urban Catholic school, put it simply "I'm happy to teach Confirmation. I do my best to pass on the faith that I believe in. It's a privilege".

However, those who viewed the church with a degree of scepticism were less enthusiastic about teaching the Roman Catholic faith, which some saw as a form of indoctrination. Articulating a view which was shared by many, Alan argued "How can I teach the Catholic religion in schools when the same religion says that I am a pervert? What about the gay kids in my class or the children of gay parents?". While only three had refused to teach religion in their respective Catholic schools, many of the teachers contended that it would be disingenuous for them to teach a religion in which they did not fully believe, and one which some found to be antipathetic towards their own sexual identity. In order to reconcile these feelings, the teachers adopted a type of *a la carte* Catholicism, choosing the elements of the religious doctrine they felt appropriate and rejecting the rest. While they taught religion classes, they did so in a manner which did not compromise their own beliefs. Jamie states this clearly "I teach all the stuff about being kind to one another, about thinking about people's feelings and being respectful of nature and stuff...I don't teach any of the commandments or the *shite* (sic) rules and stuff... (laughs)...I just ignore anything I don't agree with.". Barbara, teaching in a rural school in the midlands, adopts a similar strategy and opines that many straight teachers have a similar approach "It's not just a gay thing...It's just that being gay

makes you really aware of the issues involved”. This sanitisation or dilution of religious dogma was common across the majority of the sample, particularly when it came to issues around sexuality or gender. The teachers were anxious, however, to justify and explain their actions

“If you have a gay kid in your class, how can I – of all people - tell him that he is bad or his life is sinful? What message does that give to other kids in the class? We have a responsibility to make sure that all our pupils feel safe and that their identities are acknowledged in a positive manner”. (Jonny)

For a small number of the sample, the teaching of religion in schools was inappropriate and unnecessary. They argued that religion should not be taught in state schools during the school day. They maintained that religion should be taught after school and that parents should be required to “opt in” to the teaching of religion. For these teachers, their minority sexuality status positioned them as outsiders and gave them, they argued, a sense of clarity about the Irish school system

“Being gay has made me think about religion a lot. I was brought up in a very Catholic home. But I worked in America and saw how religion doesn't have to be part of the school day. Teachers shouldn't be put in that position if they don't have a real belief in the religion in question”. (Kate)

Indeed, most of the teachers argued that a broader ethics-based program be taught in schools, one which explored world religions and provided pupils with a wider perspective on faith and faith formation. Such a programme could, they argued, be delivered and still highlight the centrality of particular faith systems within relevant schools.

Reflexivity

Teachers interviewed for this study demonstrated a high degree of reflexivity and informed their professional decisions based upon considered thought. They were hyperaware of the complex interplay between their sexuality and their professional responsibilities. For some, this reflexivity resulted in a degree of inertia “I’m very wary of doing anything that might give me away. I just stay in the background” (Ann Louise) or hypersensitivity about

revealing their sexuality inadvertently “I’m really, really careful about (revealing my sexuality) ...and watch myself all the time. That’s why I always go to mass (laughs).” (Larry). This also applied to their understanding of their role in teaching religion “It’s funny, isn’t it? Here I am teaching a religion that’s anti-gay. Not only am I teaching it, but I’m also supposed to be recruiting children into being a Catholic. What am I doing! When I think about it...” (Claire). For one teacher, the tensions involved are difficult to countenance. His internal dialogue is highly self-critical in respect of his own inability to be more open about his personal circumstances and the implications this has for his pupils. Jim is principal of a rural school. In his thoughts, he has cast himself as a hypocrite and as weak

“I know I should stand up for myself and say no, but I didn’t do it when I had a chance. I often think about the message this gives to the kids in my school. I could have been a great kind of role model...but I don’t have the balls. That bothers me a lot, I can tell you.”

Feeling Threatened

Jim’s feelings, as articulated above, are not surprising given that some of the teachers felt threatened or coerced into teaching religion. Several detailed incidents where there was an implicit or explicit warning given to them by school management or members of the clergy that they were obligated to teach religion in an appropriate (and enthusiastic) manner. Jean spoke about how she was advised by her principal, who was aware of her sexuality, not to “cause problems” as to be seen to do so could potentially undermine her position in the school “He told me not be a martyr...” (Jean). Another member of the sample recounted how the local priest visited her in her classroom and questioned her pupils on different elements from the religion programme. No other colleague had had such a visit. She is clear as to why this has happened “I had a rainbow Pride sticker on the back of my car and there was a conversation in the staffroom about it. The priest arrived in during the middle of it and joined

in. He didn't seem too fazed at the time, but I think he put two and two together afterwards..." (Ann Louise).

Interviewees were fearful that, by opting out of teaching religion, they would highlight their own *outsider* status, draw attention to their personal lives and, thus, make themselves more vulnerable. Jerry makes this point clearly "I'd love not to teach religion. But then the principal would be asking why...and the priest would be asking why...they'd be wondering about me and my (personal) life...I'd certainly never get a Principalship after that" (Jerry). The visible presence of the local clergyman was seen as a source of concern (regulation) by some of the sample who considered it to be intimidating. They questioned if an element of deliberate monitoring was occurring "He (the priest) asked me about another priest in the parish when I lived. I hadn't clue...I was more worried that he knew that I lived with my girlfriend in house opposite my parish church" (June)

In contrast to the experiences outlined above, two teachers recounted how their respective school chaplains were especially supportive of them and that one, in particular, offered concrete assistance at a time of personal crisis "My partner got seriously ill. He (the priest) called around to the house and behaved in exactly the same way as if she was my husband. Really kind. I'll never forget him for that" (Marie). Indeed, there was a general acknowledgement among many members of the sample that individual members of clergy were compassionate, inclusive and open.

Working in a Catholic School

The physical sense of working in a school with a Roman Catholic ethos was overwhelming for many of the teachers. The religious iconography in the form of statues, pictures and crucifixes as well as the way in which religion permeated the school day was anathema to their own personal beliefs. "I look at the statue of Jesus in my classroom every day and I wonder what He would make of it all.... how the church has taken an issue like

homosexuality and demonised it? Jesus said nothing about homosexuality, you know?” (Ann Louise). In addition, echoing the experiences of the sample in respect of individual priests, there was a sense among the interviewees that not all denominational schools were the same and that schools interpreted, and manifested, their religion obligations with differing degrees of commitment. While some schools were overt in the unequivocal expression of their religious ethos, other schools were more circumspect. This, interviewees argued, was highly dependent on the personal commitment of the school principal. Eileen gave an example of this “I’ve taught in a good few schools. In some, religion is everywhere, pictures and artwork and masses and prayers and all that stuff. In my current school you’d hardly know it was a Catholic school. We do Communion and Confirmation, but other than that you’d hardly know. One of the older teachers says prayers, but most of the rest of us hardly ever do” (Eileen).

Impact on Curriculum

Another issue raised by the sample was a high degree of discomfort around a perceived tension between the school’s denominational (Roman Catholic) ethos and the implementation of specific departmentally approved and mandated programmes (Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), Stay Safe and Social Personal and Health Education) which address topics including sex education, relationships, sexuality and child abuse prevention. The teachers argued that there was an inherent contradiction between the content and thrust of these programmes and the church’s teaching on these matters. “The RSE programme is much less judgmental about being gay...but then you are teaching in a Catholic school that says being gay is disordered...there’s a kind of disconnect between the two, isn’t there.” (Billy). The same issue was raised by some of the sample in respect of the current anti-bullying policies which all schools are obliged to implement. These policies must name homophobic and transphobic bullying explicitly. However, Arthur remains unconvinced “The church is the

biggest bully of all! We're told that homophobic bullying is wrong and we have to have it in our policy but the church calls gay people sinners? What kind of message does this give to kids?"

Conclusion: Queer Theory – Emancipation through subversion

As a conceptual paradigm, Queer Theory is, simultaneously, emancipatory and subversive (Sedgwick 2008; Wiegman and Wilson 2015). It casts a sceptical and insubordinate gaze on *taken-for-granted* structures and practices and, in so doing, defiantly demands a critical interrogation of the power systems which underpin traditional attitudes and behaviours (Foucault 1998). For this study, a hitherto silent and vulnerable group (LGB teachers in Irish Roman Catholic primary schools) have, by and large, contested professional expectations in respect of the teaching of religion and, as a result, disrupted the long-accepted (cor)relationship between teaching at primary level in Ireland and faith formation. The result of this contestation is not necessarily a rejection of these traditional values, rather it has provoked an *on-my-own terms* response, one which implies a reflexive, rather than a passive, acceptance of the parameters/constraints of the job.

Mirroring national and international studies (Fahie 2016; Connell 2015, for example), this study highlights the tensions and anxiety experienced by LGB teachers employed in denominational primary schools, as they endeavour to maintain a sense of affective equilibrium while, at the same time, navigating the competing demands of their personal and professional lives. Critically, **this is an issue which is not confined to Ireland. In 2014, for example, *The Huffington Post* reported on the story of Barb Webb, a lesbian who was fired from her job in a US Catholic High School when she announced to her colleagues that she was pregnant. While in the UK, teachers working in Catholic schools have been warned that those entering into civil relationships/partnerships outside of “traditional” marriage, face sanction and potential removal from their posts (Stock, 2013).**

The data reveals the complex processes of subjectification (Foucault 2002), through which varied and, sometimes, contradictory discourses shape the identity of these teachers; discourses which inform our understanding of what it means to *be* LGB, to *be* a “good teacher”, or, indeed, to *be* a “good Catholic”. These discourses seem, on the face of it, to be at odds with one another and, as a result, provoke a high degree of tension and dissonance. In order to accommodate these discourses, and the positioning they imply, the teachers have adopted a variety of moderating strategies. For some, this involves the purposeful attenuation of the current religion curriculum. For others it involves active resistance and/or reconciling their own personal religiosity with the dogma of the Roman Catholic church in respect of homosexuality. However, these processes of accommodation are not without cost. Some of the teachers interviewed were fearful that a refusal to teach religion could, in some way, serve to reveal their sexuality. Others described a profound sense of guilt; arguing that they felt “cowardly” in respect of their reluctance, as one interviewee described it, to “make a stand” (Jim), and refuse to teach a religious doctrine whose tenets they consider anathema to any expression of their *authentic selves* (Ryan and Brown, 2003).

The data suggest that there may be an unresolved, yet subtle, tension between national policy (and indeed, legislation) in respect of homophobic/transphobic bullying, inclusion/diversity, sex education and the *upholding* of a school’s denominational (Roman Catholic) values. While schools are required to actively support pupils and staff who identify as LGB at policy, curricular and procedural level, interviewees maintained that the religious ethos of the Roman Catholic schools fundamentally contests the legitimacy and morality of these imperatives. This leaves schools, and those who work within them, in an unenviable position. LGB teachers are intensely sensitive to these competing discourses and, in response, position themselves, and are positioned, as *insider-outsiders*, simultaneously supporting and subverting the school ethos. This was particularly true for those LGB teachers who

acknowledged their own deep-felt religious faith and were content to teach the religion programme (albeit in a diluted version).

The absence of choice and the resultant sense of professional and personal entrapment (with obvious implications for mental health and well-being) was a significant challenge for interviewees. While the increased number of multidenominational schools across the country offers an alternative model of employment for LGB teachers, this is of little solace for those who continue to work in religious environment which undermines their human right to a dignity and safety in the workplace. Leaving the last word to Jane, who teaches in a large urban school

“Being gay. Being a teacher. Being a Catholic. They’re all part of who I am. So I teach religion. I kinds love teaching religion. But I sometimes feel it just doesn’t love me back. (laughs).”

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