

# An Exploration into the Experiences of LGBTQ+ Primary School Teachers in Ireland

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**KEYWORDS:** Gender, Identity, LGBTQ+, Primary Teaching, School Culture

## INTRODUCTION

Even though some research has been conducted on LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Plus) identities in Ireland, legislation and societal opinions are ever changing, and so it is important to update and add to discourse. LGBTQ+ identities shape different individual experiences, which should be included in research for it to be truly representative. The research that exists surrounding LGBTQ+ primary school teachers in Ireland is lacking in transgender and non-binary identities and the level of LGBTQ+ inclusion in Irish primary schools is constantly changing. This article is based on a broader study that explored the experiences of LGBTQ+ teachers in Irish primary schools. The purpose of the study was to critically analyse how school culture affects primary school teachers in Ireland who are members of the LGBTQ+ community and identify ways in which LGBTQ+ issues can be addressed in schools. It also examined how LGBTQ+ teachers' own educational experiences in the past have affected their current practice as teachers.

## CONTEXT

In 2019, 90% of primary schools in Ireland were under the patronage of the Catholic Church (Walsh, 2011; O'Brien, 2019). Because the Catholic Church have tangible power in decision-making regarding Irish education and employment law (Neary, 2013), many LGBTQ+ primary school teachers have experienced fear and anxiety about disclosing their identity in their schools (Gowran, 2004). Before December 2015, Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act perpetuated LGBTQ+ discrimination to maintain the religious ethos of schools (Neary, 2013; Heinz et al., 2017). As most primary schools in Ireland have a religious ethos (O'Brien, 2019), Section 37.1 created a chilling effect for LGBTQ+ primary school teachers (Gowran, 2004; Neary, 2013).

According to Heinz et al., (2017), Section 37.1 was a paradoxical exception to equality and a concrete manifestation of the control and influence of the Catholic Church. The work and activism carried out by the INTO LGBT+ Teachers' Group was central to the amendment of Section 37.1 (Fahie, 2016; Neary, 2013) which was officially implemented in December 2015, months after Ireland's marriage equality referendum (Fischer, 2016). However, while the number of multid denominational schools in Ireland are slowly increasing, they still only account for 6% of the total (O'Brien, 2019).

There are no initiatives that explicitly address LGBTQ+ issues on the current primary school curriculum (Heinz et al., 2017; Neary, 2013; Mayock et al., 2009). Some teachers feel reluctant to discuss issues regarding LGBTQ+ identities in their classrooms due to the ambiguity around what is and is not appropriate for discussion (Neary, 2013). In a study of 788 LGBTQ+ second level students, 45% reported that staff did not intervene if present when discriminatory remarks were made (Pizmony-Levy & BeLonG To Youth Services, 2019). A common reason for teachers failing to intervene in these scenarios is their lack of LGBTQ+ knowledge, preventing them from intervening confidently (Higgins et al., 2016). The vagueness of school policies leaves teachers feeling unsure and unwilling to act (Neary, 2013). For LGBTQ+ pre-service teachers, the prior association they have with marginalisation, discrimination and potentially harassment in their past school environments may add to the multifaceted challenges of a practicing teacher (Heinz et al., 2016). Creating an open dialogue amongst all pre-service teachers will promote a more inclusive college environment for their LGBTQ+ peers (Kearns et al., 2014).

The dominance of heterosexuality also stands as a barrier to the recognition of LGBTQ+ identities in education (Gowran, 2004). Heterosexism is an assumption made by societal and institutional structures that all people are heterosexual and gender identity is considered stable and uncontested (Higgins et al., 2016; Barron et al., 2018; Pizmony-Levy & BeLonG To Youth

Services, 2019; Fahie, 2016). It places heterosexuality as superior in society, leaving other identities to be seen as inferior (Pizmony-Levy & BeLonG To Youth Services, 2019; Gowran, 2004).

Neary (2013) and Fahie (2016) argue that schools are a consciously heterosexualised space and reinforce a binary model of sexuality and gender identity. This reaffirmation of heterosexism is policed and reproduced in school policies and daily practices through silence, non-recognition and misrepresentation (Gowran, 2004; Kearns et al., 2014). Heteronormative teaching practices, gender-specific uniforms and activities, and LGBTQ+ bullying not being addressed are just some of the ways in which heterosexism exists in daily school life (Kearns et al., 2014; Mayock et al., 2009). As a result of an absence of fact-based LGBTQ+ education and open dialogue, many pupils learn about sexual orientation and gender identity through the lens of discriminatory slurs (Dunne & Turraoin, 2015; Lindsey, 2013; Heinz et al., 2017).

Many teachers have grown up in this heteronormative system and it is likely that they have unintentionally embodied the silence that surrounds LGBTQ+ identities through their teaching practice (Gowran, 2004). Lack of recognition is a form of oppression (Gowran, 2004). However, trying to challenge this oppression in schools can be difficult because they are shaped by a culture and history of heteronormativity (Kearns et al., 2014; Gowran, 2004). Instead of responding to individual instances of LGBTQ+ discrimination, schools need to interrupt the heteronormative system as it exists by recognising and respecting diversity and challenging dangerous stereotypes and misrepresentations (Lindsey, 2013; Neary, 2013).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The design of this study was centred around an interpretivist paradigm (Bryman, 2001; Creswell, 2009). A qualitative approach to research was adopted to provide deep scope within the data (Bryman, 2001). A basic interpretive study was used to accurately document all participants' experiences.

Purposeful sampling was used to ensure an equal representation of LGBTQ+ identities were included (Flick, 2007; Maxwell, 2013). All five participants of this study were members of the LGBTQ+ community. Four out of five participants were primary school teachers, and one participant was a prospective primary teacher. All participants were under the age of 40 and began teaching after the year 2000. All participants currently work in urban based schools. This may influence the data collected as their experiences may differ from LGBTQ+ teachers with more years of experience or from those working in rural settings or prior to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993 (Office of the Attorney General, 1993).

Table 1  
*Sexual Orientation of Participants*

Sexual Orientation	Queer/Bisexual	Lesbian	Gay
Number of Participants	2	2	1

Table 2  
*Gender Identity of Participants*

Gender Identity & Pronouns	Male, He/Him	Female, She/Her	Non-Binary, They/Them
Number of Participants	2	2	1

Table 3  
*Type of School Currently Working in*

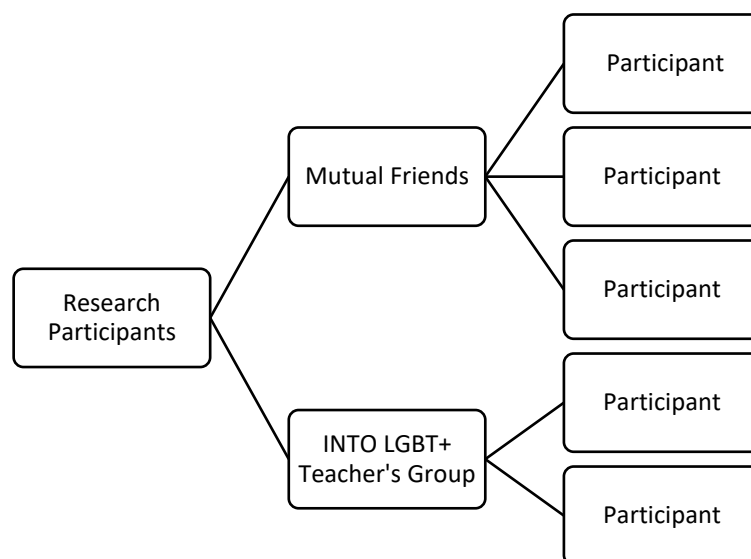
Type of School	Non-Denominational	Catholic	Catholic Gaelscoil
Number of Participants	2	2	1

Table 4  
*Years Practicing as a Teacher*

Years Teaching	0-3	4-9	10-19
Number of Participants	3	1	1

Interviews were adopted as a means of gathering data since they draw from conversational skills, which are already acquired by researchers (Denscombe, 2010). Participants were asked questions about their experiences as teachers who are LGBTQ+. Participants were sought from the INTO LGBT+ Teachers' Group and mutual friends. This process is documented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: *Process of Purposeful Sampling*



Each interested individual was sent an email with a Google Form attached. The objectives of the research were clearly stated in the email along with the ethical guidelines. Each participant worked in different types of schools; three from Catholic schools and two from non-denominational schools. The data was transcribed, coded and analysed to identify emerging themes (Merriam, 2009). In the context of this study, there was a limited amount of time to carry out and analyse the research. This study was confined to a low level of scope due to a small sample of participants. All participants were white, Irish, and based in an urban centre. The sexual and gender identities of the five participants interviewed do not represent all identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. Because of this, the findings may not be generalisable.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL CULTURE**

The impact of school culture on LGBTQ+ identities in education was a prominent finding in the research. Participant 5 said, *“it definitely has such a huge impact for LGBT staff.”* Participant 5 followed up by explaining, *“the environment added to my worries immensely.”* Participant 2 expressed similar feelings *“I didn’t even realise how miserable I was at the time”*. Some participants spoke about how they would act to adapt in the environment. Participant 1 said, *“the vitriol and the negative stuff I heard slowed how fast I came out.”* Likewise, Participant 3 mentioned *“I used to try and act straight or just put in little things into conversations that would make the teachers think I was straight.”* Each participant noted the impact of school culture. Struggles with school culture can affect how LGBTQ+ teachers engage with their own identities in the workplace (Neary, 2013).

Most participants spoke about the impact of school ethos. Participant 4 noted *“the ethos is a big thing as well. You can still be fired for undermining the religious ethos of the school.”* Participant 1 spoke on the popularity of Catholic schools *“There’s a massive emphasis on Catholic schools in the country. Most teachers work in a Catholic school”* Participant 5 captured Catholic schools in a positive light *“there are Catholic schools who do their best to promote inclusivity and use their ethos to create a culture of kindness”*. Whereas Participant 4 explained some *“LGBT+ people who were brought up Catholic in Ireland have turned away from the Church.”* When talking about the ethos of non-denominational schools, Participant 5 stated, *“The ethos is centred around inclusivity and it shows.”* Participant 4 explained *“If I worked in an [non-denominational] school, I would feel totally comfortable teaching about LGBT identities. I would be totally comfortable being as inclusive as I could.”* While it is important to acknowledge the inclusive practices operating in many schools with a denominational ethos,

teachers who work in multi-denominational schools have a considerable amount of freedom in the manifestation of their sexual and gender identities in schools (Fahie, 2016).

Bullying and discrimination towards LGBTQ+ identities were identified as a result of school culture. Looking back on their own educational experiences, Participant 3 stated, *"They found it funny to pick on somebody who was different."* Participant 5 explained how witnessing LGBTQ+ bullying affected her *"I knew some kids who were out and got a hard time because of it. Seeing that made coming out an unappealing option."* Some participants explained how their own experiences of bullying in school have affected their teaching practice. Participant 3 said, *"I don't want any other child to ever feel like I felt in school."* Participant 5 stated similar *"I never want any child I teach to feel the way I felt."* Verbal and physical harassment is often experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals in school settings. In a study of 788 LGBTQ+ second level students, 68% had heard homophobic remarks from other students and 77% were verbally harassed based on their sexual or gender identity (Pizmony-Levy & BeLonG To Youth Services, 2019).

Most participants spoke about the effect school culture has on pupils. Participant 5 said, *"everyone would use the word gay as a derogatory term."* Participant 1 said, *"A lot of students use gay as a pejorative. It's just become a word for things like 'stupid' or, 'I don't like that'".* Participant 3 said, *"It was used as a slur."* Participant 2 explained *"maybe they're hearing stuff at home or maybe they have older siblings where that language was said."* Participant 1 stated similar *"at primary school level, they're probably just parroting words they've heard before."* Participant 5 expressed feelings of disappointment *"It is disheartening to think that the same language I heard in school growing up is still being used years and years later."* Participant 1 said, *"I would worry for younger [LGBTQ+] people who might overhear stuff because they're at a much more vulnerable stage in their development."* In some cases, schools reflect the values and attitudes of society by reproducing the social and heterosexual hierarchies of society, instilling heterosexuality as the norm and marking any other sexual or gender identity as deviant or inferior (Gowran, 2004; Pennell, 2015).

#### LGBTQ+ EDUCATION AND INTERVENTIONS IN TEACHER TRAINING INSTITUTIONS

The need for LGBTQ+ education for pre-service teachers was identified by all participants as there is currently a lack of LGBTQ+ knowledge and awareness amongst their colleagues. Participant 1 said, *"I'd like to see more explicit inclusion."* Participant 5 said, *"They didn't have the education or tools to actually combat slurs and derogatory language."* Participant 4 explained *"they wouldn't feel fully comfortable handling it or they might think that they'd say the wrong thing. I actually think they might say the wrong thing if it was to come up in the*



classroom.” Participant 3 said, *“They were words I had heard obviously from my own research but that nobody else had heard.”* Because of the dominance of heterosexuality, teachers often view themselves as powerless to address LGBTQ+ issues (Gowran, 2004; Lindsey, 2013).

Most participants spoke about the lack of representation of LGBTQ+ identities in education. Participant 5 said, *“I feel like it’s important to have representation in education.”* Participant 1 said, *“It would be great if there were more perspectives in schools as teachers.”* Participant 3 said, *“I haven’t been in a school where there’s another LGBT teacher.”* Some participants speculated why there is a lack of LGBTQ+ representation amongst teachers and educators. Participant 5 explained *“the idea of the job isn’t necessarily appealing to many queer people, mainly due to some of the negative experiences we had in school.”* Participant 4 said, *“I feel like still having the religion part in 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act shouldn’t be there because I feel like a lot of LGBT+ teachers are not religious.”* Participant 2 mentioned *“When I was filling out my CAO I was deeply closeted and thought ‘Nobody’s ever going to know, it’s not going to be anyone’s business.’”* Having more diversity amongst teaching staff will prepare the children they teach for life in a society based on dignity and respect for all (Heinz et al., 2016).

Participants 1 and 3 had received education about LGBTQ+ identities while in college. Participant 1 mentioned *“I know from lectures”*. Participant 3 explained; *“It brought everyone together to talk about these really important topics and vocabulary. He had given us a massive amount of resources with gay story books, stories about gay relationships, children growing up as gay.”* Participant 4 spoke about the impact of role models in college *“I remember thinking, ‘Oh, my God, she’s a lesbian and she works in this college. That’s mad because this is such a religious college.”* Participant 2 mentioned *“I did like college. But there wasn’t that feeling of community.”* If all teachers are equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to combat LGBTQ+ discrimination in schools, they will be able to create a supportive environment and transform the heteronormativity that exists in the school system (Kearns et al., 2014).

Each participant spoke on the effect LGBTQ+ education and representation can have on teachers and pupils. Participant 3 said, *“People speaking openly about it was completely new to me. No one had ever spoken about it openly to me before.”* Participant 5 explained *“I went through school as a queer kid and I know the importance of doing that for the kids I teach.”* Participant 1 said, *“someone like me in a school could be good for a child that’s like me or will be like me once they realise their own sexual [or gender] identity.”* Participant 2 mentioned *“I’m able to personify and humanise things maybe a little more.”* Participant 4 stated, *“It doesn’t make sense when people question whether talking about LGBT+ people is*

*undermining the religious ethos. Because no, of course it isn't. You're making sure everyone is represented and included."* Participant 5 said, *"the children we teach are going to be at the forefront of society in years to come."* Providing the opportunity for pre-service to understand how to engage with anti-oppressive teaching practices is a key part of transforming schooling and education. Helping teachers to explicitly reflect on their experiences, attitudes and questions will create an open dialogue amongst all educators and promote a more inclusive and safe school environment for LGBTQ+ youth and families (Kearns et al., 2014).

## **CONCLUSION**

The injustices experienced by LGBTQ+ teachers in Ireland needs to be recognised by both policy makers and teachers (Heinz et al., 2016). The lack of transgender and non-binary identities in Irish research continues to exist. Transgender identities must be considered and incorporated into education policies (Dunne & Turraoin, 2015). Inclusive practice should be adopted by all teachers to create a safer educational environment for LGBTQ+ identities. Teachers need to become active LGBTQ+ allies through understanding, engaging, and transforming educational institutions (Heinz et al., 2016; DePalma, 2017). Consideration should be made by policy makers to monitor inclusive practice.

Research that gives LGBTQ+ identities a voice in Irish education should be increased. As transgender identities are lacking in Irish research, there should be a conscious effort to amplify their voices. This study examined the experiences of five LGBTQ+ primary school teachers in Ireland through the means of single, one-on-one interviews. Future research could include follow up interviews from participants, focus groups with a range of LGBTQ+ identities, or an ethnographic study.

The inclusion of LGBTQ+ identities in classrooms should be prioritised by teachers across the country. As participants mentioned in the interviews, using resources that currently exist, such as LGBTQ+ storybooks, can be an effective way of promoting inclusive practice. Schools should develop and implement effective LGBTQ+ inclusive policies and strategies. The current reformation of the RSE curriculum and Primary School Curriculum is an opportunity to explicitly include LGBTQ+ education. LGBTQ+ identities exist everywhere. Our teachers deserve the inclusion of their identities and the celebration of their diversity, experiences, and lives (Pizmony-Levy & BeLonG To Youth Services, 2019).



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