

‘See no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil?’  
The experiences of lesbian and gay  
teachers in Irish schools

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**Introduction**

Issues of sexuality rarely, if ever, receive attention within Irish educational discourse; issues of lesbian and gay sexuality are even more noticeable by their absence. This chapter documents some of the more pertinent issues encountered by lesbian and gay teachers in Ireland, in particular it identifies and explores the difficulties and issues experienced by these teachers in being open about their sexual orientation. The chapter reports on the key findings of interviews carried out with a small number of primary and post-primary lesbian and gay teachers. It also aims to counter common assertions that discourse on issues of sexuality and, more explicitly, lesbian and gay sexualities, are not appropriate within the context of primary schools. The paper will demonstrate how issues of sexuality are intimately linked with human identity and integrity and, therefore, are fundamentally relevant to ensuring the inclusion of all for whom this issue is relevant, that is not only lesbian and gay teachers but also students who may be beginning to identify as lesbian or gay, students with lesbian or gay parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, sisters, brothers, in short a sizeable proportion of users and providers of education within Ireland.

The interviews reveal that the issues encountered by lesbian and gay teachers are primarily ones of inequality and have their roots in the dominant culture of heterosexism<sup>1</sup> that pervades society as a whole, and which results in the oppression and vilification of

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<sup>1</sup> Heterosexism is the authoritative construction of norms that privilege heterosexuality (Fraser 1995).

lesbian and gay sexualities whilst simultaneously rendering them silent and invisible. Moreover, the research shows little variation whether the teacher works in the primary or post-primary sector, or within denominational or non-denominational settings. The relative dearth of research and writing in Irish education about issues relating to sexuality (Lynch and Lodge 2002), and in particular homosexuality, is an indication in itself of the silence and secrecy with which these issues are treated within our education system. Research carried out in Ireland and elsewhere indicates that the issues encountered are seriously destructive and debilitating for the social, emotional and intellectual development of young people who identify themselves as lesbian or gay (Collins et al 1995, Harbeck 1992, Mac An Ghaill 1991, Rofes 1989, Scott 1989). These findings, coupled with the research conducted for this paper, bring to the fore the need for sexual identity to be considered as an essential part of human identity, one which needs to be valued and nurtured as much as all other aspects of human identity.

### *Theorising silence*

Any discussion of sexuality in relation to an institution such as that of Irish education would be incomplete without reference to the particular historical forces and factors that have shaped what is considered 'natural' or 'normal', in this case heterosexuality (Foucault 1981, Inglis 1998). Whilst the Christian Churches' influence on the discourse around sex and sexuality has undoubtedly lessened in recent years, its imprint will have lasting effects. From the late nineteenth century in Ireland the discourse on sexuality was dominated and controlled by the Roman Catholic Church and resulted in the indoctrination of the predominately Catholic populace with a (hetero)sexuality of chastity, modesty, temperance and self-control as its central defining features (Inglis 1998). Anything other than married sexual love was seen as a threat to the natural order of things. Homosexuality was reconstructed as deviant and inferior to the dominant sexual expression of heterosexuality (Young 1990). Within this context what resulted was the authoritative construction of norms that privilege one culture over another (Fraser 1995); in this instance (married) heterosexuality was privileged over all other expressions of sexuality and sexual orientation.

Teachers working within this context occupy an unusual situation when compared to other employees, in that they are partly a product of the system that they now work in, and are therefore subject to the institutional and cultural bias of that system. In the long history of its influence on Irish education the Roman Catholic Church has been quite successful in shaping young peoples'

sexuality through its ability to control what is taught, said and done in the schools that are under its influence. Generations of teachers have grown up in this system and it is likely that they have embodied the silence that surrounds sex and sexuality, and its perceived sinfulness; this in turn is passed onto the generations of students that they teach (Inglis 1998). It is likely that lesbian and gay teachers have further embodied negative messages about 'deviant' sexualities from direct statements from the Christian Churches about the practice of homosexuality as being 'contrary to the laws of nature' and 'objectively disordered' (Agnew 2000 citing Pope John Paul II). In short, all teachers (regardless of their sexual orientation) educated within such an environment have learned the hidden rules and regulations whose transgression exacts severe punishment in their minds, if not in reality.

Non-recognition in the form of silence, and misrecognition and disrespect in the form of homophobia<sup>2</sup> and discrimination, are the quintessential inequalities surrounding the issues that lesbian and gay teachers face. They are a direct result of what Fraser (1995) describes as the cultural-valuational structure of a society that privileges heterosexuality and renders other forms of sexuality either invisible or deviant. Invisibility and silence around issues of sexual orientation are particularly common within the context of Irish education (Lynch and Lodge 2002, O'Carroll and Szalacha 2000) reflecting the prevalence of heterosexism. The net effect of such dominance is that those who do not fit into the dominant mould are effectively forced to displace their sexual identity from their public identity in such a manner as to render it invisible. Identity and the recognition of one's identity are fundamental defining characteristics in human beings (Taylor 1931). Sexual identity is central to developing a full interpretation of the self (Inglis 1998). Consequently, lack of recognition of one's identity, including sexual identity, is a form of oppression, in that it inhibits people from developing and exercising their capacities and expressing their needs, thoughts and feelings (Young 1990). In short, it prevents an individual from striving towards his or her ontological vocation to become fully human (Freire 1972).

Such oppression is a result of the everyday well-intentioned practices of liberal society, in which most people (heterosexual people in this case) do not understand themselves as agents of oppression. This lack of understanding causes minority groups to

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<sup>2</sup> Homophobia is used generally to refer to the manifestation of hatred directed at gay men, lesbians, bisexuals as well as other minority sexualities. It differs from other phobias in that hatred, as well as fear, are the emotional responses.

suffer deep injustices as a result of ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, as well as the structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies (Young 1990). Heterosexism effectively permeates the core of daily life and school activities. Frequently it is argued that one's sexuality has nothing to do with one's role as a teacher. This quite simplistic argument fails to take cognisance of the fact that '... heterosexism is a worldview for most people, it is probably not even conscious. It is a mind-set ... it is also a bias' (McNaught 1993: 47). Consequently, lesbian and gay teachers do not enjoy the same freedom that heterosexual teachers enjoy in the integration of their sexual and public identities. The majority of lesbian and gay teachers believe that a strict separation between their personal and professional lives is required if they are not to risk being subjected to prejudice, discrimination and accusations of hidden sinister agendas (Griffin 1992, Collins et al 1995). This false duality between the private and public spheres of life means that they are not free to be their full human selves in the work place. This is critically problematic for lesbian and gay teachers, but also symptomatic of the denial of the emotional and affectual dimension of life and our emotional selves as being a necessary part of our full human identity.

Although not within the scope of this paper to elaborate upon, it is nevertheless important to highlight that issues around sexuality and homosexuality are major threats to traditional cultural ideology associated with dominant masculinities and gender relations (Connell 1989, Harbeck 1992). Schools, both primary and secondary, are the mirrors of the values and attitudes of society in general, they serve to maintain and reproduce the social and (hetero)sexual hierarchies of the society in which they are placed (Connell 1989, Cooper 1989, Epstein and Johnson 1994, Mac An Ghail 1991, Redman 1994). Although they do not operate in a vacuum, Connell (1989) sees schools as having a powerful and decisive influence in the formation of dominant masculinities, and their associated gender relations. This traditional, dominant ideology is exerted by instilling the norm of universal heterosexuality, and marking sexual difference as deviant and inferior (Young 1990).

As such, lesbian and gay teachers are not only oppressed by lack of recognition of their existence, they are further alienated by being '... regarded as the pathology of the healthy society' (Freire 1972: 48). This misrecognition results in a paradoxical oppression whereby the individual requires recognition as a human being from the dominant culture, but is in return judged by the same group to be different, marked or inferior (Young 1990). The paradox results in the individual forming a double consciousness, being defined

by two cultures, the dominant and the subordinate, at the one time invisible but also marked out as different (Young 1990). The misrecognition that is inherent in this process often results in homophobia, and finds expression in disrespect and violence; another form of oppression (Young 1990). As a result of homophobia, non-dominant sexualities are 'disparaged, subject to shaming, harassment, discrimination, and violence, while being denied legal rights and equal protection' (Fraser 1995: 77).

### **Methodology**

In order to explore whether the theoretical account of oppression outlined above is relevant within the context of Irish education it was necessary to hear what it is like for lesbian and gay teachers in Irish schools today. The seven teachers<sup>3</sup> who participated in the research were identified through personal contacts of the author. The participants in the interviews are mainly from the post-primary sector. As the author herself worked in the post-primary sector, it was easier to make contact with other second-level teachers. Difficulties in accessing respondents in this area have been noted in other research carried out in this field (O'Fathaigh 2003). Two primary teachers were also interviewed. Very similar issues concerned teachers in both sectors. It is important that people appreciate the degree of silence around sexuality, especially within caring professions such as teaching where people's concerns are compounded by the fact that many of them are employed in denominational schools and, as a consequence, their legal rights are not entirely clear. These issues are discussed in depth throughout this chapter.

All participants were assured of full anonymity both for themselves and their respective schools. Such an assurance was not only essential to guarantee the integrity of the research process but is of utmost importance to guarantee the safety and protection of lesbian and gay teachers working within a state in which employment equality legislation is perceived as leaving them vulnerable to discrimination by religious employers who may consider their sexual orientation, if discovered, undermines the religious ethos of the institution. The Employment Equality Act, 1998, permits such

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<sup>3</sup> The participants in the research comprised of seven self-identified lesbian and gay teachers (five lesbians and two gay men). Five of the interviewees were from the post-primary sector. Two interviews with primary sector teachers were conducted later to compare similarities and differences in experience between the post-primary and primary sectors. All seven teachers were asked the same questions through the same interview process.

employers to take 'action which is reasonably necessary to prevent an employee or a prospective employee from undermining the religious ethos of the institution'. The threat of such 'reasonable action' was felt strongly by most of the teachers interviewed. For this reason pseudonyms are used in reporting the research findings and schools are described only as primary or post-primary and denominational or non-denominational, in order to further safeguard the participants anonymity.

The interviews conducted were built around questions drawn from research carried out in other cultural settings (Griffin 1992; Woods and Harbeck, 1992). Amongst other issues, the questions explored 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. As outlined above, the research aimed to explore the issues and makes no claims to be representative of the entire teaching body of lesbian and gay teachers. However, the similarities of experience, despite school type or level, and their striking similarities with more extensive research (Collins et al 1995; Griffin 1992; Woods and Harbeck 1992) are worthy of note.

### **Key findings**

This section illustrates key findings of the research and documents what it is like for lesbian and gay teachers in the Irish education system and in particular how non-recognition, misrecognition and disrespect are experienced by these teachers in their everyday working lives. Selected quotations are used to illustrate key findings.

For all the teachers who participated in the research the process of internalised oppression began in their own schooling where heterosexuality was implicitly if not explicitly hegemonic. None of the respondents received any education about sexuality issues, including lesbian or gay issues, whilst at school. Essentially, sexuality had no name; the sexuality of people who were gay or lesbian was especially nameless. Whilst one may argue that this

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'out' refers to being explicitly open about one's sexual orientation within a heterosexual environment. The converse term 'closeted' denotes individuals who remain silent or secretive about their sexual identity. It should be noted however, that the issue of being 'out' is more complex than what is described here for ease of the uninitiated reader. For many lesbians and gay men there are many dimensions to simply being 'out' or 'closeted' and these vary depending on the context and company they find themselves in at any given time. Indeed this becomes apparent from the research findings within this paper.

may have had positive benefits insofar as sexuality was not always explicitly presented as heterosexual, it also had considerable limitations as students had no opportunity to explore their view on sexuality, or to understand their own sexuality in relation to dominant norms, as this female teacher recalls:

... when I look back now I kind of think that some things that I was experiencing and not able to name were part of my experiencing difference growing up lesbian. I was quite lonely during much of my adolescence and I know I was really feeling different at that time ... I knew somewhere that this was to be hidden and not ok socially, that people did not talk about this ... (Sheila, post-primary, denominational)

In light of the historical context of the discourse on sexuality in Ireland, it is not surprising that invisibility and silence around sexuality were recurrent themes in the participants' stories. The same teacher believed that there was, in fact, a positive aspect of this invisibility and silence for her in that she was saved from '... not having them [the teachers] mess around with my mind ...'. The belief held by this respondent, that she was saved in some manner from 'corruption' is quite untenable, in that she clearly received a covert message that there 'was something wrong' with homosexuality. This response clearly illustrates a (heterosexual) cultural imperialism whereby the dominant norms have rendered the minority (lesbian, in this instance) invisible at the same time as marking it out as an inferior reduced mode of being (Young 1990, Freire 1972). Further evidence of such stigma is apparent in how the same teacher describes her struggle to reconcile the stigmatised identity of lesbianism with her feelings and actions as she came to recognise her sexuality:

... I didn't know what lesbians were; I didn't know that what I was doing [falling in love with a woman] was lesbian. I thought lesbians were kind of old women who hung around toilets ... and I was not one of those. (Sheila, post-primary, denominational)

### *The climate of schools in relation to lesbian and gay issues*

The climate of schools in relation to sex and sexuality is very important in shaping attitudes and values and in particular those relating to lesbian and gay sexuality. Indeed, how sex and sexuality are addressed in schools is an important gauge indicating the level of inclusiveness and equality present. Respondents were asked to describe their workplace in terms of how it deals with lesbian and gay issues. Responses demonstrated that the invisibility

and silence that teachers experienced during their school years is still very much in evidence today. Although some did refer to the openness of some staff to difference, the domination of heterosexism was very apparent from the responses received:

It [issues of sexual orientation] has never arisen, it doesn't arise. (Paul, primary, denominational)

I have never heard anything mentioned [about sexual orientation] at all, not once, never. (Maeva, post-primary, denominational)

This complete denial of the existence of both lesbian and gay teachers, and students, is further evidence of the prevalence of heterosexism, displaying striking similarities with research conducted in different cultural contexts (Griffin 1992, Woods and Harbeck 1992).

### *Split identities*

McNaught (1993) claims that all individuals have a public and a private sexual orientation identity. For heterosexuals these identities are nearly always the same, but where there may be severe penalties for honesty in relation to one's sexual identity, a lesbian or gay man must choose what they disclose in any given situation. 'When our behaviour and/or our identity are different than our orientation, it can take a terrible toll' (McNaught 1993: 33), as evidenced by this teacher's comments:

... I think the ability to be unable to become unconscious of who we are, all the time, is ... detrimental mentally because you are continuously aware of situations, you can see them coming a mile off, you spot them and you immediately go into a kind of an adrenaline rush in your head where you are working out how do I avoid this, how do I remove myself from this ... (Mary, post-primary, denominational)

A World Health Organisation report (WHO 1991, cited in Collins et al 1995: 4) concluded '... that people who hide their sexual orientation for fear of discrimination or alienation live less fulfilling lives, encounter additional stress and are placed in situations that are not conducive to safe sexual practices'. The toll that this exerts inhibits lesbian or gay individuals in their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts and feelings, and as such is a form of oppression that has its roots in the '... unquestioned norms, habits and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and collective consequences of those rules' (Young 1990: 40-41). The quotation that follows illustrates how these unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols can

unintentionally lead to the exclusion of lesbian and gay teachers and their subsequent denial of certain benefits enjoyed by heterosexual teachers in recognised partnerships:

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 ... .. whip-rounds for somebody having a baby, somebody getting married or engaged, or recognition that their partners would be sick and this kind of thing. (Sheila, post-primary, denominational)

### *Managing split identities*

Given that teachers are not encouraged to be 'out' in schools, the interview focused, in part, on asking participants questions regarding the management of their sexual identities whilst in school. Participants were asked initially if they saw a separation between their home (lesbian or gay) identity and their (teacher) public identity. Again responses were varied, some said that while they were 'out' to some colleagues they did 'deliberately hide it from others' (Sheila, post-primary, denominational). Others remarked that they 'don't make any claims ... in any direction [sexual identity]' (Mary, post-primary, denominational), or that '... in a teaching environment I become asexual. I don't really have a powerful lesbian logo stamped on my head ... ' (Orla, post-primary, non-denominational), or '... neither do I shout about who I am in my private life, or in school' (Maeve, post-primary, denominational). However when asked as to whether they ever censored conversations in school when speaking about their private lives the responses were somewhat in contradiction to the above:

... I've come out to two other teachers but I haven't come out to the rest of the staff and I don't mention things like ... oh, I was at the lesbian arts festival last weekend or something, I am aware of avoiding that ... (Ann, primary, denominational)

... if I was in a staff room context, I would use the word 'them' or 'they', as opposed to naming the person ... I suppose I would, I'd do the pronoun thing. (Orla, post-primary, non-denominational)

In light of these responses it seems that these teachers do, perhaps unconsciously, censor what they say in relation to their private (sexual) identity whilst in school. This indicates that there is a

separation between their home (lesbian or gay) identity and their (teacher) public identity. With regard to other identity management strategies – all participants said that they regulated what they say in formal/informal interactions with students. Indeed some teachers expressed severe anxiety and fear of adverse reactions from students if they were to be ‘out’:

... it [homophobia] could get more sadistic, very more subtle maybe, but its quite intimidating. And, I suppose, I'm very conscious of the fact that I live very close to the school and that it could be a home attack ... (Orla, post-primary, non-denominational)

Participants were then asked quite an open question with regard to mechanisms against disclosure of sexual identity in situations that they did not choose. There was an overriding sense of privacy around most of the participant's sexual identity, to which they felt that others were being intrusive in asking questions of them:

... it depends on the question and the way it was asked, some people are just born nosy. (Orla, post-primary, non-denominational)

... if it's a stranger or someone that I felt is just being curious I certainly wouldn't give them the information just for the sake of it. (Tom, post-primary, denominational)

... if I was asked questions about certain things I would be vague and people would know that there are certain lines that they don't pursue. (Mary, post-primary, denominational)

Other strategies used to deflect attention from them included not focusing directly on the issue of sexuality, or by preparing for the situation before it arose:

... in recent years I haven't been as eager [to pursue lesbian or gay issues] because I felt there were repercussions to that ... And I tried in other ways to get across the ideas of tolerance, respect and understanding ... (Mary, post-primary, denominational)

It is clear from the above that lesbian and gay teachers utilise various strategies to ensure that their sexual identity is not disclosed in situations that have not been chosen by them. Those referred to above involved regulating topics that they covered to take the attention away from lesbian and gay issues, also careful preparation for situations that could be confrontational and their avoidance. There are perhaps other protective mechanisms that teachers employ that they become desensitised to as this teacher refers to:

... protecting myself becomes so habit, so much of a habit I almost don't know when I'm doing it or not doing it ... (Sheila, post-primary, denominational)

What is clear however is that being a lesbian or gay teacher in an environment that does not welcome diversity can make a big difference to them and their lives both in and outside of school, as encapsulated by this teacher:

... I think that at various times over the last several years, I have felt this threat or sense of fear within me because of my lifestyle and my sexual identity ... and I would be aware that it can, over a long period of time, affect my health in terms of stress, and not in an overt way ... but deep inside me in the pit of my stomach ... [I am] very aware of ... ... where I felt my soul was displaced, because my soul was the soul of a gay woman it had been displaced from myself in order for me to exist in this situation ... (Mary, post-primary, denominational)

The separation of professional and personal lives that is depicted by this teacher encompasses the essence of the oppression felt by many lesbian and gay teachers – it strikes at the very core of human identity and dignity. The stress that this teacher refers to is not overt, nor is it apparent to the unobservant eye; however, it is real to the individual suffering it, as are the compromises they may make to avoid it in the future. Therefore being a lesbian or gay educator, within an institution that denies their existence and makes it impossible for them to integrate all the aspects of their lives, does make a very real difference – to the individual lesbian or gay teacher.

### *Misrecognition and disrespect*

This, and other research, found that despite the fact that it seems unacceptable to positively include lesbian and gay issues and identities, it is, however, evidently acceptable to denigrate them, given the reports of homophobia and harassment that this section reveals (Mac An Ghail 1991, Trenchard and Warren 1987, Woods and Harbeck 1992). All of the teachers interviewed had encountered homophobia in their workplaces, either personally or having witnessed it in relation to someone else. In all cases homophobia was expressed in comments and jokes:

... It [homophobia] would take the form of banter, either sexual banter or slugging, at times among themselves [male staff] ... there's always an underlying insult in it. (Mary, post-primary, denominational)

A number of the teachers interviewed had experienced homophobia directly from both students and teachers within their schools.

It should be pointed out that the issue of harassment by students due to sexual orientation was felt most strongly by those teachers working in the post-primary sector; it was less of an issue for the primary teachers. However, both primary teachers interviewed felt the fear of harassment from older students in the latter stages of primary level.

The following is a report of an incident in which one teacher tells of an attempt by someone to have him removed from his position due to knowledge of his sexual orientation:

... an anonymous letter was sent to the principal ... saying was she aware of the fact that I was a gay man living with another in [name of area] and did she consider me suitable to be teaching in junior infants ... .. It undermined my confidence personally and professionally and also too there was the idea well who the hell knew where I lived ... .. I found it nasty, scary that someone disliked me, hated me, so much that they wanted me to actually lose my job. (Paul, primary, denominational)

All incidents of homophobic harassment are damaging to those they are directed at, arguably more damaging are those of a violent nature.

Participants were also aware of homophobic actions and comments directed at students, both by teachers and students alike:

I've seen a homophobic ... expression with kids who they [male teachers] thought could be gay and some of it was their own sense of being uncomfortable around these students. Or I suppose in a very unconscious way, colluding in the bullying that was happening by not making a stand for these students, by letting it happen ... bullying is a huge issue ... a large proportion of the bullying is based on a suspicion that boys are gay. (Mary, post-primary, denominational)

The condoning of homophobia by schools evident from this research matches that which was found to be evident in other studies (Lynch and Lodge 2002, Mac An Ghail 1991, Trenchard and Warren 1987). It also demonstrates how much of the homophobic actions and comments were administered by male teachers and students. Both exist within institutions where overt and covert gender stereotyping is used to maintain and reproduce the dominant power relations of society in general (Mac An Ghail 1991). Hegemonic masculinity is inherent in these power relations whereby, through an array of practices, women are subordinated. One such practice includes the placement of homosexual masculinities at the bottom of the gender hierarchy among men, as remarked by this female teacher:

... the culture of a boys' school is very much along the lines of a single identity of manhood and the exploration of their sexualities is definitely not catered for, in fact it is discouraged because of the subtle culture that says you must be macho, you must be sporting, you must be tough ... (Mary, post-primary, denominational)

### *Depreciated and misunderstood identities*

Evidence of how devaluation and misrecognition have been internalised by some lesbian and gay teachers was revealed through the fear that some felt in their everyday interactions with students and the threat of possible accusations of improper sexual behaviour towards students:

... one of my biggest fears as a teacher, and I think its unfair that I have to say, as a lesbian teacher ... 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 as a person if that was exposed. (Orla, post-primary, non-denominational)

I am in situations [PE classes] which could be compromising for me, could be – they're not ... ... I'm almost doubly aware of it because I just think that, I can imagine the problems that parent might have ... (Maeve, post-primary, denominational)

It would seem that these teachers have internalised negative perceptions of minority sexualities communicated through heterosexism. This issue of child sexual abuse is extremely delicate and one that all teachers have to be aware of; however, when probed, both participants said that their lesbian identity made them more aware. Another male teacher felt that it was more a gender issue than a gay issue and stressed his need to

identify yourself almost unconsciously asexual, in that you don't involve yourself with anything like that because of the whole fear in terms of paedophilia, just that fear of being sexually 'out' ... (Paul, primary, denominational)

As highlighted earlier, being sexually 'out' is implicit for heterosexual teachers, it is not for lesbian and gay teachers, therefore one may deduce that this is most definitely a gay issue.

Further evidence of misrecognition in terms of the association of homosexuality with paedophilia was experienced by one participant in the company of an officer from a teacher's union, when he 'jokingly' referred to the inclusion of sexual orientation in the union's equality statement; the following paraphrases this reference:

... 'what do you think about the paedophile clause?' and I said 'what?' and he [the union officer] said, 'you know, they're protecting paedophiles now ...' When questioned further on who exactly he was referring to this teacher reported him as having said '... lesbians and gays ... some of them are paedophiles'... (Sheila, post-primary, denominational)

Inherent in this statement is a direct association between homosexuality and paedophilia and subsequently the devaluation of homosexuality as a perverse form of sexuality. Such messages can lead to internalised homophobia as expressed by the teachers cited above in their fears of allegations of improper sexual behaviour.

### *Legal rights and discrimination*

Whilst Ireland currently enjoys a position at the forefront of homosexual legal rights in Europe due to the Employment Equality Act, 1998, and Equal Status Act, 2000, protection for lesbian and gay teachers is far from strong. In simple terms, openly lesbian or gay teachers may face great difficulties in accessing jobs and promotion under the control of religious establishments. None of the teachers who participated in this research felt completely secure that their sexual orientation, if known, could not be used against them in this regard as evidenced by the following quotations:

... all else being equal let's [interview board] take the straight person ... (Ann, primary, denominational)

... I think there would be very few schools that would take on a headmaster who isn't married ... I think you know if I was going for an interview and if the board knew that I was gay that would be a hurdle to get over. (Tom, post-primary, denominational)

Being open about one's lesbian or gay sexuality is simply not an option for most teachers if they are to protect themselves from suffering negative consequences.

I think being 'out' is a difficulty and I think that most lesbian teachers are not out in school and not because it doesn't matter but because they think it does matter and it will matter or change something, or because society is so heterosexual, the workplace is so heterosexual, this whole children/family thing is so heterosexual that it just doesn't seem to fit being lesbian or gay within all of this ... (Ann, primary, denominational)

The dominance of heterosexuality that this teacher speaks about as a barrier to being out highlights the lack of recognition that lesbian and gay teachers experience. Implicit in all the interviews carried

out for this research was the notion of power and the notion that being completely open about one's sexual identity meant leaving oneself powerless in a system where there is no formal support:

... because of the Employment Equality Act [1998] you've got no protection against the principal using this [knowledge of your sexuality] against you. The principal can legally use it against you. I don't see it ever happening that you'd be fired for it, but certainly in terms of going for promotion ... .. they're legally within their rights to say, well no actually there's somebody else that has just come in off the street and we're going to give it to them because you don't reflect the ethos of the school. So I think the element of power that's going on, how power is being provided to someone else by telling them of your sexuality is something that would never happen for a straight person ... (Paul, primary, denominational)

Within this exploration of the issues that impact on the working and personal lives of lesbian and gay teachers many key issues arose, most of which are a direct result of non-recognition of non-dominant sexual orientation identities, and the devaluation of such identities through the process of heterosexism. Although the interviews revealed some variation in the attitudes and opinions of participants, there was a great deal of shared experiences, despite the different types of schools represented, and range of teaching experience. In the absence of more extensive research regarding the experiences of lesbians and gays in an Irish education context the findings suggest that there are serious equality issues that impact upon lesbian and gay teachers regardless of their teaching situation. At the root of these inequalities is the non-recognition of lesbian and gay sexualities, which is manifested through silence. The silence effectively serves to censure any positive exposure of lesbian and gay sexualities, and condones their disparagement. The result is an enormous drain on the personal and professional resources of the teachers affected, as is evident from the deep-seated anxiety about disclosure in this study. This anxiety evidently varies from person-to-person, and context-to-context, nevertheless it displays a deep sense of social exclusion.

### **Conclusion**

... if there's anything we owe young people it's the truth, and I feel I'm hiding that from them, and I think that's sad. (Sheila, post-primary, denominational)

The truth that this lesbian teacher refers to is hidden by the silence and fear that surrounds sexual orientation within schools, borne

out by this and other research (Griffin 1992, Lynch and Lodge 2002, Woods and Harbeck 1992). The powerful censorial nature of this silence contributes to multiple forms of oppression resulting in psychological, social, cultural and economic stress, as evidenced by the teachers involved in this work. For students identifying as, or beginning to identify, as gay or lesbian, educational disadvantage can be added to this list. The White Paper on Education (1995: 7) established the fundamental aim of education as '... to serve individual, social and economic well-being and to enhance quality of life'. It also cites pluralism and equality as educational principles derived from this fundamental aim of education. Whilst small and tentative steps are being made in some quarters,<sup>5</sup> the evidence from this research suggests that concerted efforts need to be made if these principles and aims are to be met in terms of the recognition and inclusion of lesbian and gay sexualities within education and, ultimately, the equal participation of those students who identify as, or who may be beginning to identify as, lesbian or gay.

An individual's identity is of fundamental importance to their development because, '... we owe our integrity ... to the receipt of approval or recognition from other persons ... [which is necessary for] ... the positive understanding of self ...' (Honneth 1992: 188, cited in Fraser 1995: 71-2). Sexual identity is an essential part of human identity; consequently in being denied recognition lesbian and gay individuals are forced to exist in a reduced mode of being, limiting their freedom and rights as human beings. Silence and disrespect for lesbian and gay sexualities has a negative impact on educational establishments in general. Issues of cultural domination and devaluation are not exclusive to any one minority group; people with disabilities, people of colour, people from lower-socio-economic backgrounds all suffer from similar forms of oppression due to non-recognition and misrecognition (Young 1990). Consequently, schools need to recognise and respect diversity in order to redress the situation and become more inclusive of all their students and staff.

Issues of difference, whether related to sexual identity, ability, ethnicity, class, gender, etc are issues of equality and plurality. They are also a reflection of the diversity of human life, experience and culture of which society is composed. How any one issue is dealt with, or ignored, reflects how all issues of difference are dealt with. If one is denigrated, then there is a danger

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<sup>5</sup> For example the Irish National Teachers Organisation opposed Section 37(1) of the Employment Equality Act 1998; The Equality Authority has been proactive in raising the issue of lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers at a joint conference with the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland.

that all difference will be equally devalued, for all such issues reflect the operation of power and dominance over powerlessness and oppression. Therefore, the evidence presented in this research provides a response to those who may say that issues of sexual identity have no place in primary schools, in that identity and the recognition of one's identity are fundamental defining characteristics in human beings (Taylor 1931), and sexual identity is central to developing a full interpretation of the self (Inglis 1998). If teachers are so preoccupied with managing aspects of their identities because of fear, how can they be full human beings and therefore provide a broad and holistic education to our young people?

If there is to be any real attempt made to redress the imbalance of dominant cultures in our education system, the silence needs to be broken. The onus is not on those who exist under the blanket of silence to do this alone. Those in positions of power within institutions of education need to start being truthful about the totality of the real world, acknowledging the richness of diversity and celebrating the difference that is an inherent aspect of human nature. We not only owe the truth to our students – we owe it to ourselves and an obvious starting point is in education, however:

... in order to educate the kids I think we need to educate ourselves.  
(Maeve, post-primary, denominational)

We also need to remember that '*... the people that really need it [education] are the very ones that probably think they don't need it*' (Sheila, post-primary denominational).

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