



A Sociological Critique of Youth Strategies and Educational Policies that Address LGBTQ Youth Issues

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Abstract

This paper adopts sociological and “after-queer” lenses in order to problematise anti-bullying approaches that are justified on the basis of the apparent “vulnerability” of LGBTQ youth to a range of negative mental health outcomes, including self-harm and suicidality. Subjecting recent youth strategies, educational policies and instructional resources to critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003), it identifies the discourse of risk/vulnerability as a dominant or “nodal” discourse around which other sub-discourses—including the discourses of homophobic bullying, isolation, suicidality, self-harm and resilience—cluster. It considers the discursive effects of this configuration of discourses which foreground or include certain aspects or experiences of being LGBTQ to the exclusion of others, resulting in a “selective representation,” “simplification” and “condensation” of a much more complex social and cultural reality (Fairclough 2005). It argues that the singling out of LGBTQ youth as being “at risk” of homophobic bullying and mental health difficulties has a range of abnormalising, othering, re-stigmatising and heteronormativity-bolstering effects that obfuscate the role that schools themselves play in creating and sustaining the conditions that produce bullying. Rather than positioning LGBTQ youth as victims, and specifically targeting those who identify as LGBTQ as the beneficiaries of anti-homophobic bullying initiatives, it advocates a range of alternative frameworks that privilege the conditions and effects of gender regulation and normativity to which *all* children and youth are routinely subjected. The paper concludes by highlighting the need to address school-based organisational and cultural practices in order to reduce the incidence of gender and sexuality-based bullying in schools.

Keywords Critical discourse analysis · Homophobic bullying · Heteronormativity · Suicidality · Gendered sexual socialisation · Gender policing · “After-queer” scholarship · Youth strategy

Introduction

Despite increasing recognition of the harm that gender and sexuality-based forms of bullying can cause, as well as a proliferation of various measures to address homophobic and related forms of bullying, the denigration of non-normative gender expression and sexual identities remains commonplace in schools and in the wider society. This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of the problematic effects that discourses of homophobic bullying and LGBTQ victimisation and vulnerability more generally can have in terms of obscuring the larger mechanisms through which gender and sexuality-based in-

equalities are reproduced in schools and society.¹ Specifically, I seek to problematise gender and sexuality-based anti-bullying approaches that are justified in terms of the apparent “vulnerability” or susceptibility of LGBTQ youth to a range of negative mental health outcomes, including self-harm and suicidality. Drawing on recent educational and youth-related developments in an Irish context, I interrogate the discursive and material effects of anti-bullying interventions that have become unthinkable without depictions of suffering, suicidal LGBTQ teens (Airton 2013; Driver 2008; Formby 2015; Savin-Williams 2005; Gilbert et al. 2018).

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¹ The terms “LGBTQ” and “queer” are used interchangeably throughout the paper. The term “queer” is used in the political sense, to reflect the re-deployment of “queer” away from its formerly injurious intent towards alternative understandings of LGBTQ identities. In the interests of consistency, the term “LGBTQ” is used as the acronym throughout except where a document includes a different acronym in its title, such as “LGBT” or “LGBTQI+.” In these instances, the acronym used in the document’s title is used.

The paper forms part of a larger body of work that takes inspiration from “after-queer” research to challenge the logics of vulnerability and victimhood underpinning LGBTQ advocacy and policy-making (e.g. Marshall 2010; Talburt 2010; Talburt and Rasmussen 2010). It builds on the author’s earlier published work which engaged with the complex consequences and effects of LGBTQ mental health research by “speaking back” to risk-based narratives that foreclose more complex and critical engagement with queerness and with the heteronormative structures that fuel homophobia and transphobia (Bryan 2017; Bryan and Mayock 2017). This earlier work sought to complicate the so-called “suicide consensus” that has emerged over the last three decades in relation to LGBTQ youth which deems them to be at elevated risk of mental health difficulties and suicidality (Eliason 2010, p. 6), and considered how LGBTQ subjects themselves problematise and resist these discourses of vulnerability and victimhood. The present study extends this earlier work by critically considering how discourses of vulnerability influence youth and educational strategising, and their role in constituting particular *subjects* of youth policy who are deemed to be universally “at risk” by virtue of their LGBTQ identification (Talburt et al. 2004). While there is an increasing body of scholarship that challenges the conflation of LGBTQ identities with victimisation and vulnerability (e.g., Airton 2013; Driver 2008; Formby 2015; Savin-Williams 2005; Gilbert et al. 2018), to date there has been little published research which critically examines the discursive and material effects of these discourses as they circulate in public policy, especially in an Irish context where LGBTQ policy and research are in their infancy.

The denominational structure of Irish education, which created the conditions within which structural homophobia has flourished in schools, is the contextual backdrop against which much of the evolving research and policy-making has taken place (Bailey 2017; Neary 2018). Numerous authors have highlighted the challenges associated with identifying as LGBTQ within an educational context that continues to be heavily influenced by the denominational values and teachings of the Catholic Church (Fahie 2016, 2017; Neary 2012, 2017, 2018). Fahie (2017), for example, documented the negative impact that fear and unease over the public manifestation of one’s sexual identity had upon LGBTQ teachers’ professional practice in terms of their willingness to engage with sexuality issues in their classrooms. Moreover, Neary (2017) highlighted the impact that fears about loss of reputation and employment as a result of the legislative power of religious ethos can have in terms of ensuring a “heteronormative docility” on the part of LGBTQ teachers (Neary 2017, p. 59). Other research has examined school principals’ experiences of the implementation of *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Skills 2013a) which were first introduced in 2013 (Foody et al.

2018) as well as the “policy archaeology” behind the introduction of the “identity-based” bullying clause within these *Procedures* (Bailey 2017). The present article seeks to add to this literature by subjecting the substantive content of these *Procedures* and related youth and education policy documents to critical scrutiny, with a view to illuminating some of the difficulties the discursive construction of the “at risk” queer young person poses in terms of the prevalence of sexuality and gender-based bullying in schools. It draws on “after-queer” and sociology of bullying frameworks and critical discourse analysis techniques (CDA) (Fairclough 2003, 2010) to consider the effects of particular ways of thinking about LGBTQ youth that are embedded in policy and strategy documents and curriculum resources concerned with LGBTQ youth well-being (Youdell 2009). The key argument advanced in the paper is that the discursive positioning of LGBTQ youth as being being “at risk” of homophobic bullying and mental health difficulties has a range of abnormalising, othering, re-stigmatising and heteronormativity-bolstering effects, including the marking of heterosexual and gender-conforming identities as healthy, normal and untroublesome. It is further argued that the preoccupation with homophobic and transphobic bullying precludes critical engagement with mundane, everyday school-based features and practices which create the conditions whereby bullying can flourish. The next section presents an overview of the sociology of bullying literature which illuminates the social function that bullying serves in reflecting and reinscribing inequalities that are embedded in larger social structures (Pascoe 2013).

The Sociology of Bullying

While much of the anti-bullying literature has focused on school-based bullying, it has failed to take adequate account of the sociocultural context of school—which is linked to larger social structures such as gender and sexuality that children and youth have to navigate on a daily basis (Duncan 2013a, b; Payne and Smith 2016; Temko 2019; Pascoe 2013). From a sociological perspective, schools are “microsystems embedded in a larger cultural context,” and broader social policies, discriminations or legislative scenarios “trickle down and impact school cultures” (Pearson and Wilkinson 2018, p. 198). As such, schools typically reflect dominant social structures and values, particularly in relation to the norms and behaviours associated with normative gender and sexual identities (Gansen 2017; Wilkinson and Pearson 2009). Gender is produced and reproduced in schools and other educational settings, often through routine, mundane, everyday practices, rituals, and rules. Educational institutions, including early childhood settings, comprise important sites of gendered sexual socialisation wherein “individuals...come to understand rules, beliefs, meanings, and gender-specific codes of conduct associated with conducting oneself as “proper”

girls or boys with respect to sexuality and sexual behaviours” (Gansen 2017, p.256). On the one hand, educational institutions provide the setting within which teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil interactions take place but they also act as *institutional agents* through which various structures, policies, rules, practices and rituals which produce and reproduce gender are enacted (Kuzmic 2000). From this vantage point, we need to take seriously the role that schools themselves play in creating the conditions where bullying flourishes if we are to meaningfully address the prevalence of these behaviours in education (Duncan 2013a, b; Gilbert et al. 2018; Payne and Smith 2016). Recent years have witnessed the emergence of a body of literature that adopts an explicitly sociological perspective on the problem of bullying (e.g. Brenick and Halgunseth 2017; Pascoe 2013; Payne and Smith 2013, 2016; Søndergaard 2012; Temko 2019). This literature has emerged as a response to the perceived failure of the dominant bullying literature, which has its disciplinary roots in psychology, to adequately address the underlying reasons *why* bullying actually happens, and relatedly, the broader social contexts within which bullying occurs (Temko 2019; Pascoe 2013). Within the dominant psychological framework, bullying stems from deficiencies in bullies’ psychological development or family background, such as their inability to express empathy, inadequate socialisation or a dysfunctional family structure (Payne and Smith 2016). Sociological critiques take, as their starting point, the individualistic and micro-level foci of these approaches which obfuscate the role that larger social inequalities play in bullying, particularly with regard to the extent to which bullying reflects and reinscribes inequalities that are embedded in larger social structures (Pascoe 2013). Sociological approaches underscore the extent to which the social context of schools is influenced by a broader heteronormative cultural landscape wherein heterosexuality is “produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon” relative to other sexual identities (Kitzinger 2005, p. 478). Schools are heteronormative spaces that reflect the dominant structures and values of society, especially with regard to norms and behaviours associated with “acceptable” sexuality as well as a binaristic understanding of gender which presumes that the sex assigned to one at birth corresponds to their gender identification or how they express their gender (Gansen 2017). Pearson and Wilkinson (2018) define heteronormativity as a:

hierarchical system in which heterosexual identities and expressions are privileged above non-heterosexual identities and expressions, where cisgender identities are privileged above noncisgender identities, where heterosexuality and cisgenderism are assumed and celebrated, and where anyone perceived as gender nonconforming, noncisgender or nonheterosexual is stigmatized (Worthen 2016) (Pearson and Wilkinson 2018, p. 196).

The sociological literature illuminates the ways in which heteronormativity is promoted, normalised, and enforced across all levels of the education system, even in early childhood settings where children have yet to develop a salient sexual identity (Gansen 2017). It is critical of what it refers to as the “gender blind” quality of mainstream bullying literature, and the role that bullying plays in enforcing cultural expectations about gender and sexuality and ensuring that people perform their gender “correctly” (Ringrose and Renold 2010, p. 576). This sociologically-oriented literature has been especially fruitful as a means of demonstrating the social or “policing” function that school-based bullying serves in order to enforce cultural expectations about gender and sexuality (Payne and Smith 2016, p. 127; Ringrose and Renold 2010). As Payne and Smith (2018) put it, “[t]he further youth fall from idealised forms of masculinity and femininity, the more vulnerable they are to these patterns of heightened policing as well as more severe forms of violence (p. 406).” From this vantagepoint, bullying functions as a tool for the preservation of the status quo in relation to traditional understandings and expressions of gender and sexuality (Payne and Smith 2018).

The academic literature on bullying has grown alongside increased media attention on the phenomenon of bullying and the emergence of an antibullying industry (Pascoe n.d). These phenomena have evolved in the context of a growing global trend towards the singular representation of queer youth as vulnerable, “at risk” victims in schools and society (Harris and Farrington 2014). This narrative highlights LGBTQ youths’ susceptibility to homophobic or transphobic bullying and their “at riskness” for a range of associated negative mental health outcomes such as self-harm, depression and suicidality. The present article—which locates itself within the sociological tradition—seeks to contribute to an emerging literature which is critical of the discursive construction of LGBTQ youth as invariably “at risk” of bullying, victimisation and mental health difficulties (Airtion 2013; Harris and Farrington 2014; Gilbert et al. 2018; Jones 2013; Marshall 2010; Monk 2011; Rasmussen 2006; Talburt et al. 2004; Talburt 2010). It operates from the premise that discourses constitute rather than merely reflect material reality, thereby shaping or structuring how we think about LGBTQ experiences and subsequent possibilities for action (Allen 2014; Fields 2008). As such, it considers the educational implications of the discursive construction of LGBTQ youth as invariably “at risk” of bullying, victimisation and serious mental health difficulties—including self-harm and suicidality—and highlights the importance of schools and other educational settings as both *agents* where the structures and practices of schooling serve to define gender and sexuality for teachers and students and as *settings* where social actors act as critical agents in the production of gender and sexual identities (Kuzmic 2000).

An Overview of Irish LGBTQ Mental Health Research

LGBTQ mental health has been a focus of considerable media and political attention in Ireland over the last decade. At least some of this attention has been the direct result of the publication of two large-scale research studies exploring prevalence rates of bullying, depression, self-harm, suicidality, and substance use amongst LGBTQ people living in Ireland. *The Supporting LGBT Lives* study was the first major study of its kind in an Irish context (Mayock et al. 2009) and comprised an online survey of 1110 LGBTQ-identified people ranging in ages 14–73, as well as 54 in-depth interviews with service providers and LGBTQ people (16–62 years of age). The *LGBTIreland* study (Higgins et al. 2016), which was published 7 years later, comprised an online survey of over 2000 LGBTQ identified people similar to the one that had been distributed as part of the *Supporting LGBT Lives* study for comparative purposes. It also included a survey “[t]o measure attitudes towards LGBT people in a nationally representative sample of the Irish public” (p. 21). Both studies were commissioned by GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) and BeLonG To Youth Services—the two most prominent LGBTQ non-governmental organisations at the time—but were conducted by different research teams. The survey findings from both studies revealed that actual lifetime prevalence rate of suicide attempts amongst members of the LGBTQ community in Ireland is relatively high; about a fifth of online survey participants in both studies reported that they had attempted suicide on at least one occasion. Moreover, 27 percent of *Supporting LGBT Lives* and 34 percent of *LGBTIreland* survey participants indicated that they had self-harmed on at least one occasion.

Both studies also had a qualitative component. In the case of the *LGBTIreland* study (Higgins et al. 2016) however, this was based exclusively on open-ended questions which were included in the online survey, whereas the *Supporting LGBT Lives* study (Mayock et al. 2009) also comprised 40 in-depth interviews with individuals who identified as LGBTQ as well as qualitative data derived from the survey itself. This methodological approach allowed for a far more detailed engagement with motives as well as meanings that helped to locate, contextualise, and understand self-harm and suicidality than the online survey approach alone allowed. This mixed-methods approach yielded a greater diversity of divergent views and experiences than single paradigm probing might have permitted and also placed an onus on the researchers to speak to all aspects and complexities of the data presented to them (Bryan and Mayock 2017).

When the statistical data on suicidality were considered in conjunction with qualitative data derived from the *Supporting LGBT Lives* study (Mayock et al. 2009), a complicated and highly nuanced picture of LGBTQ mental health and suicidality emerged. This was particularly evident in relation to the

meanings that those participants who *had* felt suicidal and/or who had acted on these suicidal thoughts, ascribed to their suicidal feelings and actions (Bryan and Mayock 2017). Participants’ narrative accounts of their self-injurious behaviour or suicidal feelings or actions illuminated the extent to which these experiences are often attributable to a range of overlapping factors that cannot be reduced to monocausal explanation. Whereas some participants recognised their sexuality or gender identity as having played a direct role in contributing to their suicidal distress, others alluded to a range of additional, or in some instances, an entirely unrelated set of circumstances or events in their lives that had caused them to contemplate or attempt suicide. Another issue which was addressed in the context of the analysis of interview data was the possibility of the potential for mental health research to influence participants’ understandings of their own thought processes and behaviours which underscores the need for highly detailed, nuanced and critical engagement with both the subject matter, and analytical process involved. As outlined in the following section, Irish anti-bullying policy was not informed by contextualised narrative accounts that complexify dominant understandings but rather by decontextualised statistical generalisations that have a re-stigmatising rather than a liberatory effect.

An Overview of Recent Anti-Bullying Policy in Ireland

Official recognition has been afforded to homophobic and related “identity-based” forms of bullying in Ireland since 2013, with the publication of an *Action Plan on Bullying* (Department of Education and Skills 2013b) and related *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Skills 2013a).² The *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* which were developed on foot of the *Action Plan* provide direction to school personnel in preventing and intervening in school-based bullying. These *Procedures* represent the most significant development in relation to tackling bullying in Irish schools to have been published in 20 years (Foody et al. 2018). Whereas homophobic bullying had been recognised as a problem in Irish schools prior to the publication of the *Supporting LGBT Lives* study (e.g. Norman and Galvin 2006; Minton et al. 2008), its status as a legitimate educational problem warranting serious attention was elevated with the publication of this research (Bailey 2017). Those elements of the *Supporting LGBT Lives* study (Mayock et al. 2009) which documented high levels of homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools, as well as mental health difficulties among a significant minority of LGBTQ participants (Mayock et al. 2009),

² Other identity-based forms of bullying recognised in these policies include “racist bullying, bullying based on a person’s membership of the Traveller community and bullying of those with disabilities or special educational needs” (DES 2013a, p. 8).

helped to justify the need for a specific clause on “identity-based” bullying in schools’ individual anti-bullying policies, with specific reference to transphobic and homophobic bullying (ibid). As Bailey notes, “The impact of the [*Supporting LGBT Lives*] report meant that LGBT activists were even better positioned in relation to demanding that something be done at school level with regard to transphobic and homophobic bullying” (Bailey 2017, p. 30). A working group to address bullying was established in 2012 by the Minister for Education and Skills at the time, Ruairí Quinn, T.D. These anti-bullying initiatives were supported by a commitment in the Programme for Government “to encourage schools to develop anti-bullying policies and, in particular strategies to combat homophobic bullying, to support students” (DES 2013b, p.11). Representatives from the two most prominent national LGBTQ organisations at the time, the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) and BeLonG To Youth Services, who commissioned the *Supporting LGBT Lives* study, were members of this working group. Their presence on the working group helped to ensure that homophobic bullying would be recognised as a legitimate problem that needed to be addressed within the context of anti-bullying legislation for schools (Bailey 2017). As Bailey outlines, the inclusion of homophobic and transphobic bullying within the anti-bullying policy framework was significant as it marked its transition “from a position of social and educational invisibility to one of visibility,” and an acknowledgement by the DES that homophobic and transphobic bullying were *legitimate* educational problems which needed to be addressed (Bailey 2017, pp. 35–36). Having mapped the disciplinary and contextual terrain within which the present research is located, the next section discusses the specific methods that were used to analyse these anti-bullying policies and related strategies that are relevant to young queer lives in contemporary Ireland.

Methodology

The current study employed a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework to provide a detailed textual analysis of how queer youth are represented or imagined in a number of key policy documents and educational resources concerned with young people and/or compulsory education that have been produced over the last decade in Ireland (Fairclough 2003, 2010). CDA is a methodological technique that involves examining various degrees of presence or absence in the texts, such as foreground information (those ideas that are present and emphasised), background information (those ideas that are explicitly mentioned but deemphasised), presupposed information (that information which is present at the level of implied or suggested meaning) and absent information (Fairclough 2010).

As the research is associated with a broader body of work concerned with “thinking through the effects” of research (Youdell 2009, p. 38), the analysis is circumscribed by a consideration of those documents that incorporate LGBTQ mental health research that was conducted in an Irish context over the last decade. Informed by a Foucauldian consideration of how a particular set of ideas attain the status of truth in a given time and place—in other words, how these ideas circulate and come to operate as “regimes of truth” (Foucault 1990)—the analysis was concerned with how key findings from these studies have informed policy-making, youth strategising and educational practice and specifically what LGBTQ subject positions they render visible, intelligible and legitimate (Youdell 2009).

The specific documents that were selected for analysis included: the *Action Plan on Bullying: Report of the Anti-bullying Working Group to the Minister for Education and Skills* (Department of Education and Skills 2013b); *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Skills 2013a); the *National Youth Strategy* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2015); the *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018–2020* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2018) and supporting documents which informed the Strategy, including the *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy: Report of the consultations with Young People in Ireland* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DYCA], 2017). Two key state-sanctioned curriculum resources, *Growing Up LGBT: A Resource for SPHE and RSE* (DES/Health Services Executive 2012) and *Being LGBT in School: A Resource for Post-primary Schools to Prevent Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying and Support LGBT Students* (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network [GLEN] 2016) were also analysed. Each of these documents was analysed from the perspective of how key findings from recent LGBTQ mental health studies (namely the *Supporting LGBT Lives* (Mayock et al. 2009) and *LGBTIreland* reports (Higgins et al. 2016) were deployed, taken up and engaged with within these resources. The analysis focused on how these research reports *intersected* with strategy and curriculum documents. As such, “key findings” reports from the *Supporting LGBT Lives* (GLEN 2009) and *LGBTIreland* studies (GLEN 2016), as well as the full reports themselves, were analysed.

The primary focus of the analysis was *intertextuality*, i.e., “how texts draw upon, incorporate, recontextualise and dialogue with other texts” (Fairclough 2003, p. 17). In other words, I was primarily interested in how external texts (in this case LGBTQ mental health reports) were drawn upon, and “intertextually incorporated” (Fairclough 2003, p. 47) into these various strategy and curricular documents and with the associated question of how queer subjects were discursively constituted within these framings (Fairclough 2003, p. 17). Central to this was a concern with the relationship between the original research reports and how they were subsequently

taken up and reported in various policy documents. I initiated the analysis of intertextuality within these documents by asking: What/whose voices are included/excluded in the intertextual incorporation, and what significant absences are there? (Fairclough 2003). I then considered how these various representations related to the rest of the policy document or resource. I also examined how elements of these research texts were variously included or excluded from the various policy documents and *recontextualised* within them, in order to substantiate and legitimise particular perspectives, policies or actions. The intertextual analysis also considered specific assumptions and claims (including those that can be deliberately or accidentally false) that the authors of these policies and curriculum documents made in relation to LGBTQ mental health research.

The concept of a “nodal discourse” around which other sub-discourses cluster was also used to inform and structure the analysis (Fairclough 2003, p. 368). The discourse of risk/vulnerability was identified as a dominant discourse around which other sub-discourses—including the discourses of homophobic bullying, isolation, suicidality, self-harm and resilience—cluster. The analysis which follows considers the discursive effects of this configuration of discourses which foreground or include certain aspects or experiences of being LGBTQ to the exclusion of others, resulting in a “selective representation,” “simplification” and “condensation” of a much more complex social and cultural reality (Fairclough 2005).

The Discourse of Risk/Vulnerability as a Nodal Discourse

As outlined above, the global discourse of LGBTQ risk and vulnerability gained significant momentum at the national level with the publication of two large-scale, LGBTQ mental health research reports that were produced within 7 years of each other. The “alarming” findings from these studies, or rather how these findings were represented in press releases and supporting documents, helped to ensure widespread media coverage of the research, and to instil a discourse of risk/vulnerability into public consciousness. The Preface to the *LGBTIreland* report released in 2016 (Higgins et al. 2016) contains a quote by former President of Ireland, Dr. Mary McAleese, who describes the report as “horrific” and “tragic”. She bemoans the “level of misery” and the “undeniab[ility]” of the “ongoing damage” contained within it (p. 5). A separate “key findings” document summarising some of the main elements of the study (GLEN and BeLonG To 2016), helps to solidify this discourse of risk and vulnerability by drawing comparisons to a “general population” mental health survey that had been conducted a few years prior to the *LGBTIreland* survey. The following statement appears in large blue font and stands out from the other text:

Compared to the My World National Youth Mental Health Study, LGBTI young people in this study had: 2 times the level of self-harm; 3 times the level of attempted suicide; 4 times the level of severe/extremely severe stress, anxiety and depression (GLEN and BeLonG To 2016, p. 3).³

There are obvious scientific challenges associated with comparing data from different studies conducted at different time points which used very different sampling strategies (i.e., a nationally representative, random sample in the case of the *My World Survey* versus an online, convenience-based sample in the case of the *LGBTIreland* study). Despite the problematic nature of the comparison, these relative statistical claims were taken up and circulated as attention-grabbing headlines in mainstream media, thereby helping to ensure their insertion in public discourse. Yet as Waidzunus (2012) shows in the case of the “two to three times more likely” claim regarding gay male suicide in the US, non-scientific estimates which emerge as “scientific fact” in the public arena via mainstream media and LGBTQ activist groups can have “complex consequences” (p. 202). One such consequence is the “looping effect” associated with particular classifications such as “gay youth” “...whereby people come to learn how they have been classified, modify their behaviour, and create a new reality that can then be described differently by experts (Hacking 1999, 34)” (Waidzunus 2012, p. 202).

One of the most striking features of recent Irish educational and youth strategising is the consistency and uniformity with which LGBTQ youth are portrayed as inevitably or universally “vulnerable,” “marginalised,” “at-risk,” “isolated” and “excluded” by virtue of their gender and/or sexual identification across different policy documents and domains. Anti-bullying policy documents explicitly define LGBTQ pupils (and those perceived to be LGBTQ) as an “at risk group” (Department of Education and Skills 2013b, p. 21); they are described as being “*more* vulnerable to or *at risk of* experiencing bullying” alongside a number of other “*more* vulnerable pupils” such as those “with disabilities or special educational needs, those from ethnic minority and migrant groups, pupils from the Traveller community, and pupils of minority religious (Department of Education and Skills 2013a, p. 14; emphasis added). These *Procedures* posit that one of the ways that schools can promote a positive school culture is by taking *particular* care of these “at risk” pupils and responding to their “needs, fears or anxieties” in a sensitive manner (Department of Education and Skills 2013a, p. 22; emphasis added).

³ The *My World Youth Mental Health survey* (Dooley and Fitzgerald 2012), which was published four years prior to the *LGBTIreland* study comprises a nationally representative, randomly selected sample of over 15,000 adolescents and young people in Ireland, 4% of whom identified as gay or lesbian; 4% as bisexual, and 3% as “not sure” of their sexuality.

Similarly, the *National Youth Strategy* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2015)—which addresses the needs of children and young people between the ages of 10–24—classifies LGBTQ young people as one of a number of cohorts who are invariably “marginalised” in Irish society.

Marginalised/disadvantaged young people: This term involves, but is not limited to, young people who are marginalised by location or geography or socioeconomic reasons. It includes young people such as Travellers; Roma; young people from ethnic or religious minorities; migrants; refugees and asylum seekers; young people with disabilities or with mental health issues; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people; young carers; young people in conflict with the law; young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET); young parents; those in care; those in direct provision; and lone parents under the age of 25 years (DYCA 2015, p. 41).

While not denying that some young LGBTQ people may indeed be marginalised, the failure to qualify how these experiences may be mediated by *inter-alia*, school-based experiences, family acceptance, sex, race, social class, location etc. leads to a depiction of youth in very different circumstances as equally vulnerable, marginalised or “at risk,” thereby effectively “homogenising” queer youth identity (Waidzunus 2012). Moreover, clustering LGBTQ young people with other “marginalised/disadvantaged” groups in Irish society such as Travellers or Roma who stand out as experiencing *extreme* disadvantage in terms of social attitudes, employment, education, housing and health is questionable given the starkness of the inequalities and injustices that have been documented in relation to members of these ethnic minority groups (Watson et al. 2017). The fact that young LGBTQ people are *only* ever presented in deficit terms when alluded to in the *National Youth Strategy* has a re-stigmatising effect; they are associated throughout the document with words such as “stigma,” “marginalisation,” “rejection,” “isolation,” “homophobic bullying,” “poor mental health outcomes,” and a lack of autonomy and dependence on others. In some cases, the intertextuality is directly attributed, as in the following example which cites the *Supporting LGBT Lives* study (Mayock et al. 2009), albeit presenting a highly selective and simplified account of the findings which doesn’t address the complexity or diversity of experiences documented.

Research indicates a high level of homophobic bullying in schools and other settings, and this, together with family rejection, has been identified as leading to poor mental health outcomes in later life for young LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) people (DYCA 2015, p. 10).

On other occasions, the assertions are more generalised and not attributed to any particular source, as in the following instance where it is implied that young LGBTQ people are amongst a number of social categories who invariably experience difficulties “becoming autonomous and independent” by virtue of their designated “marginalised” status as queer in the strategy (DYCA 2015, p. 14).

For some young people, becoming autonomous and independent is more difficult. These include young people with mental health problems or living with disabilities or chronic illnesses; those who are stigmatised and marginalised due to their sexual orientation or ethnicity; young people who are exposed to substance abuse or various types of neglect and abuse, including practices such as female genital mutilation; those who are exploited, and young people in care who are moving to independent living.

A picture of LGBTQ marginalisation and loneliness is further inscribed in the depiction of LGBTQ adolescents who are not “out” to others, which is described as a period of “profound isolation” (DYCA 2015, p. 10)

For those young people in Ireland who self-identify as LGBT, the most common age is 12 years, while the most common age at which they begin the process of ‘coming out’ to others is 17 years. This can often be a time of *profound isolation* for LGBT young people (DYCA 2015, p. 10; emphasis added).

While not seeking to minimise the challenges that can be associated with realising at a young age that one is LGBTQ in a heteronormative culture, the accuracy or at least the generalisability of this tragic, isolated and lonely LGBTQ figure is questionable in an era of social networking and LGBTQ visibility. Cover (2016), for example, is critical of “simplistic accounts of homophobia, social isolation and the difficulties of coming out” (p. 102) which are associated with stereotypical and out-dated pre-digital formations of queer lives that bear little resemblance to the lived realities of contemporary queer selfhood in an “...era of networked, accessible information and substantial LGBT media representation, and in the socialites and supportive environments these produce rather than in isolation” (p. 102).

The *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020* (DCYA 2018)—which was devised “with the aim of ensuring that LGBTI+ young people can achieve the same outcomes as all young people in Ireland” (p.4)—presents a more balanced and in some respects contradictory portrayal of young queer experience, documenting several “developments [which have]

resulted in greater equality, inclusivity and celebration of the LGBTI+ community” (DCYA 2018, p. 4). Unlike the *National Youth Strategy* (DCYA 2015), it recognises that:

Young people are coming out earlier, have a diverse set of role models available to them, can access information about sexuality and relationships, and communicate with likeminded peers all around the world (DYCA 2018, p. 16).

Moreover, it presents a range of perspectives from young people who participated in the consultation process informing the Strategy to convey that for some young LGBTQ people at least, “coming out was easy”; “being gay is fab” and “no one cares (in a good way)” (DCYA 2018, p. 4). The existence of an LGBTQ youth strategy is a very positive and significant development, most notably perhaps in relation to the recognition of the need for specific supports for Transgender and intersex individuals and the emphasis it places on the importance of strengthening sexual health services and education in response to the needs of LGBTQ young people. Despite offering a more nuanced engagement with contemporary queer youth experiences than the general *National Youth Strategy*, much of the *LGBTI+ Strategy* is also pre-occupied with the “significant challenges” [that] still remain for LGBTI+ young people today” (DYCA 2018, p.3). While the emphasis on challenges is to some extent understandable, given the *LGBTI+ Strategy’s* remit, some of the claims that are made in the Strategy document do not, in fact, stand up to scrutiny. Moreover, despite its somewhat more nuanced engagement with queer youth experiences, The *LGBTI+ Youth Strategy* nevertheless describes queer youth in homogenous terms as an “at risk group” (DYCA 2018, p. 6). Queer youth experience is associated with “challenges” on 14 separate occasions in the document. Moreover, the need to “develop targeted early intervention initiatives and services to reduce the risk of mental health problems for LGBTI+ young people, including suicide and self-harm” is identified as one of its key objectives (p. 28). Once again, focusing on “mental health problems for LGBTI+ young people” *in general* has a homogenising effect that depicts all LGBTI+ youth as *equally* “at risk,” thereby effectively “homogenising” queer youth identity and obfuscating the diverse social categories and experiences that make up contemporary queer youth culture (Waidzunas 2012). The “at risk” discourse subsumes and articulates with a great many other discourses, as evidenced by the LGBTI+ Strategy’s “high-level overview of some of the key challenges faced by LGBTI+ young people” with respect to “a range of challenges and physical and mental health issues.” The Strategy identifies 12 broad challenges which it claims are based on “The *LGBTIreland Report*, and other LGBTI+-related research and data sets” (DYCA 2018, p. 8). Among the challenges identified are: “Mental health

problems, including higher rates of severe stress, anxiety, depression, self-harm and attempted suicide;” “discrimination, victimisation, stigmatisation and abuse;” “bullying and harassment, particularly in the school environment;” “high levels of smoking, drug use and alcohol consumption” and “high dropout rates in schools and colleges for LGBTQ young people” (DYCA 2018, p. 8). Despite the claim of “high dropout rates in schools and colleges for LGBTQ young people,” the *LGBTIreland Report* (Higgins et al. 2016), which is presented as the source of these findings, reported that only 4% of respondents had dropped out of school and a mere 1% had left college as a result of negative treatment they had received as a result of their LGBTQ identification. In fact, the study revealed “higher levels of education compared to the general population,” with almost 60% of the sample indicating that they had completed some form of post-secondary education, compared with 45.6% of the general population, as reported in the study (Higgins et al. 2016). The 4% of *LGBTIreland* survey participants who indicated that they had left school early because of their LGBTQ identification is actually lower than the national figure of 6% of 18–24 year olds who were early school leavers (Central Statistics Office 2018), and considerably lower than the EU average of 11%, which gives further pause in terms of whether all aspects of LGBTQ experience are being accurately represented in policy reports.

The *LGBTI+ Youth Strategy* further references the *LGBTIreland* report in identifying “high levels of smoking, drug use and alcohol consumption” amongst LGBTQ people as some of the main “challenges” facing LGBTQ youth in Ireland. When one looks at the report’s findings, however, we see that the 25% of the sample who indicated that they smoked does not differ significantly from the 23% prevalence rate of smoking reported in the general population in 2015, during the time period corresponding broadly to the survey. Moreover, whereas the number of LGBTQ people who had ever used drugs recreationally during the life was significantly higher than the general population (55.9% versus 27%), when it came to drinking, figures on reported alcohol use amongst young LGBTQ people were approximately 10% *lower* than the estimated rates in the general population, as reported by the report’s authors (Higgins et al. 2016). Of course, one could argue that the reported figure of 43.8% of participants who indicated some level of alcohol problems or dependence remains high in *absolute* terms, regardless of whether these figures are higher or lower than for members of the general population. However, the fact that the prevalence of smoking was *not* significantly higher amongst members of the LGBTQ community and that reported levels of problematic alcohol consumption and early school leaving were actually *lower* for LGBTQ people, raises the possibility that at least some of the challenges identified in the Strategy are not in fact “more pronounced for LGBTI+ young people” as suggested in the document (DYCA 2018, p. 26).

My intention here is not to discredit the *LGBTI+ Youth Strategy* by drawing attention to these inconsistencies; as already indicated, elements of the Strategy have the potential to enhance young LGBTQ people's lives considerably and it addresses many gaps where the rights of LGBTQ young people are concerned. Rather, the purpose is to consider the effect that these various intertextual strategies and dominant or nodal discourses have in terms of representing LGBTQ youth as universally vulnerable and at elevated risk of multiple "challenges" and poor outcomes. Russell, Bohan, & Lilly (Russell et al. 2000, p. 82) put it like this: "When we repeatedly and pointedly employ this narrative as a means of calling attention to suffering—while ignoring positive aspects of being queer—we may be offering queer youth a reified script that suggests an unhappy and dangerous life is to be expected."

The next section looks in more detail at how some of these so-called "risks" and "vulnerabilities"—particularly those that relate to self-harm and suicide—are depicted as being directly caused by bullying and how this risk/vulnerability discourse conflates queer identities with bullying, self-harm and suicidality.

The Conflation of Queer Identities with Bullying, Self-Harm and Suicidality

As the DES's *Anti-Bullying Procedures* (DES 2013a) preceded the publication of the *LGBTIreland* report, research findings reported in these *Procedures* and in the *Action Plan on Bullying* (DES 2013b) were derived from the *Supporting LGBT Lives* study (Mayock et al. 2009). There are multiple references in the *Action Plan* to the "higher risk of self-harm, suicidal thoughts and behaviours, victimisation, serious physical abuse and problems with schoolwork" that young LGBTQ people experience (p. 33). Elsewhere in the *Action Plan*, a section on "The Impact of Homophobic Bullying," presents statistics on rates of self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts amongst young LGBTQ people, based on the findings of the *Supporting LGBT Lives* survey and states that "there is a clear correlation between homophobic and transphobic bullying and serious mental health difficulties among LGBT people" (DES 2013a, p.35; emphasis added). The positioning of decontextualised mental health statistics within a section on "the impact of homophobic bullying," combined with the reference to "a clear correlation between homophobic and transphobic bullying and serious mental health difficulties" implies a causal relationship between homophobic bullying and self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. Yet, as Rand (2015) observes, the presentation of suicide as a consequence of homophobic bullying overestimates the power that bullying has, by depicting it as the single or primary reason why a young person may be suicidal, while downplaying the relationship of bullying to the heteronormative standards, norms and values that are

pervasive in schools and the wider society. A similar pattern of presenting alarming, decontextualised statistics is evident in both curricular resources examined for this study, namely the *Growing Up LGBT* resource designed for use in secondary schools (Department of Education and Skills/Health Services Executive 2012) and the *Being LGBT in School* resource, also designed for use at post-primary level. The latter document, which is subtitled *A Resource for Post-Primary Schools to Prevent Homophobic and Transphobic Bullying and Support LGBT Students* conflates "being LGBT" with "homophobic and transphobic bullying," thus eliding the multiple, diverse and contradictory experiences of "being LGBT in school" (Gilbert et al. 2018). While this document presents a lot of very valuable information and practical guidance to school personnel, the inclusion of harrowing statistics about the vulnerability and "at riskness" of LGBTQ youth, and the conflation "being LGBT" with bullying and victimisation, delimits particular ways of knowing about queer experience premised on an understanding of queer youth as "always-already victims." It suggests that to identify as LGBTQ is an automatically negative, traumatic and problematic experience (Marshall 2010, p. 67). It gives the impression that "vulnerability is endemic to queer youth rather than a common, human, corporeal and shared attribute of humanity in relationality" (Cover 2012, p. 145). The final section of the paper highlights the need for counter-discursive, depathologising approaches to anti-bullying and education policy more generally that are premised on a more thorough and expansive understanding of young LGBTQ people's lived realities.

Discussion

Contemporary forms of gender and sexuality-based bullying are taking place within a changing sociocultural context wherein younger generations are more likely to express their gender and/or sexual identities in fluid and complex terms (Pearson and Wilkinson 2018). That is, an increasing number of children and youth seek to actively disrupt binaristic conceptions of gender and sexuality by expressing a diverse array of gender and sexual identities and transgender individuals are identifying and coming out as trans at younger ages today compared to the past (ibid). Cohen and Brooks (2018) claim that the perceived epidemic of school bullying has resulted in a range of anti-bullying measures that do more harm than good. They suggest, as have others, that individual level explanations which portray bullying as an individual-level phenomenon place the onus on individual students to resolve bullying which makes it difficult to develop and implement effective bullying prevention strategies. Individualistic accounts of bullying are typically "gender blind" (Ringrose and Renold 2010) and therefore do not consider the role of heteronormativity in structuring homophobic violence,

which in turn normalises and naturalises heterosexuality and cisnormativity. Sociological approaches, on the other hand, highlight the role that schools themselves play in generating bullying, or in providing the conditions within which it can flourish. As such, they seek to illuminate the broader contextual factors and systemic inequalities that underlie bullying practices and behaviours (Temko 2019).

The foregoing analysis has illuminated the production and circulation of a nodal discourse of LGBTQ risk and vulnerability across the youth and education sectors in an Irish context that subsumes and articulates with other discourses about queer youth experience. Through a discursive process of selective representation, condensation and simplification (Fairclough 2005), the complexity, multifacetedness and diversity of LGBTQ youth experiences is reduced to broad generalisations and harrowing statistics that in some cases do not even stand up to scrutiny or are based on questionable comparisons to the “general population” (Waidzunus, p. 219). Policy-makers and educational professionals’ thinking and acting in relation to LGBTQ youth are framed by a particular discursive representation that demarcates the boundaries within which meaning can be negotiated (Fairclough 2010).

So ubiquitous has the stereotypical figure of the miserable, isolated, marginalised, “at risk” LGBTQ figure become in the wake of the repetition of decontextualised numbers, estimates and coarse generalisations, that policy documents fail to acknowledge the diverse contemporary realities of queer selfhood, such as access to social networks and supportive environments, mainstream media representations of queer identity and queer identity and activism (Cover 2016). The discourse of vulnerability and victimhood effectively contributes to the production of “hierarchies of normality” within schools (Skattebol 2007, p. 53), whereby some students, by virtue of their sexual orientation or gender identity, are portrayed (and perceived) as healthy and “normal” whereas others are marked as automatically vulnerable, “at risk” and hence different and Other. In other words, the positioning of queer youth as a homogenous “at risk” category and therefore Other in relation to their heterosexual and cisgender peers fails to destabilise the normalcy of heterosexuality or the heteronormative structures and ideologies through which LGBTQ oppression is sustained (Rasmussen 2006; Rasmussen et al. 2004; Quinlivan 2012, 2013). Moreover, as Gilbert et al. (2018) argue, when LGBTQ identities are repeatedly conflated with victimisation and vulnerability:

[LGBTQ youth] are stripped of the multiple and contradictory experiences of being queer and trans. Since LGBTQ youth are so often understood as singularly tragic figures, alone and miserable, we fail to recognise their participation in broader queer and trans

communities. Nor do we notice the more ordinary aspects of being LGBTQ – falling in love, navigating friendships, choosing a new name, or fighting with your parents (Driver 2008; Sinclair-Palm 2017)” (p. 167).

Airton (2013) is critical of those initiatives which target queer youth as the “subjects and objects of homophobia,” namely those which restrict understandings of homophobia as being applicable *only* to queer people, and advocates instead the privileging and foregrounding of *queerness*—which they define as the “possibilities and excesses of sexuality”—rather than *queers*, as the beneficiaries of anti-homophobic educational interventions. Working against the conflation of queerness with homophobia, Airton makes a compelling argument that singling out queer subjects as the beneficiaries of anti-homophobic interventions constructs a community of subjects who are Other or “not them,” rather than focusing on the conditions and effects of normativity to which all children and youth are routinely subjected (Airton 2013, p. 545).

Airton puts it like this:

An exclusive focus on *particular* children as in need of special protection from gender and sexual normativity tends to naturalize and render unproblematic the normative behaviour of (heterosexual, gender-normative) peers, parents or teachers, even as this behaviour bleeds into various forms of violence. It is hard for education to do something about the entire system of gender and sexually normative socialisation, but its actors can certainly intervene on behalf of some very legible outliers.

Airton (2013) questions the assumption embedded in anti-homophobic interventions that the harms perpetrated against queer-identified students are necessarily more urgent or harmful than those experienced by “non-queer” students who violate gender or sexual norms. They highlight the fact that “non-queer” students and teachers [also] experience oppression on the basis of their momentary or perpetual deviation from contextual norms of gender and sexuality, and conceivably more so than do some queer-identified (and/or identifiable) students and teachers.”⁴

Airton’s argument is consistent with sociological approaches which conceive of gender and sexuality-based bullying as having a central role to play in gender socialisation processes (Pascoe 2013). Framing homophobic bullying as a phenomenon that *only* or indeed *primarily* affects those who identify as

⁴ In an Irish context, while it is acknowledged in the *Action Plan on Bullying* that “all students can be vulnerable to identity based bullying, for example any student can be fearful of being targeted by homophobic name calling” (DES 2013b, pp. 2223), the definition of homophobic bullying that is supplied restricts it to “bullying of those who are, or who are believed to be, LGBT,” which clearly identifies LGBTQ children as the beneficiaries of anti-homophobic bullying interventions.

LGBTQ or who are perceived to be such—i.e., in terms of sexual identity or gender identity—fails to recognise the role that homophobic bullying plays as an integral part of gendered sexual socialisation processes (Pascoe 2013). These bullying practices often take the form of what Pascoe refers to as a “fag discourse” involving insults, jokes, and threats through which boys come to think of themselves and others as “real” boys. Pascoe’s theorisation of bullying, which links bullying to the interactional reproduction of larger social inequalities, views bullying behaviours as normative, rather than pathological (See also Bansel et al. 2009). In a similar vein, Payne and Smith (2016) call for a “paradigm shift—one that positions the aggression targeting LGBTQ and gender non-conforming students within a broader system of gender regulation that is experienced by all people and in all contexts” (p. 129). This sociologically-orientated literature highlights the complex “entanglement” of gender and sexuality, such that to perform one’s gender correctly, i.e., for a girl or woman to be perceived as appropriately feminine and a boy to be deemed sufficiently masculine, one must also be heterosexual (Gansen 2017, p. 265). Payne and Smith propose the concept of *gender policing* as an alternative to bullying discourses which are concerned with preventing bullying behaviours. This expression encapsulates “the social process of enforcing cultural expectations for “normal” masculine and feminine expression” via a range of behaviours ranging from macroaggressions to verbal harassment to physical violence which are targeted at those individuals whose masculine or feminine expression or identity is perceived to violate gender norms (Payne and Smith 2016, p. 129). This conceptual shift away from the discourse of bullying to an emphasis on how gender difference is regulated, punished or “policed” has the potential to create new possibilities for altering the underlying structures through which LGBTQ and gender non-conforming youth are constructed as inferior and other. Furthermore, Payne and Smith contend that the construct of “gender policing resists the assumption that LGBTQ students are doomed to be victims and, instead, encompasses queer identities within a wide range of gender and sexual differences that should be recognised and valued within schools” (p. 129). They actively resist the victim narrative where LGBTQ youth are concerned on the grounds that it creates an overly simplistic binaristic bully/victim scenario (Ringrose and Renold 2010) which limits the focus of intervention to tolerance and empathy-based programmes and approaches concerned with individual actors whose anti-social behaviour, poor socialisation or dysfunctional family backgrounds are thought to be responsible for their bullying. In focusing on individual students, the role that schools play in sustaining the conditions that produce bullying are obscured and once again, schools are let off the moral hook in terms of contemplating their own complicity in these processes (Duncan 2013a, b; Gilbert et al. 2018; Payne and Smith 2013). As Gilbert et al. (2018) explain:

Discourses of bullying in schools...tend to focus on individual actors and obscure systemic and pervasive inequalities (Marshall 2010; Payne and Smith 2012; Ringrose and Renold 2010). That is, we can condemn acts of hatred against individual LGBTQ students but have a difficult time understanding how schools sustain conditions that produce bullying—for instance, through sex education curriculum that silences the realities of LGBTQ lives, through administrative policies that make it nearly impossible for trans students to change their names and gender on official documents, or through school board antagonism toward gay-straight alliances (Gilbert et al. 2018, p. 167).

As the above examples suggest, some of the ways in which schools create the conditions that produce bullying are quite obviously harmful for LGBTQ youth. But many of the mechanisms through which queer identities are marginalised through the privileging and normalising of heterosexuality and cisgender identities are subtler and hence harder to respond to, and are linked to more general features of schools and how children’s lives are constrained within these settings. Sociological approaches to bullying emphasise how the structures underlying schools as a social institution themselves contribute to bullying, i.e. how *institutional* aspects or features of school shape, and contribute to school-based bullying (Duncan 2013a, b; Yoneyama and Naito 2003; Yoneyama 2015). Furthermore, they highlight the role that social actors within schools play as *socialising agents* of gendered sexual socialisation (Gansen 2017) and as *agents* in the social reproduction of gender and sexual inequality (Pascoe 2013). The discursive positioning of LGBTQ youth as “at risk” of homophobic bullying and a range of associated negative health outcomes has the effect of precluding critical engagement with the complexities of school environments and with societal or macro-level forces such as social and cultural norms pertaining to gender and sexuality which children and young people are actively involved in upholding through routine as well as more extreme forms of harassment and violence. Formby (2017), writing about the university context, puts it simply but effectively: “[r]ather than seeing LGBT+ students as inherently ‘in need,’ we should examine [educational] spaces and services themselves as needing structural change.” Equally problematically, the conflation of LGBTQ identities with homophobic bullying has a series of depoliticising and desexualising effects (Monk 2011; Marshall 2010), which is perhaps at least one of the reasons why there has been such little resistance to the implementation of “identity-based” anti-bullying policies in an Irish context. In addition to needing to be protected from harm, young people have a right to sexual agency and expression. Within educational contexts which are often already characterised by a reluctance to engage with, or outright avoidance of, issues pertaining to sexuality, there is a

very real possibility that if educators perceive LGBTQ youth as universally wounded and vulnerable that they will be too fearful to engage young people in dialogue about sexuality and gender, thereby shutting down, rather than opening up, possibilities for engagement with issues of gender and sexual diversity, and increasing the likelihood that LGBTQ youth will be positioned as outsiders in schools. Thus, the discursive construction of LGBTQ youth as inevitably and universally “at risk” could, therefore, ironically contribute to their denial of access to sexual knowledge and to open honest discussions around sexuality which are critical to their health and well-being throughout their lives (Monk 2011; Robinson 2012).

Identifying how heteronormativity is produced and sustained through school and classroom-based practices and interactions may help to prevent the reproduction of inequalities along gender and sexuality lines (Wilkinson and Pearson 2009). To radically reduce the incidence of gender and sexuality-based bullying in schools would require changing the fundamental conditions, and organisational and cultural practices that currently exist in most schools, as well as the training that teachers receive. This is a tall order, however, precisely because these conditions have such a taken-for-granted status attached to them and because school-based cultural practices, such as competitive sports, play an important reputation-enhancing function for schools. Nevertheless, if governments and educators genuinely care about addressing gender and sexuality-based bullying and harassment, they need to take seriously the ways in which heteronormativity and hegemonic gender identities are enforced, normalised and celebrated through routine, mundane features of schooling and to avoid anti-bullying programmes that target “at risk” LGBTQ youth as their beneficiaries.

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