

Queer Religious Youth in Faith and Community Schools

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Abstract

Queer youth are positioned as ‘at risk’, and queer youth in religious settings and communities are seen as *especially* vulnerable due to the anti-LGBT sentiment assumed to inhere there. Governmental funding has recently been directed towards challenging homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in English faith schools specifically, as the political discourse of ‘British values’ comes increasingly to include an ostensible commitment to LGBT rights. It is in this context that we present qualitative research with queer religious youth who attended both faith and community schools in England. The lived experience of queer religious youth in faith schools is much more multi-faceted than is commonly represented – this was also the case for pupils in (non-faith) community schools. Rather than locating the problem within religion, attention needs to be paid to the heteronormativity and gender binarism that structures the entire educational experience. Furthermore, in engaging with the experiences of queer youth who are *also* religious, we explore the ways in which religion can be mobilised as a form of support, and more broadly argue against the tendency to see queer youth exclusively in terms of their queerness.

Keywords

Sexuality; Religion; Education; Youth; Queer

Introduction

This article comprises a qualitative exploration of both the ‘faith’ and ‘community’ school experiences of queer¹ religious² youth in England. This is timely given the UK government’s recent allocation of funding to the charities Stonewall and Barnardo’s to tackle homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in faith schools in apparent recognition of these sites as *particularly* problematic. This occurs amidst wider concerns over ‘British values’ and the increasing mobilization of ‘sexual orientation equality’ rhetoric as part of these discourses. Faith schools, and religion more generally, have increasingly come to be identified as problem sites.

But what has been missing from these conversations and debates has been the voices of queer young people themselves (and particularly queer *religious* young people who are frequently assumed not to exist at all (Taylor 2015). We argue against this tendency to locate the ‘harms’ in faith schools and in religion more broadly, suggesting that not only does this misrepresent the

ambiguities and complexities of lived experience, but this is politically problematic in letting the secular 'off the hook'. We also argue against the tendency to see queer youth *only as queer*: this article is thus an attempt to bring an intersectional mindfulness to these one-dimensional debates.

We begin by explaining the position of faith schools in England, as supported but viewed uneasily by the UK government. Our review of the research goes on to show that there has been little to no work on queer experiences of faith schools in the UK. After discussing the project's methods, we then present the findings under three headings ('Experiences of faith schools', 'Experiences of community schools' and 'Against (the necessity of) coming out'). In the conclusion, we provide some alternative policy suggestions based on these findings.

Faith schools: context and governmental support

In England³, one in three state-funded schools have a 'religious character' (Long and Bolton 2015). Most of these schools are Christian (CoE or Roman Catholic) although there are a small number of Jewish, Islamic, Hindu and Sikh schools. Schools with a religious character are categorised as either 'voluntary-controlled' (VC) or 'voluntary-aided' (VA). The difference lies in the extent to which the school is funded by the state and thus the control the school/religious authority has over the selection of pupils and employees on religious grounds; appointment of school governors; and freedom over religious education (British Humanist Association 2015). State-funded schools that are not of a religious character are generally termed 'community schools', but it would be a mistake to call them secular since daily acts of collective worship of 'wholly or a broadly Christian character' are mandated (Department for Education 1994). Academies and free-schools, which operate outside local authority control (yet are still partly funded by the State) may or may not be of a religious character.⁴

The existence of faith schools, and particularly the state-funding thereof, is a controversial issue in the UK (Oldfield 2013). The debate concerns fundamental social, political and philosophical issues, including social cohesion and pluralism; the social 'good'; the rights of parents and children; the role of religion in the public sphere; and the ultimate purpose(s) of education. Successive UK governments have maintained consistent support for faith schools, with support markedly increasing under New Labour in the opening of the first 'minority' faith schools. The current Conservative government continues to provide special status to faith schools (for example, their exemption from new statutory sex education (Department for Education 2017, 4)) and has been active in encouraging the establishment of new faith-based free schools (HC deb, 12 September 2016, vol 614, col 604). Such support may be understood as part of the broader neoliberal project, where the UK government has looked to non-governmental groups and organisations, including faith groups, to contribute to welfare provision and community services such as schooling (Dinham and Jackson 2012).

Faith schools and religion as problem sites

As part of the same broader neoliberal political current in which faith schools have a role to play in education provision there has also been increasing recognition of gender and sexualities equality

under both the New Labour and Conservative governments. Without denying the positive impact that the granting of citizenship rights has had for LGBT people, such moves can also be seen in terms of the shifting onus of responsibility from the State to individual citizens or interest groups. As Monk (2011, 193) argues, the conferring of 'rights' also confers 'responsibility'. However, recent political discourses of 'British values' has meant support for faith schools now exists uneasily alongside the commitment to gender and sexualities equality. As Vanderbeck and Johnson (2016, 301) write: 'the active promotion of sexual orientation equality has become a central feature of government rhetoric concerning the preservation of the nation's core values'. This concern has been translated into education policy: Vanderbeck and Johnson argue that under Section 28, 'the active promotion of sexual orientation equality would have been deemed by government to undermine, rather than enhance, SMSC [spiritual, moral, social and cultural] development' whereas today 'the drive to promote British values has resulted in the inscription of a clear linkage in the framework for school inspection between the promotion of sexual orientation equality and SMSC development' (2016, 301).

Whilst faith schools have been continuously exempted from statutory sex education, a number of faith schools have also failed Ofsted inspections on the grounds of their inadequate handling of gender and sexualities equality. For example, a recent Ofsted report on a failed Jewish girls school stated: 'pupils are not taught explicitly about issues such as sexual orientation...as a result, pupils are not able to gain a full understanding of fundamental British values' (Ofsted 2017). This has led to religious interest groups claiming that faith schools are being specifically targeted as 'problems' as part of a wider State assault on religion (e.g. Christians in Education 2017). Whilst non-faith schools have also been criticised by Ofsted along similar lines, recent government publications have also made links between faith and intolerance with regards sexualities equality. The Casey Review, a government-commissioned review of integration in the UK, stated that 'There is evidence that some people in particular ethnic and faith communities have views around LGBT people that are at odds with mainstream modern British values and laws' (Department for Communities and Local Government 2016, 7.28), before going on to cite the equally-high percentages of Anglicans, Catholics and Muslims in the UK who believe being gay is wrong. Louise Casey, author of the report, gave evidence to the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee (2017: Q29) in which she stated '...it is not okay for Catholic schools to be homophobic and anti-gay marriage...it is not how we bring children up in this country'.

This discourse elides with the idea that 'religion' is a realm of conservatism whilst 'the secular' is equated with progressiveness (Rasmussen 2010). This is especially so when it comes to rights and freedoms regarding gender and sexuality, which are often positioned as the anti-thesis of religious faith. Shipley (2014) argues that this has led to religious communities and schools being identified as particular sites of harm when it comes to young people with non-normative genders and sexualities. In both popular and academic discourse, queer youth themselves are increasingly positioned as 'at risk' groups (McDermott and Roen 2016, 2-3). Whilst some researchers have challenged this discursive framing (e.g. Savin-Williams 2005), studies continue to document rates of self-harm and suicide amongst this population (Nodin, Peel, Tyler, and Rivers 2015). Religion is seen to exacerbate the risk factor: research has suggested that whilst religious affiliation is a *protective* factor for heterosexual young people (associated with higher educational attainment and less mental health difficulties), it often becomes a *risk* factor for queer young people.

Concern with the mental health of queer youth (Public Health England 2015), as well as the identification of faith schools as problem sites, have recently cohered in the UK government's allocation of funding for the charities Stonewall and Barnardo's to 'work with faith organisations and schools...to tackle HBT [homophobic, biphobic and transphobic] bullying and support young LGB&T people of faith' (Department of Education 2016). In an evaluation of a previous round of government funding to tackle HBT bullying in schools, the issue of 'faith' was identified as a particular 'gap' that needed to be addressed:

The possible adverse reaction of some parents (or teachers) with a religion or belief was still a concern in some schools (Mitchell, Kotecha, Davies, Porter, Kaxira, and Turley 2016, 8.3).

For their part, Stonewall suggest that there is a particular problem with faith schools, aligning with governmental discourse. The most recent Stonewall Schools Report (Bradlow, Bartram, Guasp, and Jadvá 2017) indicates that LGBT pupils in faith schools are less likely than their peers in non-faith schools to report that their schools says HBT bullying is wrong; are more likely to say staff never challenge HBT language; and are less likely to learn about safe sex in relation to same-sex relationships. They also report that LGBT pupils of faith are more likely to have attempted suicide. However, as we will show, this is a somewhat one-dimensional picture of queer experiences of faith schools. More broadly, Stonewall's research has also been criticised by some for perpetuating the aforementioned 'queer youth at risk' discourse (Monk 2011).

Queer experiences of faith schools

There is much research detailing queer experiences of school (e.g. Taylor 2007a; Taylor and Falconer, 2016) as well as a wealth of educational literature on queering the classroom (e.g. Allen, Atkinson, Brue, DePalma, and Hemmingway 2008). Similarly, there has been much sociological and educational work on faith schools at both the macro and micro levels (e.g. Meer 2009; Casson 2011). However, there is little existing UK research that brings these two issues together, such as exploring queer experiences of faith schools. Love and Tosolt (2013) and Callaghan (2016) conducted qualitative research with queer- and lesbian-identified young women at Catholic high schools in Canada. The homophobia their participants encountered, and the religious school setting as an unsafe place to be queer, necessitated the deployment of different survival and resistance strategies. Queer teachers in religious schools themselves describe being subjected to administrative surveillance and having to monitor oneself in public spaces and feeling pressure to be model teachers if they were 'out' at school; teachers are also concerned that their jobs might be at risk if they try to be queer-inclusive in their classrooms (Litton 2001). However, Maher (2013) found that both LGBT alumni of, and current educators within, Catholic high schools in the US felt that their schools were more accepting and supportive of LGBT issues than local public schools. It was *because of the school's Catholicism* (rather than in spite of it) that this was seen to be the case, with participants invoking the strong social justice tradition of Catholicism.

In his ethnography of UK secondary schools, McCormack (2012) found that it was the religious school in his sample which had the most openly gay (male) pupils, all of whom reported positive experiences of being out at school. Unfortunately, aside from noting surprise that it was the religious school that showed most evidence of the 'declining significance of homophobia' (at least for gay

men), the religious character of the school is not explored any further. On the other hand, Page and Yip (2012) conducted research wherein religious LGBT people recounted their experiences of a (non-faith) secondary school. However, whilst Page and Yip provide insight into formal and informal school experiences of religion and sexuality, the 'religion' and 'sexuality' elements are kept largely distinct in their analysis.

We suggest, therefore, that there is a research gap where queer student experiences of UK faith schools have not been addressed. As discussed above, this issue has now taken on a particular political resonance, with much being assumed about queerness in faith schools without inclusion of first-hand experiences. Our article is an attempt to begin that conversation. Furthermore, by comparing the experience of queer religious youth at both faith and community schools, we also subject the realm of the 'secular' to the scrutiny typically reserved for religion; we do not give secular society a 'free pass' (Shiple 2014) by exceptionalising faith schools. Additionally, our article is unique in addressing the experiences of students who are not only queer *but also religious* – a group that tends to be made invisible in popular, academic and policy discussions because of the assumed incompatibility of 'youth', 'queer' and 'religious'.

Methods

The data from this paper comes from the ESRC-funded project 'ANON'. The project was designed to bring the intersections of religion, sexuality and youth into focus, given how religion (particularly Christianity) tends to be treated as mutually exclusive of both young people and non-hetero sexualities (Taylor 2015). Education was identified as one of a number of spaces where these 'strands' intersected (other spaces included family, work, leisure, and conceptions of the future).

Whilst the broader research included participants up to the age of 35 in order to reflect the increasing elasticity of the concept 'youth', in this article we draw specifically on the accounts of 13 participants aged under 25 (3 aged 17-18). Thus, these participants left school all within 6 years of each other, and had all been at school after the repeal of Section 28 in England in 2003. Confining our analysis to this sub-sample means that the diversity of experiences that we go on to discuss are less likely to be due to the different eras in which participants attended secondary school, and are more reflective of diversity amongst schools within a similar time period. None of the participants were in school at the time of interview, and so the data is in this sense 'retrospective'. However we do not feel this is a limitation since the accounts of participants are still first-hand (and relatively recent) accounts of being a queer religious young person in the English school system, and are thus still able to inform debate.

Participants were based in London, Newcastle and Manchester. The majority of the sub-sample were cisgender (6 men and 5 women), one participant was a trans man, and one participant was trans and genderqueer. Participants identified as gay (n=6), lesbian (n=3), bisexual (n=1), queer (n=1), pansexual/queer (n=1) and gay/queer (n=1). As with the broader sample, participants were 'white British' or 'white other' and the sample could be considered largely middle-class (typical of sexualities research more generally, where more advantaged participants tend to be over-represented (Taylor 2007, 2009). 8 participants attended faith schools (CoE or Roman Catholic), and

5 attended community schools. Here we use 'faith schools' to encompass both CoE and Catholic schools since participants' experiences did not seem to differ on the basis of denomination.

Participants were recruited through social media, LGBT-inclusive churches, and LGBT societies, youth groups, and support services. Participants took part in a face-to-face semi-structured interview, as well as a diary and mind-mapping exercise, although the data presented in this article comes exclusively from the interviews (for an expanded discussion on recruitment and methodological choices, see Taylor 2015). The research was conducted following the British Sociological Association's ethical guidelines. Interviews were thematically coded using Atlas.ti, and a number of broad themes emerged (pertaining to relationships, leisure, family, education etc.) As relevant to this article, the education theme was then subjected to closer, more sustained analysis, and a number of sub-themes were subsequently developed. In order to ensure rigour and reliability, coding and analysis was undertaken by members of the project team, and interpretations of the data were discussed and agreed upon.

Experiences of faith schools

Most participants had at least some positive experiences of being queer in faith schools. Isabelle (18) described how:

There was even a policy at the front of our school diaries, there were bullet points and one that said, I think they mentioned amongst hate crimes, racial crimes, you know, it mentioned homophobia amongst racism and sexism.

A formal policy against homophobic bullying is of course no guarantee that the school culture will be an accepting one for queer students, but Isabelle went on to comment that there were three 'out' bisexual pupils in her year alone – a number which she felt was larger than might be expected, and was perhaps related to the overall non-discriminatory ethos of the school ('...There was no homophobia, which was nice...'). James (17) also described his school as accepting, where although he himself wasn't 'out' (due to being unsure about his identity), his best friend was. Indeed, since moving onto sixth-form college, James has maintained links with his old high school, and has recently disclosed his relationship status to a former teacher ('...and the member of staff who runs that [debating society] is asking me what's gone on and what's new with me and I said, "Well I'm in a relationship and it's great"'). A few other participants who attended faith schools also described supportive relationships with teachers. Perhaps surprisingly, it was Claire's (24) RE teacher at her Catholic high school who provided her with affirmation with regards her sexuality:

I remember saying to my teacher, 'Well, the book says most religions don't like it [homosexuality] but what do you think?' I remember she said - I don't know how she got in there, she was the most feminist person ever -she was like, 'If they're happy with it, then I think that's fine'.

Claire, however, recognises this teacher was somewhat of an anomaly and not representative of the wider school environment which was characterised by silences and ambiguities. This is illustrated when Claire's question in sex education goes unacknowledged:

We had sex education, obviously without the condoms and stuff, and they didn't tell us anything to do with homosexuality. I remember we had this thing where we had to put a question in the box, like any question we wanted, in Sex Ed, and I put in, 'What if I think I'm a lesbian?' And basically, they didn't answer it. They must have seen it but they just didn't answer it.

And also when her friends attempted to argue in favour of gay adoption in the debating team:

We had the debate team and some of my friends were in it and they wanted to do in favour of gay adoption as their topic and the school said you can do it but it's not supported. So it was like they were allowed to do it as an academic exercise but the school was like, 'It doesn't represent what the school thinks'.

Claire's account illustrates how faith schools (even within the same school) were neither monolithic nor homogenous with regards queer issues. Whilst the official 'party line' was influenced by religious doctrine (eg the Vatican's opposition to gay adoption), spaces could be opened up within this through pastoral support, or approaching issues as 'academic', which allowed for a demarcation (and thus bracketing) of the 'religious'. John (21) also experienced school not as a monolithic anti-gay institution but one where pockets of safety, support and resistance could be found or made, as in his experience of choir:

I think choir was the 'queer space', not a gay space, but choir in my school was very non-normative; it was like, if you were in choir you were a little bit of a social reject in a way (laughter)... I really came into my own in choir actually, like, I really felt like that was one place that I was really accepted and quite happy in.. And in choir gender wasn't as big an issue... I just really liked it.

Religious education was also ambiguous with regards content. John described how 'They didn't preach in that class about gay being wrong but they didn't even introduce the idea for a second that it might actually be just completely fine'. Despite the lack of condemnation, however, the *lack of positive affirmation* meant John felt unable to come out at school. In these accounts, we can see reflections of the negative faith school experiences previously reported by queer youth (e.g. Callaghan, 2016), but also some parallels with research which indicates that homophobia in schools is declining (e.g. McCormack, 2012).

In Estelle's (24) case, she was outed at school aged 13, and experienced verbal and physical abuse due to her sexuality. However, whilst this took place at a faith school, it was in religion that Estelle found comfort and strength to be able to survive the homophobic bullying:

I think probably the defining moment was the beginning of secondary school when it was really conscious, we had an amazing R.E. teacher and he did lots of Christian Union stuff and things. What do they call it, the God Bus or something, they came into the class and I suppose Confirmation was around the same time as well but they said, 'Anyone who wants us to pray for them, stay behind'... And that was when I really sort of committed, in my head, and it was around 13 as well when all the shit was kicking off at school, that was when it really became more important to me.

For Estelle, 'religion' was not to blame for the homophobia she experienced. This highlights how even when bullying takes places within faith schools, we should avoid assuming that religion is the causal factor. Indeed, Estelle talks about she was bullied by the 'cool kids' who had disavowed religion, whereas she belonged to the religious 'geeky' group. Estelle went on to describe her religious faith as:

Safe...I was getting beaten up at school and my home environment was abusive, so to be in that environment, conservative as it was... it was safe for me to still say 'I think you're wrong and this is why...' And I had quite a supportive R.E. teacher who disagreed with me fundamentally on my whole Theology but respected me for it.

Religion was thus experienced as a refuge for Estelle, given her turbulent home and school lives. Perhaps significantly, her feeling of safety persisted despite the 'conservative' religious community to which she belonged (although she also acknowledges her RE teacher's respect for her divergent views). This points to the idea that what is experienced as supportive for queer youth experiencing bullying may not involve direct affirmation of their sexuality. As Estelle grew older, she felt increasingly alienated from her religious community, but as a teenager it provided her with a key source of well-being despite the lack of sexuality-specific support. Estelle's account also brings into focus the fact that queer youth can also be *religious*, and religion can be mobilised in ambiguous ways beyond secular anti-bullying narratives. Estelle was not just a queer person experiencing homophobic bullying in a faith school, but she was *also* religious, and this facet of her identity was equally important to her. It was through religion that Estelle's life was made liveable (Butler, 2004); it was religion that allowed for her to be recognised as human when heteronormativity did not.

Susan (19) was another participant who attended a faith school and experienced homophobia, but also mobilised religion in order to make her life liveable. She describes how she was involuntarily outed when she was discovered to be in a relationship with another girl. In order to protect herself, she drew upon her identity as a 'good Christian girl':

I was just kind of terrified and didn't want people to know. So I said 'no, I didn't want to do this. I'm Christian and this person manipulated me basically'. So everyone said [to the other girl] 'o no, you manipulated [the] little Christian girl, you're awful' and everyone hated this girl...

In drawing on the gendered trope of Christians as pure and innocent, Susan was able to deflect responsibility onto this other girl. Gender and religion thus intersected in a particular way which Susan used to 'shut down' a particular interpretation of her sexuality (i.e. that she was gay and had played an active role in the relationship). Here we can see the complexity of navigating multiple subject positions and the ways in which they can work both with and against each other. Susan's tactic reinforces the idea that Christian and queer cannot co-exist, but at the time, provided her with a way of surviving a homophobic environment. This mobilisation of religion as a survival tactic adds a new dimension to research on how queer youth navigate the homophobia of faith school environments (Love and Tosolt 2013; Callaghan 2016); critically, we show how religion may not always be the 'enemy' it is assumed to be. We now move on to explore the experiences of students who attended non-faith community schools.

Experiences of community schools

Community schools were also experienced in multi-faceted, contradictory and ambiguous ways by queer religious youth. Community schools (i.e. schools not affiliated with any religious authority) could be and were just as homophobic as faith schools. A number of participants described negative reactions from both teachers and other students, such as Andrew (24):

I stood up and said, 'Well actually I am gay' in front of the whole class... and teacher's face was negative in her response and stated she was sad I had made that decision because she envisions me being a lovely husband and father, which if that's not bigotry then I don't know what is.

As with faith school students, community school students had diverse experiences both across and within schools. Experiences of affirmation and marginalisation frequently co-existed in participants' accounts, as again they referenced supportive peers or individual teachers but a wider culture of homophobia, or particular spaces or subjects that were experienced as safe whilst others were not. Across both faith and community schools, Physical Education (P.E.) was frequently cited as an unsafe space since this was where gender norms were particularly amplified in terms of what was appropriately masculine and feminine. Andrew's account was again exemplary of many participants' experiences:

Needless to say my relationship with my P.E teachers was fraught. And again with a male dominated subject I found there was no nurture for the feminine side of sport, it was all football orientated; boys did football and girls did netball. The only thing I really enjoyed about physical education at the time was when I could actually do mixed sets sessions such as going to the gym or swimming so I could have more female companionship and do things that I was a bit better at.

This account is suggestive of the ways that heteronormativity and binary understandings of gender are built into the institutional fabrics of schools. Due to the embodied nature of P.E., this was often where these came into sharpest relief. Our point here is to suggest that we must look beyond the restrictive and individualizing discourses of 'homophobia' and 'homophobic bullying' when understanding school experiences since much of what makes school an unsafe space for many young people (queer or otherwise) is the naturalized gender binarism that pervades teaching and the classroom, and from which homophobia arises. This accords with Monk's (2011, 96) point that the 'structural forms of homophobia', beyond individual perpetrators, are often overlooked in anti-bullying initiatives. Thus we can also see how it is a mistake to solely locate 'harms' within religion, when these much more subtle but arguably no less pervasive norms are threaded through 'secular' education.

The experiences of some participants at community schools also allow us to again problematize the idea of 'support'. In the previous section, we discussed how we might view religion not necessarily as a problem for young queer people, but an important (if ambiguous) source of support in some cases. In the case of community schools, some participants talked about how explicit LGBT+ recognition and support from schools was not necessarily *experienced as supportive*. Tom (20), a trans man who presented as female and identified as a lesbian whilst at school related the following:

They'd [teachers] ask every so often if everything was okay, they'd say 'And since you've come out, is everything okay?' and then that would be it on the subject...And they put up Stonewall posters when I came out, which to be honest, wasn't that helpful (laughter). Because everyone knew why they did it... I think positive publicity is a good thing but when it's done in such a blatant way I don't think anyone really pays any attention to it; it's got to be there in the first place rather than just suddenly be put up because of one person and everyone's like, 'Yeah, yeah, we know...'

Tom felt that his teachers' pastoral care was overly-focused on him coming out, and even then, teachers were not prepared to delve deeper than a surface check-in. Tom appreciated the symbolism involved in the school putting up Stonewall posters, but he also felt singled-out because of this. His point was that these affirmative posters should have been there *regardless* of whether any of the pupils were openly queer, which would have allowed the messages to circulate more organically. Because they had not done so, the posters had somewhat of a conspicuous presence that made Tom feel even more like a body-out-of-place. Tom also discussed how coming out at school was something that he did not have much agency over, because of his teachers' over-eagerness to be supportive:

I immediately changed my appearance, got my hair cut from shoulder length to nothing and started dressing in a certain way, and everyone at school sort of made their assumptions based on that rather than me actually telling them. Teachers started asking me, especially my guidance teacher who wanted to try and put the support in; so I didn't actually tell them, they just asked me...I mean, I didn't quite get why it had to be as big a deal as it was but I was sort of glad that they were at least coming from that side instead of opposing me completely.

Tom acknowledges the good intentions behind the teachers questioning, and states that he would rather have this than be met with hostility, but at the same time, there is ambiguity in Tom's account as he reflects upon assumptions made about him due to his appearance, and questions why such a fuss was necessary. As Airton (2013) argues, making space for queerness within education has tended to mean making space for individual queers rather than *queering* the classroom and tackling heteronormativity.

The idea of a 'big deal' also emerged in Tim's (18) narrative:

The teachers always said to us on one to ones that if somebody did come out, obviously then support them, make sure they feel comfortable. And even then, we still didn't, because thought, 'That's what you're saying to obviously make us feel comfortable' but we just thought, 'No way.' But the teachers did suspect who was queer and who wasn't queer.

Again, we can see this in terms of how queerness tends to be understood through the 'liberal' grammar of education: that is, as an *individual* difference that sets queer youth apart and to which teachers must respond, especially given how queer is cathected to 'risk' within schools (Airton, 2013).

For many participants, however, it was stigma regarding their religiosity which lead to their marginalisation at school, rather than their sexual identity. Nicola (21) talked about being bullied throughout school because she was 'very churchy' and 'very open about going to church and

spending a lot of time there'. Likewise, Samuel (22) found being religious to be a lonely and isolating experience (...*'it was very hard to grow up as a Christian when everyone around you wasn't. That was very difficult'*). Similarly, whilst Tim was able to be out as gay in some spaces, he felt unable to be out about his religious faith (*'I think Drama was the only place in school where I felt safe to reveal my sexual identity; my religious identity was always still hidden'*). For Tim, his religiosity carried more stigma than his sexual identity, and it was this that he felt was most important to conceal from his peers. We relay these accounts not to deny the experiences of participants, but to highlight that when discussing queer youth, 'queer' is not always the most salient part of the young person's identity with regards negotiating relationships with others.

For some participants, like James (17), it was his Christian identity that was most important to him, and all other identities were secondary. John (21) compared his university experiences to his (faith) school experiences, and found that despite the homophobia he experienced in school, it also provided him with an environment where he could be openly religious:

Everyone I knew was Catholic so I just thought everyone said their prayers and stuff and then as soon as I came to University I was like, it's such a tiny [amount]... Like, at school there were no qualms about mentioning it because we knew it so well, the whole thing, everyone had gone through the same thing, we could relate entirely on that level and you could mention something about God, any comment, whereas at Uni, if you are a Christian and you are fully fledged and you believe then it's quite a bold statement.

The liberal and diverse space of the University, despite being queer-affirming, is often experienced by queer religious young people as exclusionary, since religion is rarely included in either institutional diversity discourses or welcome within queer spaces (Falconer and Taylor 2016).

This all points to the need for an intersectional understanding of queer youth experiences. Reflecting a broader trend within sexualities research which accords 'excessive explanatory power' to sexuality (Stella 2015, 58), there is a widespread tendency in both academic research and in anti-bullying initiatives to view queer youth entirely in terms of their queerness (Savin-Williams 2005). But queer youth also have genders, ethnicities, class belongings, disabilities and varying citizenship statuses (McDermott and Roen 2016) – and, as we demonstrate, religious faiths (or none). To see queer youth solely through a queer lens, and thus to develop policy initiatives according to this totalising view, is to make invisible other sources of distress and inequality in young people's lives.

Against (the necessity of) coming out

The argument that queerness is but one factor amongst many in the lives of queer youth is also illustrated in participants' discussions of coming out (or not) at school. For many participants, coming out was not seen as necessary for them to experience school as a place of both security and pleasure ('safe and comfortable', Martin (21)). Susan (19), who mobilised her identity as Christian to deny that she was a lesbian because she felt unable to be out, nevertheless had the following to say about her school:

I had the time of my life, it was a girls' school erm and there wasn't any pressure... the teaching was top-notch, like really inspirational. And the teachers I go back and see them still.

Class backgrounds may be relevant here: for example, Susan's school was a grammar school, and although Martin attended a comprehensive, it was in an affluent area and on par with local private schools. For Susan and Martin, attending well-resourced schools perhaps also mitigated the need to be open about their sexuality, since their material and intellectual environment was one which provided other sources of belonging and security. McDermott and Roen (2016) discuss how their middle-class young queer participants anticipated going to University with a sense of security and excitement, as they envisaged this as a future space where they could express their gender and sexuality. This is not to suggest that middle-class youth are less likely to be out at school, but rather to highlight that having a sense of ontological security regarding the future (i.e. *knowing* that you will go to University because it is what is done) might also work to mitigate decisions about outness.

Tim (18) even felt that coming out at school could be *damaging* for other queer people in that it instates a kind of normative queer subject who is open about their sexuality (MacIntosh 2007). Tim subverts the narrative of the desirability of having 'positive' LGBT role models amongst one's peers by describing how he felt he benefitted from the fact that no-one was out in his school:

Interviewer: Was there anyone at your school who felt like they could be 'out'?

Tim: There was no-one.

I: So you didn't have anybody to compare?

T: No. Which was really quite nice because then it didn't feel like you were being pressurised to come out or pressurised to stay in.

In Jacob's (21) case, he did feel that coming out helped make his school life more liveable since then the bullying he experienced could be explicitly named as homophobic, which was stigmatised:

"A lot of people started sticking up for me, even though the bullying was not new, people perceived it as being homophobic and they were less okay with that"

However, the protection Jacob gained from this was dependent upon him claiming a fixed identity, and it was only then that his experiences could be taken seriously. This highlights the limits of the discourse on homophobic bullying in that it focuses on an individual identifiable non-heterosexual subject, rather than examining more broadly how gender and sexual norms circulate through education spaces, and how they affect us all. Students should not need to 'name themselves' in order to live a school life free from harassment and abuse, but because of the way homophobia is operationalized in educational discourse to apply only to demarcated queer students (Airton 2013) this is often indeed the case.

Conclusion

This article represents an exploration of queer religious youth's experiences of faith and community schools in England. From these, some key policy suggestions emerge. In terms of the larger political and governmental perspective on faith schools, we would urge caution against the reductionist assumption that faith schools are places of risk or danger for queer youth and thus require particular scrutiny. Participants' experiences of faith schools were not monolithic: some were good, some were

bad, most were ambiguous, and these could happen all within the same school. But crucially, this was also the case for participants who had attended community schools. Positioning faith schools as 'problem sites' with regards LGBT equality enacts harms of its own: it makes invisible queer youth who are also religious, overlooks the fact that religion can be a source of support against bullying, and ultimately reifies the mutual exclusion of religion and sexuality. As we have argued, it also lets the 'secular' off the hook with regards homophobia, heteronormativity and gender inequalities when the spotlight is so intently focused on 'religion' as *the* problem.

For organisations such as Stonewall who have been tasked by the government to work with faith schools on the 'issue' of LGBT, as well as schools themselves, we recommend paying attention to the structural issues from which instantiations of homophobia arise – that is, the gender and sexuality norms institutionalised in *all* educational settings which impact on *all* students. We agree with Airton (2013) who makes the case that schools should focus on granting all students the 'negative' right to be free from gender and sexual normativity. This is of course a vast and complex undertaking, and so we suggest that a concrete place to start might be with something like PE, where as we have seen, the kinds of sports pupils are permitted to do are still often divided by gender (a finding also affirmed by recent research e.g. Wilkinson and Penny 2016). This reifies notions of what is appropriately feminine and appropriately masculine, the policing of which is intrinsically linked to homophobia, but is something that structures the school experiences of *all* students, not just those who are queer.

Our article has also shown the limitations of current pastoral support for queer students and how it is not necessarily experienced as *supportive*, since it requires the identification of 'difference' and the making visible of the queer body to which support can be directed. Again, there is need to shift focus to the wider school culture - as one of the participants in this study suggested, a simple example of this could be having queer-affirming posters and materials visible as a matter of course, regardless of the existence of identifiable queer students.

Addressing queer youth's distress might also require addressing other aspects of school life beyond sexuality and gender, such as stigma towards religious faith. As we have argued, queer youth are never only just queer. We have shown how for some queer youth, being in an environment where they could express their religious faith was just as important as being in a non-homophobic environment. Although our own intersectional engagement in this article was (due to our focus) largely limited to the intersection of 'queer' and 'religious, we also pointed to some ways in which 'gender' and 'class' work to shape experiences. For example, 'coming out' might be dependent on certain classed visions of futurity, and so for some pupils, coming out may not be necessary or desirable (and so pastoral support might be less insistent on this). Heteronormativity and rigid gender binarism are systemic and ubiquitous, and so the above recommendations will of course not 'solve' the problem - but they may be at least a place to start.

¹ Whilst recognising contestations over the term ‘queer’, we use ‘queer’ as an umbrella term to encompass participants who identified as LGBT but also those participants who preferred ‘queer’ as a descriptor, or some other term beyond the LGBT rubric.

² Whilst the majority of participants could be considered ‘Christian’, we use the term ‘religious’ throughout this article since participants tended to identify with their denomination rather than with ‘Christianity’ as such, as well as to reflect how some participants’ identities exceeded that of ‘Christian’ (e.g. those who were Christian but with Pagan and Buddhist leanings).

³ We focus on England here since Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have differing legislation governing schools and education.

⁴ Throughout this paper, we use the term ‘faith school’ as synonymous with ‘schools with a religious character’. This is in accordance with usage within educational policy (e.g. School Admissions Code, 2015) where the terms are used interchangeably. However, there are several issues and complications here. We do recognise that some Anglican schools reject the designation ‘faith school’ since ‘it implies confessional education for children of a particular faith community, rather than the inclusive education of children from a diversity of religious backgrounds that many of these schools like to present’ (Ipgrave, 2016: 61). This is an issue that relates to the distinction made between voluntary-aided and voluntary-controlled faith schools, which may indeed differ in terms of the communities they serve (VC schools must comply with LEA guidance regarding inclusive admittance whereas VA schools can select on religious grounds). However, in practice, many VA schools, particularly in the primary sector and in rural areas, ‘simply admit all the children living in their parish first’ (Diocese of Rochester, 2014). Arguably then, both VC and VA schools could also be considered ‘community schools’ in that they *are* - in practice - schools for the whole community. However, since data was not collected on the precise nature of the faith schools attended by participants, we have decided to retain the broad designation ‘faith school’ despite it glossing over some potentially different contexts. We have also retained the policy-based distinction between ‘faith’ and ‘community’ schools for this reason, although we fully acknowledge that this distinction may not be ‘lived’ on the ground in the same way as set out in policy.

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