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The Narratives of Gay Male Teachers in Contemporary Catholic Malta

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Dedication

To 'invisible' gay students and teachers who silently suffer the woes of homophobia and to educators who actively encourage all students to be themselves in complete freedom and safety.

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I wish to express my sincere thanks to all those who have assisted me in completing this study. I particularly would like to express my deepest gratitude to the supervisors of this research project, Dr Jools Page and Professor Peter Clough for their constant guidance, discussions and advice and for their persistent encouragement throughout all the stages of this study.

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Thank You!

ABSTRACT

JONATHAN BORG

THE NARRATIVES OF GAY MALE TEACHERS IN CONTEMPORARY CATHOLIC MALTA

This thesis seeks to raise awareness of the pervasive heteronormativity of Maltese culture and on the effects that exclusionary practices may have on gay students and teachers. The culturally-saturating influence of the Roman Catholic faith in Malta, and the effects of a vigorously heterosexist society are chief elements which discourage Maltese homosexual educators from presenting their true sexuality to students, their parents, and teacher colleagues; in this and other related socio-cultural ways, Maltese gay teachers have thus been rendered an invisible presence in their schools. The study investigates the significance of being a gay teacher in contemporary Maltese culture through a set of narratives which reveal how five teachers construct and negotiate their personal and professional identities. The thematically-driven narratives themselves are made ‘transgressively’ (St Pierre, 1997) from an artistic re-casting of interview data as composite fictional accounts; in this way, the identities of the actual participants are invisible, whilst the issues that characterise their lives can be dramatically foregrounded. Each of the fictionalised narratives is followed by a critical deconstruction which both locates the story in the context of the literature and features the reflections of the interviewees themselves on the re-working and re-presentation of their life accounts. The accounts themselves tell of suffering and exclusion, of ambiguity but also of success; of experiences which are heavily conditioned by the sexuality of these teachers and by the context in which they are situated. The study concludes with an anticipation of the further research and of the developments in education policy which are needed if Maltese institutions are to realise the national commitment to inclusive cultures of schooling.

KEYWORDS: FICTIONALISED NARRATIVES, TEACHER IDENTITY, GAY TEACHERS, INCLUSION, SEXUAL DIVERSITY, PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY, MALTA.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AD	Alternattiva Demokratika
APA	American Psychological Association
CEO	Catholic Education Office
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
EU	European Union
FRA	Fundamental Rights Agency
GLEN	Gay and Lesbian Equality Network
GSA	Gay-Straight Alliance
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission
ILGA	International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association
IVF	In Vitro Fertilisation
LGB	Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer
LGBTIQQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and Questioning
LGBTQQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning
MGRM	Malta Gay Rights Movement

MUT	Malta Union of Teachers
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
NCF	National Curricular Framework
NCPE	National Commission for the Promotion of Equality
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NMC	National Minimum Curriculum
NYA	National Youth Agency
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
PE	Physical Education
PGCE	Post Graduate Certificate in Education
PSCD	Personal, Social and Career Development
RS	Rejection Sensitivity
WHO	World Health Organisation

Chapter 1

Introduction

Foreword

In this research project, I present the fictionalised narratives of five Maltese gay, male teachers. Through a meticulous investigation of their experiences, the research reveals the significance of being a gay teacher in 21st century Malta. This study challenges heteronormative assumptions on sexuality which have historically beleaguered students and teachers with a non-normative sexuality. It additionally reveals homophobic issues that are embedded in the Maltese educational system and which consequently lead to the social alienation of these individuals. The assembly of these elements advocates recommendations which aim at ensuring truly inclusive educational environments for all students and teachers, independent of their sexual orientation.

Understanding Maltese Culture

Culture is learned knowledge and a pattern of meanings that is shared and inherited between different generations in a community (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). Through these socially constructed ideals, a culture dictates the normal practices of society. It is by means of these notions that Geertz (1973) argues “men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life” (p.89). According to Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), these socially-ingrained assumptions may thus act as “conditioning elements” (p.181) since these may jeopardize the social participation and functioning of individuals whose ideals do not correspond to the expected societal norms or ‘set of beliefs’ that is adhered to by the mainstream majority.

Bradford and Clark (2011) maintain that a strong urban orientation, social, economic and sexual stratification, dependence on kinship units and family solidarity are aspects which characterise most Mediterranean societies. In relation to this thesis I argue that these structures prompt consistent value patterns such as honour and shame. Defining honour as the value of a person in one’s own eyes and in the eyes of the other community members, O’Reilly Mizzi (1994) explains that this attributed socially claimed status “functions most effectively in intensive face-to-face communities” (Brandon and Clark, 2011, p.181). In other words when a person infringes the value norms of a culture, he taints his honour and is often rejected by society and treated with contempt. Similarly, shame embodies disgrace and

humiliation and the resultant loss of status; the socially constructed judgment of an individual. In the context of this research, the ramifications of ‘honour and shame’ on Maltese individuals who violate the local cultural norms are at the very heart of this study and therefore should, I argue, be seriously addressed. With its small size and its high population density (highest in Europe) Malta is often considered as an ‘urban village’ (Gans, 1962, p.16). Villagers within a typical Maltese community would often know each other by name, if not by the family’s nickname and several members of the extended family would normally reside in the same village.

Brandon and Clark (2011) report that, in Malta, “life has a quality of intimacy that centres on family, children, Church and local community” (p.181). For example, the annual village *fešta* is one important occasion when these values are particularly evident. This is confirmed by the National Youth Policy Review of 2005 which describes Malta as “a cohesive society built on the foundations of family and faith” and that there exist “... strong attachments to family and neighbourhood” (Council of Europe, 2005, p.26). Given the regular contact between community members, knowledge about other people and families is frequently made known through the “mechanism of gossip” (Brandon and Clark, 2011, p.181). The preservation of one’s honour is therefore fundamental. Interestingly, O’Reilly Mizzi (1994) suggests that “... if your behaviour deviates from the norm you cannot move to another part of the community and start again. Your reputation will follow and catch up with you very quickly” (p.375). Therefore, despite the inevitable effects of globalisation, the religious beliefs of the Maltese people remain strong. In a culture where “... religion [is] the substance of culture and culture ... the form of religion” (Camilleri, 2003, p.87) the difficulties for LGBTI individuals residing in such communities continue to prevail and may even become exacerbated.

‘Grin and Bear it...’ – The Maltese Scenario on non-Heterosexuality

As a British colony, the Mediterranean island automatically adopted Great Britain’s Penal Code (Karim, 2013) which incriminated same-sex relations between men. A well-documented case dates back to the 19th century (Aldrich, 2003), when Guglielmo Rapinett, a Maltese magistrate, was arrested for bawdy behaviour while trying to seduce a guard. In Malta, it was only in 1973 when the law criminalising sodomy was repealed (*Malta Gay Right Movement*, MGRM, 2013). In 2012, however, the House of Representatives in Malta

approved a bill that included hate crime amendments to the Criminal Code (Maltatoday, 2012). The bill extended the scope of this law to include sexual orientation and gender identity. A step in the right direction was taken by the *National Commission for the Promotion of Equality* (NCPE) when it included sexual orientation as part of its campaign against any form of societal discrimination. The commission (2013, p.4) claims that it:

works to ensure that Maltese society is a society free from any form of discrimination based on sex, family responsibilities, sexual orientation, age, religion or belief, racial or ethnic origin, and gender identity in employment, financial institutions and education at all levels (p.4).

With Malta's accession to the *European Union* (EU) in 2004, a ban on anti-gay discrimination in employment came into effect; MGRM further currently lobbies government to add sexual orientation to the anti-discrimination laws for the provisions of goods and services. In 2008, MGRM presented a petition to parliament, requesting the need to legally protect *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender* (LGBT¹) individuals. It is interesting to note that apart from proposing the enactment of laws that penalise homophobic and transphobic crimes (then, still excluded from the Criminal Code), the petition also called for an anti-homophobic bullying strategy for the islands' schools.

A significant statement was made by the President Emeritus of Malta, Dr George Abela, who claimed that the most important thing there exists, is love and that it cannot be 'graded' according to an individual's sexual orientation (Maltese President Meets, 2009). The statement of the then President was noteworthy since it was the first time ever, that a Head of state formally met members of the *International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association* (ILGA). Eventually, the ILGA's thirteenth annual conference was, for the first time ever, held in Malta. The 2013 general election was influential in determining unprecedented progress for LGBT rights. Following the eventual election of a new labour government, a bill which allowed civil unions to same-sex couples was presented in parliament (Parliament Meets Today, 2013). With fifty-two per cent of the Maltese being against same-sex marriage (Vella, 2012), the law on civil unions, enacted in 2014, was the source of much controversy since it concurrently grants joint adoption rights to same-sex couples. Although, all rights and obligations of same-sex couples in a civil union equate to

¹This acronym may be written LGBT, GBLT, GLBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQI, LGBTQQI, etc.

those of the civil marriage law, same-sex marriage in Malta remains forbidden. Access of same-sex couples to *In Vitro Fertilisation* (IVF) and surrogacy are currently not permitted by the Maltese law.

In April 2014, the Nationalist Party presented a bill requesting a constitutional amendment. The bill advocated protection from discrimination on the basis of one's sexual orientation or gender identity and was unanimously approved by the Parliament of Malta (Malta, 2014). With the enactment of the *Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Act* (Malta, 2015) Malta became the first country in the world to bar forced sterilization and surgical interventions on intersex people. Individuals can now have their gender identity officially and legally recognised without the implementation of medical procedures.

The globalisation process via technology, media and NGO networks has been instrumental in strengthening the fight against LGBT discrimination (Globalization101, 2009). Exposure to global developments in the field of LGBTI rights has also been crucial in instilling a basic understanding of these issues (Globalization101, 2009). In addition, Malta's accession into the EU was instrumental in raising awareness on the lack of anti-discriminatory legislation and policies in the field of LGBTI rights (FRA, 2009). However, the challenge now lies in translating policy into practice by addressing and changing opinions and individual views. Although locally, there are no available statistics which support the argument about generational differences in attitudes towards LGBTI individuals, anecdotally I am confident that the local support for LGBTI individuals will gradually increase, if the different stakeholders in education commit themselves to truly educate people on sexual diversity. It will be evident from this brief history that the advancement of local legal frameworks for non-heterosexual individuals in Malta has been remarkable. The implementation of policies which safeguard the well-being of individuals is always a positive progressive step. But this is far from being the end. Moreover, given Malta's close-knit culture and the insular mentality in some of its communities, developments in the field will most probably be slow. Gabi Calleja, MGRM chairperson, claims that:

as a gay person in this country, about the first thing you learn is how to grin and bear it... the mentality is clearly still resistant to a more inclusive perception of society. We still have a long way to go... (Vassallo, 2010, p.5).

Background of the Study

MGRM (2015) claims that now that appropriate laws have been passed “we will need a wide ranging policy to ensure that inclusion is really promoted” (No Objections Expected, 2015, p.1). Education on *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and Questioning* (LGBTIQQ) is practically absent in the local educational system. MGRM insists that:

story-telling, inclusive textbooks, exposure to diverse family forms, reference to *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer* (LGBTIQ) persons who have contributed to academic knowledge and visible role models all play a part in combating the stigma and prejudice often faced by LGBTIQ children and youth (Schembri Orland, 2015, p.3).

Educational institutions do not mirror the reality outside school boundaries. The Maltese community’s lack of knowledge on such matters persists. Despite the importance of legislative advancements, the failure of education in addressing this gap must not be overlooked.

A 2011 survey on sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination against LGBT persons in Malta carried out between the years 2006-2008 reports that fifty-three per cent of respondents under eighteen years of age suffered psychological harassment by fellow students. Alarmingly, thirty-three per cent of respondents in this age group recall more than ten such incidents whilst thirteen per cent were also victims of physical violence at school. The fact that thirteen per cent are harassed at an educational institution emphasises the need to address issues of homophobia in schools. Only thirty per cent of those who attend school or university could discuss their private life as openly as heterosexual students do. Moreover, the most commonly cited location of harassment is the workplace. In July 2007, the *Malta Union of Teachers* (MUT) threatened to publish details of four attempts to expel gay and lesbian teachers from Roman Catholic school posts. These Church Schools were under pressure from parents to fire these teachers (Debono, 2007). Such circumstances continue to raise key concerns regarding the safety of LGBT educators in Malta particularly at institutions that are administered by the local Catholic Church Authority.

Locally, there has been no sustained high-level academic research regarding gay teachers working in the educational system and it is this gap in current knowledge that this research

will address. Being an elementary school teacher myself, I am especially disappointed to note that there is no specific reference whatsoever to sexual diversity in the formal academic curriculum. *Personal, Social and Career Development* (PSCD) sessions in the primary school, tackle children's physical awareness when it comes to sexual development and an awareness of sexual abuse but, make no explicit reference to homosexuality *per se* (Ministry of Education, *National Minimum Curriculum*, NMC, 1999). In the secondary sector, education on sexual diversity is limited to a weekly forty-five minute PSCD session (Department of Curriculum Management, 2014).

Furthermore, sexuality in the framework of Religious Education does not encourage gay people to live their homosexuality as nature intended. Discussion of such topics in the secondary school period is more likely to occur yet still limited in content particularly in Catholic Church schools. Referring to the organisation of educational seminars in schools, Calleja claims that "educators found it 'almost impossible' to access schools and teach students about LGBT issues... We've only been invited to one school...and even then we were given a list of things we weren't allowed to say because parents had objected" (Borg, 2012, p.16).

On the other hand, protection of LGBT educators is often disregarded while research conducted by MGRM (2011) reveals that much of the homophobic abuse suffered by educators and students goes unreported. This invisible but very real abuse is aggravated by the trauma of 'invisibility' which some educators must endure in order to secure their job (Griffin, 1992). This issue was specifically raised by *Alternattiva Demokratika* (AD) which is Malta's green political party, in the run-up for the general election in 2013. AD further stipulated the importance of this theme in its electoral manifesto, insisting:

on the need to address the needs of LGBT persons within the educational that include both staff and students. The needs of this community are currently not being addressed with the consequence that a lot of hurt is going unnoticed in our schools. AD feels that in the name of justice it is the duty of an educational system to address the needs of this category of people (Alternattiva Demokratika, 2013, p.62).

The Scope of the Study

This research reveals something of the life narratives and experiences of Maltese gay teachers. It explores how these ‘invisible’ educators construct their various identities in Malta’s ‘modern’ educational landscape. This research provides a deeper insight into current discriminatory and exclusion practices in education. The study is centred on one main research question:

What do the experiences of local gay teachers reveal about contemporary Maltese culture?

Structure of the Thesis

Following this introductory chapter, key literature in relation to the concepts of social alienation, the differing perspectives towards homosexuality, the mono-conceptualisation of masculinity, sexual identity and the pervasiveness of heteronormativity in educational spaces, is identified. The theoretical underpinnings of queer paradigm, standpoint theory and the study of intersectionalism are also reviewed in this chapter.

In the subsequent chapter, I discuss issues related to research methodology as I evaluate the potential of narrative research in exposing aspects of human experience. The legitimacy of fictional approaches to educational research is evaluated through a detailed explanation of how I apply this methodological framework in my research project. A section of this chapter discusses the epistemological and ontological assumptions of this inquiry. I further provide details on the data collection process, the analysis of narrative interviews and the eventual creation of the fictional narratives as I address the necessary ethical obligations that such research entails.

The fictionalised narratives of gay teachers that are presented in the succeeding chapter are each followed by a commentary which includes the participants’ response to each narrative. The final concluding chapter discusses the implications of this research for educational policy.

An Endnote

I conclude this preliminary chapter by indicating the two main factors which distinguish this research from other studies on the subject. It primarily ‘breaks the silence’ in the way it articulates the experiences of people who have traditionally been hushed and it employs an ‘unorthodox’ and what St Pierre (1997) calls ‘transgressive’ way of investigating narrative data. As the subsequent chapters unfold, the combination of these elements creates a fusion of critical and reflexive enquiry which is intended to persuade the reader to verification of the human issues so revealed.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine issues arising from the narratives of five Maltese gay male teachers, teaching in local schools. In an attempt to break the silence that has long veiled the presence of non-normative sexualities in highly conservative and predominantly Catholic Malta, this research sheds light on the meaning of the life experiences of teachers who self-identify as homosexual. In addition, it examines why 'being gay' is a criterion for the alienation and exclusion of both students and teachers from the culture and philosophy of education in Malta.

The preceding chapter has set the context for the systematic review of literature that I present in this section of the study. With this forthcoming review, I aim to establish the research topic by providing a detailed evaluation of relevant themes that emanate repeatedly throughout the literature. I first discuss aspects of social exclusion, attitudes towards homosexuality, hegemonic masculinity, sexual identity and the maintenance and preservation of heteronormativity in educational spaces. I then evaluate issues on the feminisation of teaching and the invisibility of sexuality in education. Queer paradigm, standpoint theory and the study of intersectionalism provide the conceptual and theoretical framework for the discussion of these themes. Since local research specifically addressing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) issues within the Maltese educational context is scarce and only limited to a handful of dissertations (Pace, 1998; Caruana and Schembri, 2001; Portelli, 2003; Portelli, 2006; Sultana, 2007; Baldacchino, 2009; Borg Castillo, 2011), the majority of reviewed sources are foreign-based.

The Concept of Social Exclusion

In the context of this research study, a review of social exclusion is central to the understanding of the fictionalised narratives of gay teachers. The concept of social marginalisation is characterised by different definitions which range from poverty to more culture-sensitive descriptions. The European Commission and the Council of Europe define social exclusion as:

A process whereby certain individuals are pushed to the edge of society and prevented from participating fully by virtue of their poverty, or lack of basic competencies and lifelong learning opportunities, or as a result of discrimination (European Commission, 2005, p.8).

Historically, several societies have struggled with discrimination against individuals who differ from a standard social 'norm' (Guindon, Green, and Hanna, 2003). From the marginalisation point of view, the concept of exclusion is governed by what society conceives as 'normal'. Gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation can all operate as criteria that lead to direct or indirect discrimination (Amnesty International, 2014). Aspects of marginalisation are particularly manifest in issues surrounding 'abject' or non-heteronormative sexualities, since anybody who fails to exhibit gender congruent behaviour or who defies a standard norm is bound to be marginalised and subjected to social exclusion.

Almost a century ago, the International Labour Organization (1919; and later in 1944) stated that traumatic experiences of discrimination and exclusion arising from socio-economic or cultural injustices appear to indirectly influence the individual's emotional and health aspects or directly affect persons, isolating vulnerable individuals from the rest of society.

Irrespective of its nature, such discrimination left profound repercussions on victims to the detriment of their self-confidence and self-esteem. A hundred years later, we are still not in a position to declare that these experiences of exclusion are forgotten history.

The exclusion of non-normative sexualities from educational spaces - a central theme in this study - perpetuates experiences of discrimination which, to a growing minority, are beyond belief. In the light of the objectives which this research aims to fulfil, it is therefore necessary to discuss the discourses which lie at the core of these unjust practices. In *A Theory of Justice* (1999), the political philosopher John Rawls, promotes a pedagogy that is based on the principles of social justice to help citizens achieve their best without restricting the opportunities of other people. Rawls (1999) proposes that:

Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others (p.3).

Rawls (1999) presents two fundamental principles of social justice, namely, fairness and equality. He accentuates societal implications of these, suggesting that society is obliged to ensure the implementation of these conventions. He additionally highlights the magnitude of governmental responsibility, through the mentioning of “institutions of practice” (p.112), which ought to ensure that the principles of social justice are met. Entitlement to justice and equality rights should be guaranteed to anyone in society irrespective of one’s sexual orientation, ethnicity or religious background, claims Rawls. Indeed, “universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice” (Constitution of the International Labor Organisation, 1919) and the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action similarly envisages social justice as a foremost aim of human rights education (United Nations, 1993).

Sadly, full community membership remains a far-fetched ideal for several excluded communities such as in the case of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ) individuals. Instead of incorporating Rawls’ conceptualisation of fairness and equality ‘institutions of practice’ often preserve and maintain discourses which stipulate what is good or bad and what is right or wrong.

Sexism, Misogyny and Homophobia: The Mono-Conceptualisation of Masculinity

Foucault (1998), in his discussion on power, explains that different discourses do not operate in a top-down hierarchy but rather in a complex web of power, oppression and privilege. It is therefore important to consider “the effects of power in our practice, and its impact on our identities” (Chapman, 2003, p. 36). On the same line of thought, Bourdieu's ideology of power maintains that symbolic power or symbolic violence is instrumental in the reproduction of social hierarchy through systematic institutions such as education. In *La Domination Masculine* (1990), Bourdieu articulates his theories of gender construction and investigates masculine domination which “can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.1); such domination, he asserts, is achieved through symbolic violence; “a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling” (Bourdieu, 1990, pp.1-2).

Notwithstanding its refined definition, powerful masculine supremacy may lead to forms of violence (Bourdieu 1984; 1990). The consequences of these processes deserve careful consideration.

In societies which subtly or overtly continue to maintain the values of patriarchy, masculinity is prized at the expense of femininity and consequently, the exclusion of anything feminine becomes a fundamental criterion that delineates maleness. Society adopts, enacts and preserves these contaminated values, often without us realising it, to the extent that these categories become normalised. The construction of the dichotomous spheres of masculinity and femininity is a perfect example of an assumed social standard: two distinct categories which are already defined by their very own exclusionary nature (Maccoby, 1987; Spence and Sawin, 1985). Historically, the 'obsolete' essentialist analysis of gender in which women were offensively perceived and treated as the weaker sex has relegated femininity to an inferior social platform. An examination of the intersection of this structural form of oppression to homophobia is paramount to understand the exclusion of males who defy the 'rules' of masculinity.

Class, ethnic background, race and sexual orientation are profoundly affected by the prescriptions of maleness. According to Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1987), maleness promotes "values such as courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body" (p.148). Individuals whose behaviour violates this prescribed manliness are therefore at an increased risk of social alienation. These socially constructed structures permeate working environments and subsequently manliness becomes the key for success to the detriment of 'othered' behaviours which fail to meet the criteria of absolute masculinity. Furthermore, male subjects may engage in homosocial behaviour in order to prove their masculinity and to ensure that they do form part of *the* group. This approach consolidates group identity but marginalises females and whatever can be related to femininity such as 'other' masculinities. To describe this phenomenon, Jackson (1998) refers to "dichotomized gender absolutism" (Jackson, 1998, pp.91–92), in which anything "not overtly male" is considered to be feminine.

On this issue, Thompson & Pleck (1986) draw upon Brannon's scale of masculinity ideology² (1976) to suggest three universal norms to which males hold, namely; status, toughness and anti- femininity. In addition, masculinity is associated with the expression of homophobia and an exigency of not appearing homosexual (Maccoby, 1987; Herek, 1987; Kimmel, 1994). By distancing themselves from gay men, heterosexual men ensure a more stable sexual identity (Theodore & Basow, 2000). However, Wilkinson (2004) concludes that men's anti-gay attitudes are more destined towards a fear of appearing feminine rather than towards status or competition.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Antonio Gramsci, a major contributor to the field of Marxist Ideologies came up with the concept of 'hegemony' to define configurations of power-establishment and the upholding of dominant structures within society. Throughout the process of hegemony, the ruling category establishes its ideals and formulates its values and morality to eventually portray them as natural or 'instinctive'.

Heteronormativity, as a case in point, is indeed the hegemonic legitimising and privileging of a sexual relationship. For instance; a married, heterosexual, man who is engaged in a monogamous relationship has what it takes to fulfil the criteria of heteronormative discourse (Browne and Nash, 2010).

In the context of masculinity, these hegemonic instances or 'imposed normalities' include qualities such as "restrictive emotionality, concern with power and status, excessive self-reliance, homophobia, anti-authoritarian bravado, anti-intellectualism, and non-relational attitudes toward sexuality" (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002, pp.59–60). Mills (2001) emphasises that hegemonic instances exist within the same gender and insists that hegemonic masculinity, "...is constructed in relation to and

²

In 1976, Brannon (cited in Vincent, Parrott and Peterson, 2011), speculated that there were four chief themes of the traditional masculine gender role in the U.S.: "No Sissy Stuff" (i.e., avoiding femininity and concealing emotions), the "Big Wheel" (i.e., being the breadwinner and being admired and respected), the "Sturdy Oak" (i.e., "a manly air of toughness, confidence, and self-reliance"); and "Give 'em Hell" (i.e., willingness to engage in violence and adventure)" (p.384).

against femininity and subordinated forms of masculinity” (p.12). The author goes on to say that:

Oppression positions homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men. Gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity, the items ranging from fastidious taste in home decoration to receptive anal pleasure. Hence, from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity, gayness is easily assimilated to femininity (Connell, 1995, p.78).

Hence, “heterosexual men may view feminine traits and behaviours in themselves and others negatively because other men could interpret this information as being diagnostic of a (generally devalued) gay sexual orientation” (Wilkinson, 2004, pp.128-129). This point concurs with a statement by Kaufman (1994) who claims that pro-feminists in men’s movements acknowledge a tendency for men to hide away any self-doubts they might have about their grade of masculinity.

Foucault (1981) refers to the role of discourse in social structures and institutions as the means to naturalise, communicate and reiterate human values. In actual fact, social structures, institutions and the media are highly influential in determining these hegemonic instances. In the context of education, research by Jackson (1998) accentuates how boys with a feminised self-conception or who provoke hegemonic masculinity by exhibiting lady-like features, risk difficulties such as marginalisation and academic underachievement. As a result, ‘subordinate’ masculinities endure an intricate process in defining their masculinity vis-à-vis ‘mainstream’ norms. This process is tough for minorities since heterosexual males might deem this unconventional paradigm of masculinity as a possible threat towards their identity. It is no wonder that in Berliner’s words (2001, p.1):

‘Gay’ is probably now the most common word for abuse in the playground and beyond, among children and teenager, and it is used to describe anything from the not very good to the absolute rubbish. It is used to describe any kind of behaviour that could be remotely categorized as homosexual, even accidental touching in a crowded corridor, or a friendly smile in the changing room.

With reference to local research, a study led by Portelli (2006), focuses on ‘language’ as an important predictor of masculinity in Malta’s bilingual context. From the analysis of a number of cases in an all boys’ secondary school in Malta, Portelli (2006) concludes that the

use of Maltese language “constitutes a quantitative index of manhood by which boys attempt to distance themselves from the world of femininity” (p.426) and cites Connell (1996) to add that educational institutions may act as masculinising agencies. In a post-colonial context where speaking Maltese is linked to a political ideology of pride, and where speaking English reflects an acquisition of British identity and culture, Maltese students who speak English were conceived as ‘silly’ or ‘snobs’. Language choice mediated through social, political and cultural factors thus evolved into an apparatus that maintains group identity and which reinforces the essence of masculinity.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, discussed in this section, is causal for the subordination of ‘subtypes’ of men (Wilkinson, 2004).

Masculinity vs. Masculinities

In the post-modern era, the mono-conceptualisation of masculinity as suggested by Bem (1981), which refers to a fixed set of features generally considered characteristic of, or apposite to, a man, has become dissected into sub-categories or ‘intra-genders’. According to Keiller (2010), these sub-categories exist in tension with one another with hegemonic masculinity and ‘pro-feminist’ masculinities at opposing ends of the spectrum. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005, p.836) report that:

The concept of masculinity is criticized for being framed within a heteronormative conception of gender that essentializes male-female difference and ignores difference and exclusion within the gender categories. The concept of masculinity is said to rest logically on a dichotomization of sex (biological) versus gender (cultural) and thus marginalizes or naturalizes the body.

Connell (1995), who has been a leading proponent of this idea, emphasises the notion of multiple masculinities and explains that the socially constructed definitions for being a man are numerous. Although men may support similar gender ideals, different men may perform these societal expectations in different ways. Courtenay (2000) describes how for instance, in the United States young men may concur that a ‘real’ man ought to be tough, nonetheless “how each man demonstrates being tough and how demonstrating toughness affects him physically - will be influenced by his age, ethnicity, social class and sexuality” (p.1390).

On the issue of masculinities, Connell (2005) argues that “to recognise more than one kind of masculinity is only a first step”; “we must also recognise the relations between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance and subordination. These relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on” (Connell, 1995, p.37). Connell (1995) additionally claims that not all men benefit from patriarchy in the same way. She explained that men who fail to fulfill the requisites of masculinity are normally subordinated by those who do. In other words, heterosexual men who are married, who are physically tough and who engage in hard work are more powerful than men who do not satisfy the criteria of this ‘set of beliefs’. Furthermore, marginalised men may also attempt to compensate for their subordinated status by defying hegemonic masculinity and constructing alternative forms of masculinity (Courtenay, 2000). In exploring gay sadomachism as a hypermasculine performance, Kularski (2013, p.2) explains that:

while some gay men choose to construct their own gender performance without regard for the requirements for hegemonic masculinity, others construct themselves in a way to assimilate to the expectations of masculinity or appropriate attributes of the hegemon to construct their own competing masculine identity.

On the same line of thought, Pyke (1996, p. 531) explains, how men “with their masculine identity and self-esteem undermined by their subordinate order-taking position in relation to higher-status male” may exploit their resources to “reconstruct their position as embodying true masculinity”.

Stereotyping Gender and Role-Congruity Theory

A theory of the social construction of masculinity asserts that gender roles are shaped by cultural expectancies for male conduct (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Sanchez, Greenberg, Liu, & Vilain, 2009; Allen & Smith, 2011). Social institutions (for example media, schooling and parental modelling) variously promote and effectively ‘police’ a rigid set of masculine ideals, realising them as characteristic expressions of ‘maleness’. Keiller (2010, p.39) makes the following point on this subject:

Pressures to conform to gender stereotypes are pervasive. People internalize such pressures from parents, media, and peers, and come to believe that being gender-typical is natural and good, whereas cross-gendered interests or behaviours are shameful and pathological.

This value-laden labelling becomes the yardstick for the measurement of normality or abnormality in individuals – a stereotype. Indeed, Tajfel and Turner's theory of social identity implies that group partisanship provides group members with a strong sense of identity (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This positive sense of belonging allows insiders to perceive the in-group (i.e. the self) positively and the out-group (i.e. the 'not self') negatively (Kilianski, 2003). Membership provides the group with a set of attributes (i.e. stereotypes) that establish the group's policies and the resultant "stereotypes of the in-group thus tend to be positive, whereas stereotypes of out-groups tend to be negative" (Kilianski 2003, p.39). Pollard (1997) warns that such stereotyping "can lead to a 'self-fulfilling' prophecy which may culminate in considerable social injustices" (p. 77). In this regard, the perpetration of violence by males becomes tolerable, expected or, even worse, naturalised.

Research demonstrates that adherence to masculine norms is positively associated with sexual prejudice (Polimeni, Hardie & Buzwell, 2000; Parrott, Adams & Zeichner, 2002; Kilianski, 2003; Keiller, 2010). Pressures to conform to this 'legitimatised' supremacy of masculinity are causal for a sense of inadequacy in adolescents, who learn that they do not satisfy the measures of maleness. Askew and Ross (1988) clarify that this quandary can "either limit our own behaviour to fit in with them or else see ourselves as abnormal" (p. 4). de Visser (2009) correlates with the notion of being a 'real' man with hyper-masculinity, characterised by an exaggerated conformity with these imposed norms.

The notion of stereotypes is adopted by Allen and Smith (2011), who explore the role-congruity theory. This paradigm describes gender-congruent behaviour as a stereotype "match" whilst it classifies gender-incongruent behaviour as a stereotype "mismatch" (Allen and Smith, 2011). Gender becomes instrumental to determine one's status in society. If a man exhibits stereotypically feminine behaviour or if he seeks work which is traditionally gender-incongruent (such as nursing or a teaching career in Early Childhood Education), he infringes the code of the male gender role and will likely fall victim in some quarter of prejudice (Davison & Burke, 2000). In actual fact, men who display stereotypically feminine characteristics which are antithetical to maleness, such as a higher degree of emotional

warmth, empathy and thoughtfulness, are frequently stereotyped as 'gay' - regardless of any actually expressed or realized sexual orientation.

Allen and Smith (2011) mention the employment of a qualified male teacher at an elementary school as a case in point. They claim that the parents' concerns tend to focus on the social implications of employment on their children even though the academic credentials of the male teacher remain undoubted. This is one of the social discursive expectations which render the elementary teaching profession incongruent with manhood - the feminisation of teaching is a point which I discuss in more detail, later in this review - to the extent that any disclosure of feminine behaviour by men is correlated with expectations regarding sexual orientation (Madon, 1997). Hence, Mac an Ghail (1994) declares that "sexuality is 'deployed' - that is, used - by operations of power that survey citizens via their bodies: its sensations, functions and pleasures..." (p. 3).

Similarly, academically 'gifted' boys may detect a conflicting incompatibility between the rigid rules of masculinity and their 'mismatching' high aptitude (Kerr and Cohn, 2001). The "stigma of giftedness" (Cross, Coleman, & Terhaar-Yonkers, 1991, p.45) is often problematic for gifted children and adolescents when faced with a demanding gender-linked expectancy, which requires them to firmly adhere to male norms. Through socialising, boys learn that compassion is unacceptable for men (Pollack, 1998). Boys "are victims of their socialisation and experience difficulties from the pressures they are put under to prove their masculinity and hide their vulnerability" (Askew and Ross 1988, p.xi). Hébert (2002) warns of possible psychological traumas for gifted boys who repress their sentiments and their virtuous abilities for fear that they are labelled 'feminine'. Conversely, "decreased feelings of inadequacy were associated with greater endorsement of the norms of achievement/status and self-reliance" (Shepard, Nicpon, Haley, Lind and Liu, 2011, p.185). Loyalty to predetermined principles thus proved to be beneficial in reducing stress and in boosting self-confidence. Martin (2002) claims that boys' fear of failure is particularly relevant to their construction of gender. The narrow cultural definition of masculinity fills boys with anxiety due to their failure in fulfilling the stereotypical ideals of masculinity, their fear of being identified feminine, of being powerless and of having their sexuality questioned. Martin (2002) relates many of the problems that boys experience in schooling "to their frustration and feelings of inadequacy in attempting to live up to what they believe their peers and society generally expect of them as

males” (p.62). In fact, manhood is deemed unstable, “susceptible to threats to masculinity because it is socially achieved and easily lost” (Allen and Smith, 2011, p. 77).

An intriguing point is raised by Thornton and Bricheno (2006) who note that “being male is now a public issue” since manifestations of hegemonic masculinity are “set against the image of caring new men who nurture children and eschew traditional stereotypes” and hence, “men and boys are subject to far greater public scrutiny now than ever before” (p.viii).

Gender, Sexual Identity and Sexual Orientation – Identity Categories?

In clearly distinguishing sex from gender, feminist writings in the 1970s shed light on how gender denotes experiences and interactions in a social world, defining it as a “socially and culturally constructed category, infinitely diverse and varying across place and time” (Oakley, 1981, p.8). Contrarily, one’s sex is determined by genetic characteristics, physiology and biological differences. Haas, Eliason, Mays *et al.* (2011) suggest a minimum of three dimensions which define sexual orientation, namely; sexual self-identification, sexual behaviour, and sexual attraction or fantasy. The *American Psychological Association* (APA) defines sexual orientation as:

an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person’s sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviours, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions ... Sexual orientation is commonly discussed as if it were solely a characteristic of an individual, like biological sex, gender identity, or age. This perspective is incomplete because sexual orientation is defined in terms of relationships with others. People express their sexual orientation through behaviours with others, including such simple actions as holding hands or kissing. Thus, sexual orientation is closely tied to the intimate personal relationships that meet deeply felt needs for love, attachment, and intimacy (APA, 2008, p.1).

In contrast to sexual orientation, gender identity refers to the individual’s inner sense of being masculine, feminine or androgynous (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Nonetheless, researchers insist that gender identity does not present a fixed characteristic and as Thornton and Bricheno (2006) suggest, we have moved from defining gender identity via the traditional binary categorisation of masculine/feminine, to “a continuum of masculinities and femininities at the extremes of which lie hegemonic masculinity and stereotypical femininity” (p.20).

These researchers suggest that variations in masculinity and femininity are boundless and sustain Fausto-Sterling (2000) who adds that this continuum ranges from masculinity to femininity and maleness to femaleness, as well as identification as neither essentially male nor female. Hence transgender people may, over time, move fluidly between identities (Whittle, Turner & Al-Alami, 2007). Interestingly, Britzman (1993) perceives gender as “a function of nature”, suggesting that it naturally encompasses specific traits “prior to how these qualities become reworked by social and historical meanings” (p.31). Britzman (1993) refers to qualities such as caring, which have “come to be regarded as being a natural ‘female’ trait or type of occupation” to insist that “gender exists prior to the social meaning that it generates” (p.31).

The gender identity that individuals express is a combination of social learning that is arbitrated by maturational and cognitive factors and that as we grow up and experience new things we actively systematise our identities: we have choice and agency. Nevertheless, the development of gender identities is subject to a strong element of social conditioning (Kohlberg, 1996). With his theory of socialisation, Parsons (1959) views socialisation in the home and at school as being specifically instrumental in ascribing masculine identities to males and feminine identities to females. Bern (1993, p.81) describes how gender polarisation works to support heterosexuality by fulfilling two main functions within the cultural context:

first, it defines mutually exclusive scripts for being male and female. Second, it defines any person or behaviour that deviates from these scripts as problematic...taken together, the effect of these two processes is to construct and naturalize a gender-polarizing link between the sex of one's body and the character of one's psyche and one's sexuality.

This Theory of Socialisation implies that culturally specific patterns of behaviour, attached to the respective sexes are learned and reinforced: “people in our social networks frequently respond to us in sex-specific stereotyped ways” (p.20). For instance, family members may even offer children toys that seemingly conform to the child’s sex and thus continue to reinforce gender expectations (Smith and Lloyd, 1978). McNay (1999) warns that gender cannot be condensed to experience “but will reveal itself through experience vis-à-vis broader contexts” (Adkins, 2004, p.11). This phenomenological analysis, according to McNay

enables us to see gender as lived, complex, social relations which involve abstract power relations (Adkins, 2004).

The inseparableness of gender and sexuality is emphasised by Butler (1993, cited in Inckle, 2010, p.260) who claims that, “gender is inherently (hetero)sexualised and all sexuality is inherently gendered” (p.260). In Butler’s queer approach to gender and sexuality, these identity categories persistently reiterate one another, “creating the illusion of a determining originary” (Inckle, 2010, p.260). This relentless cycle produces and maintains static norms (Inckle, 2010) that regulate sexuality “through the policing and shaming of gender” (Butler, 1993, p.238). The crux of Butler’s argument is that gender cannot be considered as a manifestation of an innate gender but it is the portrayed performance of gender itself which leads to the creation of an essential gender. She claims that “there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990, p.25). In simpler words she states that, “gender is not something that one is [but] something that one does, an act” (Butler, 1990, p.25).

In an attempt to deconstruct the identities of sex and gender, Mac an Ghail (1994) points out the fragility of a socially constructed phenomenon called ‘male heterosexual identity’ and questions how despite its frailty, this category appears stable and unified, and as having fixed meanings. It is necessary to evaluate the roles that institutions, such as education, have in structuring social order and in controlling unstable gender and sex categories.

Echoing Tyack and Strober (1981, p.134) who argue that “since its inception, institutional education has reflected an overall ‘structuring of society’”, particularly in relation to distinctions of sex”, Mac an Ghail (1994) suggests that “schools alongside other institutions attempt to administer, regulate and reify unstable sex/gender categories. Most particularly, this administration, regulation and reification of sex/gender boundaries is institutionalized through the interrelated material, social and discursive practices of staffroom, classroom and playground microcultures” (p.9). The lack of recognition that gay and lesbian pupils experience at school, contributes to their isolation and exclusion. Moreover, politics of inequality around sexual orientation preserve structures of reason which, in turn, inhibit the effort of schools to achieve more positive outcomes with non-heterosexual students (Grant and Gillette, 2006).

Queer Theory

Gay and lesbian studies³, originated most noticeably in the 1970s. Identity-based academic fields, such as women's studies, were highly instrumental in cultivating research into the relatively uncharted territory of sexual orientation and gender identity. Initially, these studies aimed to expose the repressed and stifling realities of gay and lesbian individuals, but eventually posited an inclusive community which recognises no ontological boundaries between lesbian and gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and intersex people and cultures.

Emerging within queer studies in the postmodernist context of the 1990s, the analytical standpoint of queer theory rejects the 'socially constructed' nature of sexual acts and identity (Branch, 2003) and claims that "identity [is] neither fixed nor unitary, but multiple and shifting" (Kissen, 2002, p. 5). This paradigm defies the notion of binary conceptions such as the essentialist identity categories of 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' (Butler, 1990). Meyer (2007) clearly points out that although queer theory is rooted in gay and lesbian studies, "it has become much more encompassing than gay and lesbian studies" (p. 15).

Casey (2007) goes beyond the framework of heterosexuality and refers to homonormativity to delineate kinds of homosexual relationships which are now increasingly gaining acceptance to the extent that they become considered as normative. Within a queer framework, even the term 'gay' indicates a normalising discourse on homosexuality. Clearly, 'queer' lies outside of these normative structures and for men who identify as queer, the lifestyle of these homo/heteronormative relationships can sit in stark contrast to their private 'worlds', which are characterised by behaviours and practices influenced by markedly different sexual cultures (Brown, 2008).

In fact, this theoretical framework encompasses any sexual activity or behaviour which society may categorise as deviant or non-normative. Queer theory has been

³ 'Gay and Lesbian Studies' are often referred to with varying emphases and/or positionalities as queer studies, or sexual diversity studies or LGBT studies. For the purpose of this thesis I use a generic 'Gay and Lesbian Studies' except where a distinction needs to be made.

heavily influenced by scholars such as Butler (1990; 1993, 1997, 2004), Sedgwick (1985; 1990) and Halperin (1995) and builds upon feminist confrontations to the idea that gender is an element of the essential self. It additionally aims to disrupt the stabilisation and maintenance of identity categories which in turn classify individuals through constricting criteria such as sexual orientation. In 1948, Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin had claimed that “only the human mind invents categories... The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. The sooner we learn this concerning sexuality the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of its realities” (p.639). Kinsey’s argument anticipated what queer theory eventually suggested fifty years later.

Categories traditionally considered as culturally ‘mismatching’ such as cross-dressing, gender ambiguity and hermaphroditism, according to Jagose (1996) prove to be the reason behind the stabilisation of heterosexuality as a ‘natural’ sexuality. “Like some postmodern architecture”, queer theory, “turns identity inside out, and displays its supports exoskeletally” (Jagose, 1996, p.132). Halperin (1995, p.62) defines queer as encompassing of:

whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative.

Queer theory has often been accused of being excessively abstract and intangible (Inckle, 2010). In this research study, I use the adjective ‘queer’ as a reference to LGBTI individuals and as a verb to define an opposition to ‘normalising’ (Spargo, 1999). On the other hand, I am well aware that the exclusive emphasis on ‘gay’ sexuality and the recurrent reference to a gay identity in my research may well be contested in the realm of identity politics: “boundaries and hierarchies” (Wilchins, 2004, p. 29). However, as Whitlock (2010) denotes, such use “does offer a place not where marginalized folks become static and anesthetized with/in the identity, but rather where we might have a way-station for taking identity inventory” (p.82).

Intersectionality

The feminist sociological theory of intersectionality explores how conceptualisations of oppression “mutually construct one another” (Collins, 1998, p.63). This concept suggests that social, biological and cultural categories such as sexual orientation, gender and religion interact on manifold and concurrent levels leading to the creation of systematic inequity and discrimination (Knudsen, 2007). According to this theoretical framework, first named by Crenshaw in 1989, forms of oppression such as homophobia, racism and sexism do not operate independently of one another but they rather interrelate to create a system of oppression that mirrors the interplay, or rather the intersection of manifold forms of discrimination. Within this theoretical framework, oppression is no longer seen as “a linear sum-total equation; thereby obscuring the complex lived dynamics of intersecting oppressions” (Inckle, 2010, p.256).

This approach is hence a challenge to universalist analyses of power, identity, inequality and marginalisation (Inckle, 2010). Research shows that intersectionality has traditionally been correlated to the interplay of social class, gender and race and the diversities of experience that these construct – experiences which cannot be fragmented into exclusive categories of oppression (Bredström, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Davis, 2008).

Intersectionality is similar to queer theory in the way it challenges hegemonic approaches to the reification of identity politics. It renders visible the repercussions of framing experiences into normative categories “by employing methodologies compatible with the post-structuralist project of deconstructing categories, unmasking universalism and exploring the dynamic and contradictory workings of power” (Davis, 2008, p.74). Taylor, Hines and Casey (2011) note that identity intersections with sexuality has not been given its due attention, nonetheless, research conducted by Griffin (1991), Sparkes (1996), Biddulph (2005) and by Barnfield and Humberstone (2008) in the USA and the UK sheds light on aspects of intersectionality in teachers’ lives. The experiences of teacher’s intersectionality with (homo)sexuality and their professional identity showed that these educators implement numerous strategies to

divide the public-professional from the private facet of their identity (Biddulph, 2013).

Standpoint Theory

One's standpoint or perspective is dependent on one's positioning in a social hierarchy. These standpoints are constructed on the experiences that individuals have in comparison to other subjects situated on other levels of the social hierarchy (Griffin, 2009). Standpoint theory, in fact, suggests that the lives of the marginalised should be the core of an analysis of power relations (Bowell, 2011). Standpoint theory underscores the social situatedness of knowledge, proposing that the social positioning of marginalised individuals provides them with a stronger standpoint than non-marginalised individuals (Bowell, 2011). This theoretical framework thus challenges the assumption that dominant groups hold a more privileged standpoint. Given this focus on marginalised populations there is a clear potential for standpoint theory to animate the investigation of gay teachers' stories.

Attitudes towards Homosexuality

Powerful institutionally-located positions such as the medical, legal and religious institutions have varying perceptions of homosexuality. In this section I first provide a brief historical background on the development of attitudes towards homosexuality in the medical domain. I then shift to the realm of Religion in order to review the Church's judgement on homosexuality since the first centuries.

Boswell (1980) explains that while homosexuality was practically accepted or even possibly unheeded by the Church during the High Middle Ages, negative attitudes to homosexuals began to develop towards the end of the 12th century. Hostility gradually proliferated through European religions and non-spiritual institutions. Writings exhibit condemnation of sexual acts which were not procreative (Boswell, 1980). Legal sanctions which had their origins in religious teachings rendered homosexual behaviour a criminal act, and one could even face a death penalty in colonies such as New Haven (Katz, 1976). Spargo (1999) elaborates Foucault's (1980, 1985, 1986) comparison of the homosexual act in the 16th and in the

19th century, and confirms that in earlier times, the weight was on the sinfulness of the act but as from the 19th century, the emphasis shifted to the ‘scientifically’ determined condition of the individual. Developments in the medical and psychiatric domain rendered homosexuality a matter of pathology; “the homosexual was now a species... The homosexual was pathologised as a perverse or deviant type, a case of arrested development, a suitable case for treatment, in short as an aberration from a heterosexual norm” (Spargo, 1999, p. 20). Researchers claim this had been a progressive stance which no longer considered the ‘homosexual’ as a criminal but as a victim of uncontrollable, destined circumstances for which he could not be blamed (Duberman, Vicinus, & Chauncey, 1989). Nonetheless, the Morrow (2001) explains that:

based on this social construction of homosexuality as abnormal, many lesbians and gays living in the first half of the twentieth century dared not disclose their sexual orientation for fear of being institutionalized as mentally ill (p.154).

As far back as in 1901, Ellis argued that homosexuality could neither be considered immoral nor a disease since it was natural and innate. In corollary, Freud believed all human beings were essentially born bisexual and that experiences of socialisation in the family and the wider community leads individuals to eventually identify as heterosexual or homosexual (Freud, 1905). In 1935, Freud’s views on homosexuality are crystal clear in a letter he had written to an American mother who wished that her son’s homosexuality would be treated:

Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function produced by a certain arrest of sexual development. Many highly respectable individuals of ancient and modern times have been homosexuals, several of the greatest men among them (Plato, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, etc.). It is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime, and cruelty too.... If [your son] is unhappy, neurotic, torn by conflicts, inhibited in his social life, analysis may bring him harmony, peace of mind, full efficiency whether he remains a homosexual or gets changed...." (reprinted in Jones, 1957, pp. 208-209, from the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 1951).

Other psychoanalysts proposed that homosexuality was a result of pathological family relationships during the oedipal period when a child is four to five years of age (Bieber, Dain, Dince *et al.*, 1962) whilst Socarides (1968) claimed that homosexuality was even pre-oedipal and therefore even more pathological than previously thought.

In a 1948 ground-breaking research, Kinsey and colleagues reported that ten per cent of their male population sample was exclusively homosexual and had been exclusively homosexual for at least three years between the ages of sixteen and fifty-five (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). Interestingly, Ford and Beach (1951) revealed prevalent homosexual behaviour in non-human species and that in a number of human societies, this was accepted and not always condemned (Williams, 1986) whereas Hooker's study (1957) confirmed that homosexuality could never be considered as a psychopathology. In 1973, the APA despite strong resistance, removed homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). Nonetheless in 1980, a new diagnosis, namely, ego-dystonic homosexuality was introduced in the DSM's third edition. Ego-dystonic homosexuality, referred to a persistent lack of heterosexual arousal in a wanted heterosexual relationship or an emotional distress arising from an unwanted homosexual arousal. This new diagnosis was criticised by mental health professionals as a way to placate psychiatrists who still insisted on the pathological nature of homosexuality. It was only in 1986 that homosexuality was entirely removed from the DSM (APA, 1974; 1987).

Sexuality and Religion

Research in the U.S. identifies religion as one of the most powerful predictors of attitudes about homosexuality (Olson, Cadge and Harrison, 2006; Schulte and Battle, 2004; Burdette, Ellison, and Hill, 2005; Rowatt, Tsang, Kelly *et al.*, 2006). While most religions tend to categorise behaviours linked with homosexuality as profane and abnormal (Yip, 2005), Christianity, specifically, has emphasised a need to be chaste and labelled those who do not abide as sinners. Given the context of this research, it is essential to elaborate on the Catholic Church's teaching on homosexuality which is summed up in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1951, Article 6: The Sixth Commandment):

Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered'. They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.

A letter from St Paul to the Corinthians taken from the New Testament of the Bible (The Holy Bible, New International Version, 1984) typically states that "because of the temptation

to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband” (Corinthians, 7:2). Similarly, St Paul tells the Corinthians:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, 10 nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:9-10),

and the Romans:

For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, 27 and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. 28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper (Rom. 1:26-28).

Old Testament writers pull even fewer punches:

You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination (Lev. 18:22).

If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act; they shall surely be put to death. Their bloodguiltiness is upon them (Lev. 20:13).

This biblical discourse has brought about many of the stigmas that continue to revolve around sexuality. In the 2nd century, one of the commandments in the *Didache* treatise, stated: “you shall not corrupt boys” in times when it was not unusual for Greek and Roman men to engage in “homosexual relationship between an adult male and a pubescent or adolescent male” (Crompton, 2006, p.118). Indeed, in the first two centuries, pederasty and male prostitution were possibly the most observable forms of homosexuality (Greenberg, 1990). In 305-306 AD, the Council of Elvira excluded from communion anyone who has sexual intercourse with a boy but by the Late Middle Ages, sodomy⁴ was considered by the Catholic Church Authorities as an atrocious sin for which sodomites were persecuted (Haggerty, 2000). While neither of the First and Second Vatican Councils discussed the issue of homosexuality, Catholic Church documents referred to it as *crimen pessimum* (the worst crime) and the judgements of earlier councils on homosexuality were never repealed (Hagel, 1831).

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By the Late Middle Ages, sodomy encompassed non-vaginal heterosexual intercourse, heterosexual or homosexual anal sex, copulation between males, fellatio, masturbation, bestiality and *Coitus Interruptus* since these have no reproductive potential (Haggerty, 2000).

Although contemporary Catholicism is less extreme in its approach than the Late Middle Ages' period, it has assumed the 'love the sinner, hate the sin' approach and thus 'accepts' homosexual beings but condemns the homosexual act on the basis that it disregards complementarity (male and female sexual organs complement each other) and productiveness (openness to new life). The Catholic Church reiterates that marriage can only be between a man and a woman and is antithetical to the legislation of same-sex civil unions which, it insists, do not provide the right environment for children (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2003). In 2013, Pope Francis referred to the legislative proposals on civil unions in Malta and expressed his 'sadness' at these developments (Pentin, 2014). Furthermore, during a meeting with Maltese Bishop Mgr Charles J. Scicluna, The Holy See restated his view that same-sex 'marriage' is an "anthropological regression" (Pentin, 2014, p.2).

Although the Catholic Church condemns any kind of discrimination in the regard of homosexuals, claiming that "they must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity" (Allen, 2013, p.180), it explains that homosexuals "are called to chastity... to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1993). According to the teachings of Roman Catholicism, it is only in such a way that these individuals can approach true Christian perfection. In an explicit reference to homosexuality, the document '*Persona Humana*' issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1975, reiterated its non acceptance of homosexual activity which it said, is contrary to the Church's teaching and morality. However, the document differentiates between homosexual individuals who were "pathologically" homosexual and homosexual persons who were gay as a result of "a false education [...] a lack of normal sexual development", or because of other healable non-biological causes (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975, VIII). The document also stated that 'pathological homosexuality' could never justify same-sex activity within loving relationships.

Any lacunae which could arise from defining homosexuality as an innate disorder were eventually addressed in the letter 'On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons' (*Homosexualitatis Problema*, in Latin) (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986). The letter was addressed to all bishops of the Catholic Church and instructed the clergy how to deal with LGB persons in a time when gay-accepting clergy and groups in the United

States were on the increase. The letter, issued in October 1986, condemned any form of physical or verbal violence in the regard of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) people but it insisted that homosexuality, although a natural orientation, was “essentially self-indulgent” and has a propensity towards the “moral evil” of homosexual activity which, in essence, is not truly loving. The letter explains that such activity is a result of deliberate choice and therefore should not be rendered inculpable by the nature of sexual orientation. On the other hand, it insisted that homosexual acts could never be equated to heterosexual acts within marriage. Interestingly, an expansion on the letter in July 1992 asserted that discrimination in certain areas such as in the selection of adoptive parents or in hiring teachers is not unjust (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1992).

Blackwell (2008) emphasises a noteworthy association between Christianity, male gender, belief in the ‘free choice’ model of homosexuality (the belief that gays and lesbians have the possibility to select their sexual orientation) and other factors that produce an antagonistic environment. In defining spiritual violence as a discriminatory practice against homosexuals based on religious-related immorality, Swigonski (2001, p.34) claims that:

Hebrew and Christian scriptures have been used to characterize GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender) persons as moral transgressors, as individuals who stand outside the cloak of protection of human rights, and to justify or rationalize hate crimes against them.

Researchers claim that active religious participation, frequent contact with religious literature and regular interaction with religious friends are likely to promote anti-homosexual attitudes (Olson *et al.*, 2006; Scheitle and Adamczyk, 2009). More specifically, Wilcox (1996) and Regnerus and Smith (1998) conclude that, apart from the fear of divine punishment, the community in which people live in may encourage more religious people to prompt others to adopt anti-homosexual attitudes and to introduce policies that are consistent with prejudice. Adamczyk and Pitt (2009) also suggest that “personal religious beliefs have a greater effect on attitudes about homosexuality in developed countries like the United States, which are characterized by a high level of self-expression and a diversity of perspectives” (p.339). Moreover, these researchers confirmed a strong correlation between attitudes towards homosexuality and living in a Catholic nation.

A study, led by Conti (2011) with therapists who deal with Maltese LGB clients revealed that the strong influence of the Catholic Church results in “religious fundamentalism, guilt, parents fearing for their children’s spiritual well-being, individuals fearing that they will end up in hell, lack of acceptance by society and family, and lack of self-acceptance” (p.58). This study specifically identifies religious fundamentalism as one of the causes of homophobic sentiments in Malta.

Cases of attempted conversion or ‘reparative therapy’ are no exception in Malta. In June 2015, an article in *The Sunday Times of Malta* featured Bishop Tom Brown, who was a guest at the evangelist church of River of Love in Malta. Bishop Brown claimed that homosexuality is indeed an illness; a mental disorder and dismissed research findings which show that the suppression of homosexuality may lead to significant health and emotional difficulties (Ban Therapy to Convert, 2015). In reacting to this so-called conversion therapy, Gabi Calleja, head of the *Malta Gay Rights Movement* (MGRM) called for the criminalisation of such therapies. She reiterated how homophobia and heteronormativity were still commonplace in Malta and that “gay people experience difficulties in coming to terms with their sexual orientation” (Ban Therapy to Convert, 2015).

In a statement issued in *The Times of Malta* (Vella, 2015, p.1), *Drachma* and *Drachma Parents’ Support Group*⁵ pointed out the absurdity in classifying LGBTIQ individuals as ‘mentally ill’ and that such hate speech was, in reality, what harmed people:

We affirm that LGBTIQ persons are part of God’s creation and are a regularly occurring variant in nature. There is nothing mentally wrong with LGBTIQ persons and their dignity is rooted in the divine personhood of God in the same way that all persons are created in the image of God. It is also not a matter of choice, nor is it reversible or curable but an identity rooted fundamentally in the person’s being.

The effects of these attitudes on close-knit and highly devout communities of less than half a million individuals, such as Malta, are scandalous. For this reason, appropriate methodological measures which ensure the safety of all participants were taken throughout the different phases of this research. This aspect is discussed in more detail in the subsequent chapter.

⁵ *Drachma* and *Drachma Parents’* support groups help LGBTIQ individuals and their parents to seek sexual and spiritual integration.

The Catholic Hegemony in Malta

Borg (2006) refers to the Catholic Church in Malta as “one dominant culture” (p.61) which “works through education to reproduce its position within society” (p.62). In 21st century Malta, clerical members are still considered as “leaders within the parishes” who “preside over key stages in the life cycle of Maltese citizens –baptism, Holy Communion, confirmation, marriage and extreme unction” (Borg, 2006, p.62). Lay and specialised organisations assist in the maintenance of the Catholic hegemony in Malta (Borg, 2006).

Practices in education are highly moulded by Catholicism which in turn remains privileged in the curriculum and pedagogical practices. The 1999 *National Minimum Curriculum* (NMC) stipulates that “teachers must keep in mind the context of the moral and religious values of the students and their parents” (Ministry of Education, p.55). The Catholic Church in Malta provides education to a third of Maltese student populations and owns more than fifty charitable institutes for the elderly, orphans, battered women, refugees and persons with disabilities (Borg, 2006). Furthermore, drug and alcohol rehabilitation services are also offered by the Catholic Church. It owns sophisticated media infrastructure, is a publisher of a national newspaper and produces an impressive list of publications (Public Relations Office, 2001). *Flimkien* (meaning: together), an eye-catching monthly booklet is published by the local Curia and distributed gratis to every household in Malta. It is an effective way for the Catholic Church to disseminate its message.

Borg (2006) refers to a ‘Catholic hegemony’ in the Maltese educational system, where he perceives Maltese state schools as sites of cultural reproduction; he goes on to accentuate the Gramscian perspective that “the hegemonic educational relationship is mediated through various institutions of civil society, particularly schools” (p.59). The realisation and preservation of hegemony is a matter of education since intellectuals “have the function of organisers in all spheres of society” (Simon, 1982, p.94). In an analysis of hidden curriculum in schools, Apple (1975) discusses how school programs suggest “a network of assumptions that, when internalized by students, establishes the boundaries of legitimacy” (p.99). The subtle yet powerful control of the Catholic Church in Malta is immeasurable. A 2011 study led by the *European Union’s* (EU) *Fundamental Rights Agency*(FRA) sheds light on how religion is embedded in Maltese culture. Seventy-eight per cent of Maltese LGB respondents

agreed strongly that better acceptance of differences in sexual orientations would allow LGB individuals to live more comfortably.

The Implications of Heterosexism

As Szasz (2007, p.96) clearly puts it:

For many years psychiatrists imprisoned homosexuals and tried to ‘cure’ them; now they self-righteously proclaim that homosexuality is normal and diagnose people who oppose that view as ‘homophobic’.

Describing homosexuality as an invention of the 20th century, Foucault (1978), suggests that this ‘innovative construct’ is indeed a ritualised mechanism of political, economic and social control, particularly for men. Owens (1992) underscores Foucault’s belief that it may be significantly convenient to view homosexuals as outcasts. The use of sexual orientation as a means for social control mostly depends on the creation and the intensification of the feminisation and criminalisation of homosexuality. Owens (1992) further suggests that although these homophobic operations are intrinsically repressive to gay men and women, they pervasively regulate the behaviour of all men: “The imputing of homosexual motive to every male relationship is thus ‘an immensely potent tool... for manipulation of every form of power that [is] refracted through the gender system-that is, in European society, of virtually every form of power’” (Sedgwick, 1985, pp.88-89).

The term ‘heterosexism’ was first employed by Herek in 1990 (Hetzel, 2011). This word replaced the earlier ‘homophobia’ term “which viewed negative attitudes towards same-sex oriented persons as an irrational fear (i.e. a phobia)” (Hetzel, 2011, p.1422). Conversely, Hetzel (2011) indicates that contemporary terms such as ‘heterosexism’, ‘sexual prejudice’ and ‘homonegativity’, have now placed the responsibility for prejudice with those who hold negative views towards Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) individuals and towards a society that tolerates such abuse. According to Shidlo (1994), heterosexism encompasses the belief that heterosexuality is the preferred and natural sexual orientation; classifying all other orientations as inferior. Crawford, McLeod, Zamboni & Jordan, (2000, pp.394-401) imply that:

In general, individuals who are most likely to hold negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians and gay and lesbian parenting are theistic, highly traditional men who believe homosexuality is a life-style choice, who know few if any gay or lesbian people personally, and who are surrounded by other people who share their views of homosexuality.

In 2012, a large-scale empirical survey conducted by FRA across EU member states and Croatia focused on individuals who self-identified as LGBT. Experiences of discrimination or harassment on the grounds of sexual orientation that took place in the previous year (i.e. 2011), were shared by about a half of respondents taking part in this survey. Similarly, the use of belligerent language by politicians in the regards of LGBT people was considered rife by almost half of all respondents. Survey results revealed how three-quarters of bisexual men and gay survey respondents claimed they avoided holding hands in public with a same-sex partner for fear of being harassed, assaulted or threatened whereas half of all respondents expressed identical fears because of their LGBT sexuality. Public sites such as streets, public buildings and public transport were clearly identified venues where such harassment reportedly took place (FRA, 2012).

Research indicates that direct and indirect heterosexist prejudice can be alienating and detrimental to the psychosocial functioning of LGB people (Meyer, 1995; Smith & Ingram, 2004; Takács, 2004). Even “the daily knowledge shared by all members of oppressed groups that they are *liable* to violation, solely on account of their group identity” (Young, 1990, p.335) is a form of indirect victimisation. Inferior educational levels and high regard for conventional family ideologies with homo-negative attitudes and discriminatory practices may possibly contribute to a discriminatory climate (Crawford, McLeod, Zamboni, & Jordan, 2000; Swigonski, 2001; Lim, 2002; Rivers, 2002).

Pachankis, Golfried & Ramrattan (2008) developed a status-based '*Rejection Sensitivity Model*' for gay men and other stigmatised minorities, so as to gain a deeper insight into the consequences that are ascribed to the marginalisation of people and communities who are excluded on the basis of their seemingly sexual 'deviance'. The study revealed that gay men with high Rejection Sensitivity (RS) were more likely to report intolerance and rejection from their caregivers, such as parents.

A Minority-Stress Model

Meyer's (2003) '*Minority Stress Model*' describes possible emotional challenges that LGB individuals experience as a result of their minority status. Societal discrimination, internalised heterosexism and disruption in social support networks can precipitate feelings of anxiety and mental distress (Meyer, 1995; 2003), thus severely impacting one's psychological well-being. LGB individuals might undergo minority stress on an interpersonal level (such as employment, institutional structures, relationships with family members, participation in social activities) and on an intrapersonal level (such as attitude, health, resiliency, coping skills).

Meyer (2003) claims that individuals with marginalised social identities are subject to chronic levels of stress owing to their stigmatised minority status and declares that LGB individuals are 2.5 times more likely than heterosexual individuals to report mood, anxiety, and substance use disorders. The societal legacy of discrimination provides significant grounds for such negative statistics (Meyer, 2003). Meyer's stress model suggests four potential determinants, specifically; "overt prejudice, expectations and vigilance about discrimination, internalised stigma, and concealment of sexual orientation" (Meyer, 2003, pp.674-697).

Similarly, gay-related stress (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Gwadz, 2002; Rotheram-Borus, Hunter & Rosario, 1994) refers to a range of stressors that originate from individual and institutional discrimination against LGB people. On an institutional level, discrimination ensues from laws and public policies that generate inequality and that fail to protect individuals from discrimination that is sexual orientation-based. A salient finding in a study conducted by Haas *et al.* (2011) shows that LGB participants residing in American States that had no protective policies were almost five times more likely to experience two or more mental disorders than those coming from other states. Recent research (Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin *et al.*, 2010) hints at a positive correlation between public policies that discriminate against sexual minorities and an elevated mental disorder in LGB people.

Elevated anxiety, depression and mental health problems were reported in LGB adults' personal experiences with discrimination (Mays & Cochran, 2001). Parental rejection, due to sexual orientation, is considered to be a 'powerful stressor' (Haas *et al.*, 2011, p.22).

Rejection by family members has been correlated to a higher risk of suicide attempts among LGB youth (D'Augelli, Grossman, Salter, Vasey, Starks and Sinclair, 2005; D'Augelli, Hershberger and Pilkington, 2001; Remafedi, Farrow, Deisher, 1991; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Furthermore, Ray (2006) asserts that the repercussions of parental and family rejection are evident through the alarmingly high numbers of homeless LGBT young adults and adolescents, estimated to constitute twenty to forty per cent of the almost two million homeless youth in the United States.

Studies have revealed a likelihood of gay-related victimisation in youths who exhibit cross gender appearance, traits or behaviours (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006; Fitzpatrick, Euton, Jones & Schmidt, 2005; Friedman, Koeske, Silvestre, Korr & Sites, 2006; Ploderl & Fartacek, 2007; Remafedi *et al.*, 1991), or who disclose a minority sexual orientation at an early age (Friedman, Marshal, Stall, Cheong & Wright, 2008).

Incidence of suicide, self-harm and eating disorders in LGBT populations have also been documented (Scott, Pringle, Lumsdaine, 2004). Possible aftermaths may consist of a decline in one's own esteem and self-confidence, school absenteeism, school phobia, and a reduction in one's ability to concentrate (Douglas, Warwick, Kemp and Whitty, 1997; Harrison, 2000; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Rantanen and Rimpela, 2000; Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin and Patton, 2001). Regrettably, such ramifications may possibly last a lifetime (Cashman, 1998).

Abandoning the Closet: Issues of 'coming out'

Getting into terms with one's sexual identity and being open and honest about it can prove to be a daunting one for LGBTIQ individuals. It is a challenging process which might be tormented with difficulties involving tensions and complex feelings. Armstrong and Moore, (2004) claim that the 'coming-out' process may be an anguishing and stressful process of discovery that, for many individuals, is charged with confusing and complex emotions. According to Meyer's stress model, the act of 'coming out' can possibly induce further feelings of anxiety rather than the disclosure itself.

Research reveals that the visibility of 'gay identity' and gay-related discrimination are often related. Meyer (1995) writes that "as gay men and lesbians become more visible, they

increasingly become targets of anti-gay violence, prejudice and discrimination” (p.41). Although LaSala (2000) believes that ‘coming out’ is a developmental milestone – a precondition for claiming rights, Green (2000) insists that this may not be ideal for all LGB individuals since unsupportive parents and abusive reactions may have dismal ramifications for LGB adolescents. While it is difficult to articulate and defend one’s rights while closeted, Takács (2004) explains that “a relatively high level of social visibility does not necessarily correlate with positive developments in legal emancipation” (p.60). This is affirmed by Waldo (1999) who claims that individuals, who revealed their gay identity to a wide circle of people, endured more gay-related harassment than those who disclosed their identity to a smaller group of people. The repercussions of achieving a level of ‘visibility’ show a positive correlation between family rejection and negative health outcomes. This is confirmed by Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez (2009) who explain that children of parents whose parents exhibited a negative reaction to their sexual orientation reported a higher level of drug use, suicidal attempts and ideation, unprotected sex and depression. This is supported by Ryan, Huebner, Diaz and Sanchez’s (2010) study, which concluded that negative family reactions to an adolescent’s sexual orientation were correlated with health risk behaviours and difficulties that were assessed, on average, five to ten years later.

Self-marginalisation is also considered as a possible repercussion since “our internalized homophobia can be so great that we may actually be willing to die rather than admit we are queer” (Tierney, 1997, p. 78). Queer individuals may have the opportunity to hide their identity (as opposed to racial minorities, for instance) and this may be advantageous in the short term, however, “a hiding place does not make a good living space (and) from the first recognition of being queer the ‘closet’ takes shape and in turn shapes the behaviour of the individual” (Toynton, 2006, p.184). Given that according to Holmes and Cahill (2003), LGBT individuals are ‘coming out’ at a younger age, some researchers have expressed their concern over the schools’ synchronization with such cultural and social development (Herdt and Boxer, 1996). Holmes and Cahill (2003) claim that “educational institutions have not changed as fast as the culture, leaving many youth isolated and at risk of violence and harassment” (p.53). Conversely, the “invisibility that comes with not identifying protects one from possible attacks or rejection” (Peplau and Fingerhut, 2007, p.32) yet the closeted queer student is to simultaneously survive his or her ‘otherness’ and invisibility. Thus as Toynton (2006) contends, the student is therefore “subjected to a burden of emotional work of a different order of magnitude to that of the privileged majority” (p.187).

The Expression of Heterosexism in Schools

Reports show that some children use ‘gay’ as the “ultimate put-down” and that “anti-gay harassment and violence is epidemic in the nation’s schools” (Holmes and Cahill, 2003, p.57). Researchers reveal the existence of verbal homophobic aggression even as early as at grade one level (Holmes and Cahill, 2003). In examining the school experiences of LGBT individuals in the United States, Holmes and Cahill (2003), explain how “many become dangerously isolated–rejected by family and friends, harassed and attacked by their peers in school, and demeaned by society” (p.63). Moreover, given their young age, many lack independence, resources and may therefore experience a hard time in seeking support. In a Massachusetts’ study conducted by Perrotti and Westheimer (2001), the researchers insist that although all students can experience harassment because of their perceived homosexuality or gender nonconformity, LGBT students and the children of LGBT parents often endure the most vicious abuse. Suicidal ideation, the commitment of suicide, substance abuse and higher truancy and drop-out rates are devastating consequences.

The European Commission states: “[t]here is considerable evidence of discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation in schools, primarily involving homophobic bullying” (FRA, 2009, p.68). Research carried out by FRA (2012) shows that two out of three LGBT student participants concealed their LGBT identity at school. Moreover, sixty per cent of participants endured verbal harassment and sexual misconduct on grounds of their sexual orientation whereas eighty per cent across European countries claimed that they had witnessed misconduct in a schoolmate’s regard upon being perceived LGBT. What is even more disturbing is the fact that two thirds claimed that such harassment took part during their school years. In addition, this survey revealed that just twenty-one per cent of LGBT respondents were open about their sexuality with co-workers or schoolmates (FRA, 2012). To add insult to injury, the phenomenon of underreporting is evident in a survey published by FRA (2009) which states that sixty per cent of LGBT people do not report occurrences of discrimination since they believe that there is no hope that things will change. Instances of bullying and harassment were widespread concerns across all EU member states whereas the invisibility of LGBT identities and issues was also confirmed in this study.

LGBT Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) drew the attention to the lack of positive representations of LGBT people in the field of education across all EU member states with stakeholder participants indicating that sixty-five per cent believed that school curricula “did not consider” or “showed a low degree of consideration” for LGBT issues (FRA, 2009, p.73). Malta is specifically mentioned in this FRA survey (2009) as a case in point where LGBT NGO representatives who aim to address issues of homophobia in schools were either blocked or disregarded by school authorities. The MGRM “has reportedly been barred from disseminating leaflets or education materials that present LGBT issue” (Debono, 2009, p.2).

In a survey conducted by FRA (2012), eighty-two per cent of three hundred and fifty-seven Maltese respondents claimed that in Malta, discrimination because a person is gay is widespread or very widespread. Eighty-one per cent of Maltese respondents claimed they strongly agreed that school-based measures that were aimed to respect LGB people could in effect allow LGB people a more comfortable living. Interestingly, thirty-four per cent of Maltese participants claimed that they are open about their sexuality to a few schoolmates and work colleagues whereas twenty-three per cent are open to none. What is even more intriguing is a twenty-nine per cent of respondents who claimed that none of their family members know about their LGBT sexuality. Respondents were then asked whether they have been open about their LGBT identity but only two per cent did so. Sixty-four per cent choose to hide their identity with the rest being selectively open about their sexual identity.

With reference to the situation of LGBT students, eighty-eight per cent of those interviewed were never (seventy per cent) or rarely (eighteen per cent) open about them being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. On the other hand, the research reveals that eighty-three per cent of Maltese respondents hid their LGBT identity during their school years whilst nineteen per cent often disguised their LGBT identity at school. Verbal harassment and misconduct at school because of their LGBT identity was always experienced by twelve per cent with twenty-nine per cent claiming that this was for them a recurrent experience. Twenty-six per cent stated they witnessed negative comments or conduct because of a peer’s perceived LGBT identity while forty-nine per cent asserted that this was a frequent happening during their school years (FRA, 2012).

Alarmingly, thirteen per cent of respondents described how their most serious sexual attack or threat of violence took place at school. Sadly, a staggering eighty-nine per cent admitted

that they never reported such abuse to organisations or institutions. Moreover, thirty-seven per cent of participants suggested they avoided being open about their sexuality for fear of being harassed, intimidated or attacked. Fifty-three per cent of research participants said that, either often or always, they heard negative comments or misconduct in a teacher's regard because of his or her perceived LGBT identity (FRA, 2012). The results published in these surveys accentuate the fact that Maltese LGBT students feel that schools are not safe sites where they can share their worries or address their concerns. The schools' resistance to non-normative sexualities discourages students from 'coming out' or from reporting any sexual harassment in their regard. For these students, 'invisibility' becomes the safer alternative and, essentially, the only possible solution to avoid abuse.

Sanlo (2000) refers to LGBT students as an invisible population, often forgotten and rejected even at the most liberal of institutions. While he alleges that few institutions celebrate the accomplishments of LGBT students, Sanlo, Rankin and Schoenberg (2006) suggest that educational institutions ought not to celebrate the success of these invisible students but should instead celebrate their tenacious survival throughout their school years. In the sections which follow, I shift the focus of this literature review to the realities, myths and challenges which characterise teachers and the teaching profession.

The Feminisation of Teaching

Both historically and currently, teaching is a highly gendered profession. Mills (2005) suggests that the concepts of misogyny and homophobia about the culture of education must be carefully investigated in order better to discern the phenomenon of male absence from school teaching particularly in the elementary sector. Within the criteria of patriarchal masculinity, the image of a 'primary school teacher' has been particularly constructed as 'female' and 'maternal'. This social construction automatically lowers the possibility of male teachers to permeate the culture of elementary education (Riddell and Tett, 2006). With reference to the Maltese context, Debono (2010) claims that male teachers are a rarity in local primary schools. Out of almost eight hundred primary school teachers, only one hundred and forty of these are male. Moreover, fifteen primary schools are totally staffed by female educators (Debono, 2010).

Feminist perspectives propose that the ability to nurture and care for others is closely tied to women's experiences in our culture (Noddings, 1992). This is reflected in women's assignment to child care and analogous work perceived as unskilled work by society (Reskin, 1991). It is assumed that for women, the capacity to care is a 'natural talent'; "men are relieved from doing it; society obtains free or cheap child care; and women are handicapped from competing with men" (Reskin, 1991, p.147). Noddings (1992) reiterates how women "have learned to regard every human encounter as a potential caring occasion" (p. 24) and hence underscores King (1998), who notes that caring has become essentialised as a feminine way of relating. In actual fact, teaching, particularly in the elementary field where it is characterised by constructs of 'female' and 'mother' has been constructed as a 'caring' profession (presumptively feminine) as opposed to being an 'intellectual' profession (Mills, 2005, citing King, 1998). This so-called feminisation of teaching provides a plausible explanation for women's marginalised status as teachers. Primary school teaching, perceived as caring, becomes a female way of knowing. Consequently "men who teach in these classrooms might be at risk" (King, 1998, p. 4). Given that the notion of care is located within constructions of femininity, it is not permissible for men to provide caring. Furthermore, men cannot be caring without being sexual. In self-identifying as potential carers, men risk being perceived as 'unnatural' (King, 1998) since "men who make teaching their career choice go against the grain of mainstream expectation" (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006, p.61).

Seifert (1988) compares male teachers to men in their fathering role in families. He argues that the kind of nurturing behaviour that fathers exhibit in a familial context cannot be equated to care as offered by male teachers. In an educational context, male teachers are the sole providers of care and are additionally expected to care for longer periods of time than fathers generally do. Although, to date, there is no research which questions the suitability of male teachers to engage in a caring and nurturing relationship, low male participation continues to prevail across professions that are related to care.

Similar to male teachers in the elementary grades, so too is the role ambiguity in male caring as reflected in men who opt for the nursing profession. Hesselbart (1977) explains that in the context of this female dominated field, male nurses expect their motives and suitability for the job, to be questioned. Lynn, Vaden, and Vaden (1975) report that female doctors embarrass male patients; male nurses embarrass female patients and may even be "considered

suspect by male patients” (p.5). On the other hand, Schreiber (1979) explains that “the male nurse is [thought] either ‘queer’ or driven to the top of the heap” (p. 24). As a matter of fact, men are stereotypically not considered successful in women’s work until they are in an authoritative position. Hesselbart’s (1977) analysis draws a parallel with the reasoning about male educators who teach in the elementary grades. The researcher explains that by opting for a profession that is clearly dominated by women, male nurses appear to be copying its ascribed female status and will consequently appear deviant. In disrupting the expected gender-related social behaviours, these male nurses violate the perceived rules of heteronormativity and masculinity.

Williams (1995) writes how prior to the American Civil War, it was not unusual for males to be teachers or nurses. However, the researcher explains that this situation changed radically when these roles became professionally institutionalised. In the educational domain, although teacher recruits were, at large, from the middle-class sector, the remuneration terms for educator were somewhat poor: “They wanted to pay proletarian wages and still keep teaching a white-collar occupation” (Tyack and Strober, 1981, p.135). Apart from the economic effects of the expanding industrial capitalism, an increase in school standards affected the presence of males in schools:

In effect, the longer terms and increased standards for entry turned teaching into a ‘para-profession’ ... A little ‘professionalization’ of this sort drove men out of teaching, for it increased the opportunity costs without resulting in commensurate increases in pay (Tyack and Strober, 1981, p.140).

Furthermore, men who opt to work in areas perceived as women’s tasks may find it harder than women who push into male oriented tasks given that, “the threat to masculinity in entering a woman’s area is much greater because of the [men’s] greater visibility and possible stigmatization of male homosexuality” (Bradley, 1993, p.14). Forty years ago, Lynn and colleagues (1975) concluded that “public attitudes challenging the masculinity of men entering traditionally female occupations undoubtedly have created and will continue to create a formidable barrier” (p.11). Forty years later, ambiguous ideas governing the intersection of gender and work, are still discouraging men from opting to join the ‘caring’ professions.

A compelling finding of a research conducted by Johnston, McKeown and McEwen (1999, p.61) reveals that men who opted for elementary teaching as their career, perceived it as a job in which their “maleness was necessary and of value”, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that teaching “was suited to women but not exclusively a woman’s job” (Riddell and Tett, 2006, p.81). Interestingly, Robinson (1981) argues for ‘an androgyny’ that, in his opinion, will endow male teachers “to soothe the hurt feelings” and “enable men as well as women to involve children in playing ball” (Robinson, 1981, p.30). Citing Podolner’s address at the 1978 Male Caucus of the *National Association for the Education of Young Children* (NAEYC), Robinson (1981) takes a deconstructive position to insist how macho masculinity is the source of the problem:

And I want him (my son) to know that he, as a man, can contribute equally to the joyous task of rearing young children without threatening his masculinity – quite the contrary, that he will only become a man when he doesn’t need the façade of masculinity to prevent him from being fully human (p.31).

Elementary School Teachers = Asexual Educators

Waller’s (1932) emphasis on the asexuality of educators, claiming that teaching is seen as virginal work is supported by King (1998) who asserts that “the pressures for teachers to be asexual and to defer to men and children are strong in elementary education” (p.138). In a culture that views males as sexual predators, sexuality develops into a strain that haunts male elementary school teachers around, carrying along with them into their classroom, the widely held presuppositions that characterise males’ sexual agenda (King, 1998). Although “an aspect of patriarchal culture is indeed men’s possession of autonomous sexuality” (King, 1998, p. 76), the social construction of women’s sexuality has been absent and inhibited (Fine, 1993). Consequently, the male elementary school teacher is often stereotyped a homosexual or a paedophile, reinforcing the cultural and social taboo that “real men don’t do so-called feminine things like teaching, so men who teach cannot be real men: they must be paedophiles or gays (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006, p. 64).

This commonly held perception, though rarely articulated renders male educators vulnerable and ‘suspect’ (King, 1998). Being himself, a gay teacher, King (1998) shows that “viewed in a context of caring, men’s work as caregivers” (p. 4) becomes problematic. Faced with

accusations of not being real men, gay teachers are rendered vulnerable and powerless. Robinson (1981, p.27) practically bars male teachers from working with young children claiming, that men were “not in their element” and that were they to opt for such a profession they would undoubtedly “be suspect” (Tubbs, 1946, p.394). Although neither of the authors makes any explicit reference to paedophilia, the underlying inaudible accusation is profound.

In the 1960s and 1970s Robinson (1981) reports a shift toward “what men could contribute” to teaching in the lower grades since traditionalists during that specific period feared the production of feminised boys in an exclusively female-dominated educational or social context. In fact, Smith (1973) suggests that an entirely female environment in elementary schooling might be unfavourable to boys’ social, emotional and academic development – a concern which has long been considered as detrimental to boys (Skelton, 2002; Acker, 1983). Controlling the ever growing ‘feminisation of the teaching profession’ becomes a necessity. Robinson (1981) concludes that “highly masculine men would feel uncomfortable, threatened or incapable of following through on the traditionally feminine aspects of an early education teacher’s day” (p.30). Additionally, parents may not want children to be exposed to nurturing, caring ‘soft’ males as this may provide inappropriate role models for boys.

Constructions of Sexuality + Male/Gay Teacher + Child = Touch

Women kiss and hug their young students. I’ve seen them. It seemed very normal to me. But of course, I can’t. The second message is that I shouldn’t want to. Nor can a young girl or boy sit on my lap... My caution is an internalised knowledge that others suspect that a squirming butt on my lap might be a cause for my sexual arousal (King, 1998, p.137).

In a study about care and gendered behaviour, conducted by King (1998) with male primary school teachers, the researcher claims that “personal constructions of ‘sexuality’, of ‘teacher’, and of ‘child’ cohabit a location called ‘touch’” (King, 1998, p.76). Actions such as hugging, touching and patting are considered female, affectionate and acceptable until they are performed by males, “at which point they are “marked”, or “conspicuous” (King, 1998, p. 137) – in such circumstances all touch becomes problematic. Parents’ concerns about the sexuality of their children’s teacher are centred on the potential for the teacher’s sexual involvement with their children. Moreover, when parents suspect that their children’s teacher, in his role of being “loco parentis” (Town, 1995, p.209) is gay, “and that being gay is a

predisposition to sexual desire for children, then the teacher's behaviours, *all* of them, are likely to be interpreted from a prefigured sexual stance" (King, 1998, p.137). While men who are married to women and who teach in primary grades are often seen as "less suspect" (King, 1998, p.111), self-identified gay men are considered to be at a higher risk facing the consequences of a homophobic society that views the homosexual teacher as a pervert who molests young children and who unduly affects their sexual development (Squirrel, 1989). Although highly conservative in nature, these views are sufficient penalties that may put an end to a teaching career. The implications of these constructs in conservative countries, such as Malta, must not be overlooked. Toynton (2006) describes that society's reaction to queer issues or individuals in schools is widely affected by the fusion of homosexuality and paedophilia:

I heard myself being described as the monster who scares (and somehow hurts) children, and I identified myself with the person who couldn't be trusted with children. All this was long before I had any idea what any of this really meant... Years later this was to delay my aspirations to teach, and several decades passed before I had the confidence to detach same-sex attraction from the fear, through simply being gay, of also being a latent paedophile (p.185).

Apart from fending off, potential male candidates from opting to a career in elementary education, the internalisation of this homophobic discourse "marginalises men who teach for failing to conform to the rules of hegemonic masculinity" (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006, p.61). On the other hand, Woods and Harbeck (1992) claim that the suitability of lesbian physical education teachers may be questioned since "for those who believe that homosexuals are child molesters who recruit young children to their ranks, just the presence of a lesbian physical educator doing her job is cause for concern and homophobic accusations" (Woods & Harbeck, 1992, p. 143). In 1961, Waller had, then, warned of possible contamination that could happen by allowing homosexual educators to practice their profession whereas in 1977, judges concluded that Gaylord⁶ would not practise his professional career since the simple

⁶ In 1977, The Washington Supreme Court ruled that being gay is in and of itself enough to make one unfit to teach public school. The court found that homosexuality is immoral and that public knowledge of a teacher's homosexuality renders him or her an ineffective teacher. Gaylord had been careful to keep his personal life separate from school. Despite his active membership within the Dorian Society (a gay organization), he had never used his classroom as a means to advocate gay rights. The only "evidence" against him was the statement of a former student (made to the police after a suicide attempt) that Gaylord had once held a lengthy personal talk with him, and he had inferred from it that Gaylord was homosexual (Gaylord vs. Tacoma School District, 1977).

presence of a homosexual educator inside a school would lead to "fear, confusion, suspicion, parental concern, and pressure" (Palestini and Palestini Falk, 2002, p.173). In this context, inarguably, this conservative yet demonised view of gay men as predatory paedophiles disturbs the lives and self-image of gay teachers. This is affirmed by Clarke (1996) who observed in lesbian teachers a "fear of being viewed as perverted and as a corrupter of young, innocent children" (p.203). This fear is expressed by LGB trainee teachers in Nixon and Givens' study (2004) as they doubt their suitability as teachers:

I find it strange that there were three of us asking ourselves that question, whether we should not be teachers, because of it, because we were almost taking on that opinion, and then, when you realize what you're actually saying by that, it's just sick (p.9).

Evans (2002) believes that this conflation may be "grounded in the psychohistorical move that sexual desire for children (paedophilia) is the very worst thing...so the concept must be removed from the self (the heterosexual majority) and placed on the abject other" (homosexuals) (Evans, 2002, p.155). I firmly consider this idea, which I deem totally absurd, as a cause for concern for Maltese parents. Sadly, in cases involving homosexual educators, the teacher's homosexuality becomes a priority over his or her academic or interpersonal skills.

Contradictorily, according to King (1998), homosexual individuals are less likely to be perceived as sexual predators. The author considers himself as a male who is "apprenticing in feminism" (p.136) explaining that gay teachers, have access to women's stories in a distinctive way. He goes on to say that he owes the understanding that he has of teaching "to the feminine parts of [his] personality" (p.136).

The Invisibility of Sexuality and Queer in Education: a tabooed silence that speaks volumes

The combination of sex and schooling is a sensitive and a highly debatable topic, owing to the level of taboo that till this very day surrounds homosexuality. Squires and Sparkes (1996) and Atkinson (2002) comment on the recurrent usage of the word 'silence' in research related to homosexuality and education. The strategy of invisibility has, so far, been successful in the sense that it maintained aloof a queer perspective on teaching and learning. The concept of

heteronormativity, which is part and parcel of the ethos in most school environments (DePalma and Atkinson, 2009), is continually reinforced in schools through protective discourses of sexuality. According to Butler (2004), the ‘paradox of invisibility’ maintains normatives of power “through producing a symbolic identification of the face [of the Other] with the inhuman” (p.147). Correspondingly, Lilley (1985) charges educational institutions as being the “most cruel enforcers of heterosexist norms” (p.20).

Discussions of the Naples roundtable (FRA, 2011) concluded that “education institutions have a key role in determining public opinion on LGBT issues” and that “these institutions (media, politics, religious leaders, education institutions) can often be resilient to change” (p.10). Indeed, “schools and educational institutions in general are places where gender identities are constantly being negotiated, tested and enacted” as research by Riddell and Tett (2006, p.85) confirms. As students enter educational institutions, they are enmeshed in the heteronormative discourses and forces (Atkinson, 2002) that prevail in Western Culture and that are designed to reinforce compulsory heterosexuality (Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Schooling and the deeply seated notions of a hidden curriculum have been instrumental tools in the construction of masculinity through “the indirect effects of streaming and failure, authority pattern, the academic curriculum and definitions of knowledge – rather than the direct effects of equity programmes on courses dealing with gender” (Connell, 1989, p.291).

Similarly, Rofes (1989) suggests that schools were failing to meet the needs of lesbian and gay students since “their voices have been silenced and because adults have not effectively taken up their cause” (p.444). Rofes’ view was eventually backed by Watney (1991) who reports that educational systems remained oblivious to the diversity of human sexuality both within the classroom and beyond the school boundaries. This is particularly meaningful for gay teachers who have been caught in heterosexist systems themselves, since they may internalise this homophobia and may even carry it into their classrooms. For gay teachers, this internalised feeling of homophobia may be traumatic and may even lead to feelings of self-hatred.

Indeed, following interviews with gay and lesbian teacher participants, Squirrel (1989) concludes that knowledge of one’s gay and lesbian identity would disparage these educators professionally both with their students and with their teacher colleagues. Harassment, the loss of one’s employment and limitations in promotion prospects were then mentioned by

interviewees as possible repercussions when sexuality becomes public acquaintance. Consequently, silence remains pervasive and the invisibility of 'other' sexualities that go beyond the binary of heteronormativity is preserved. These researchers suggest that such inconspicuousness discourages professionals from raising these issues since they are "running scared, nervous about parents' reactions, worried about losing their jobs and guarded about issues discussion of which might expose their private lives" (Chamberlain, 1985, p.303). Although the cited work has been published more than thirty years ago, these concerns are still applicable to the current realities of most 'queer teachers'.

In schools, raising issues about sex is not allowed. The topic of sex is buried in silence. Indeed, Biddulph (2006, p.16-17), enlists the following discourses that within this context generate this poignant silence around the topic of homosexuality and education;

- a. discourses that implicitly identify homosexuality as a pathology;
- b. discourses that present childhood as a time of innocence; and
- c. discourses that advocate the need to protect children in schools from 'contaminating' sexual knowledge.

Writing about the role of silence in schools, Fine (2003) explains that our demands for silence "permeate classroom life so primitively as to make irrelevant the lived experiences, passions, concerns, communities and biographies" (p.15). As King (1998) points out, the sexual desire of an adult gay male is muted and repressed. Silence becomes a tool that is used to control teachers' lives and to make irrelevant outside-of-school lives. Consequently, the intimacy of classroom relationships is jeopardised as clearly shown in the following citation by King (1998, p.123):

Within a homophobic stereotype, which constructs me as a self-centred, sexual predator, how can I participate in the intense social interactions that compromise the intimacy of classroom relationships? Rather than attacking the social wisdom that undergirds these falsehoods, we are all silent. We don't talk about sexual desire, especially the desire of a gay adult male. Our response to not hiring gay and lesbian teachers has been "better safe than sorry"... how can we allow anyone with a history of carnal thoughts to associate with children, who are constructed as innocent? If our answer remains "better safe than sorry", children will have no teachers, male or female, gay or non-gay.

Discourse which views childhood as a time of innocence during which children are to be ‘protected’ from sexual knowledge sheds light on the institutionalised control of children’s sexuality.

The Social Control of Children’s Sexuality

Epstein and Johnson (1998) describe discourses which perceived the child as an innocent, asexual being who needed security from the outside world. The beneficial aspect of protecting children from abusive adults is unquestionable; however, it is necessary to distinguish the protection of vulnerable children from the institutionalised regulation of their sexuality. Jackson and Scott (2004, p.235) explain how:

Children and sex are seen as antithetical, both being defined as special and bracketed from the ‘real’ world. Thus there is little focus on becoming sexual as a process; rather it is seen as a matter of leaping a chasm between ‘innocence’ and ‘knowledge’.

The social control of children’s sexuality dates back to the beginning of the 18th century, when in Western society, children were considered as a source of concealed, dangerous sexualities which were to be monitored. Foucault identified the “pedagogization of children’s sex” as one of the four mechanisms⁷ which have related power and knowledge to sex. Foucault explains that modern systems of government did not repress sexuality, as we often think, but new ways of talking about sex were developed, categorising sexual activity and defining individuals according to their sexual identity. Social control, through pedagogy (as well as through medicine and economics) was then seen as the solution to the development of latent sexuality (Foucault, 1979). The necessity to pedagogize on children’s sexuality through “innumerable institutional devices and discursive strategies” (Foucault, 1978, p. 30), the normalisation of sexual development, a portrayal of all potential deviations, continuous observation and expert assistance to parents are all aspects which feature in the pedagogization of children’s sexuality. Sex, therefore became “not only a secular concern but a concern of the state as well” (Foucault, 1978, p.116). The pedagogization of children’s sexuality persevered in the 20th century in spite of the fact that “a good many of the taboos

⁷ The other three mechanisms which Foucault identified are the ‘hysterization of women’s bodies’ (which views the female body as highly sexual), the ‘socialization of procreative behaviour’ (which deems reproduction and therefore, sex, as a matter of public importance) and the ‘psychiatrization of perverse pleasure’ (which refers to the study of sex as a medical and psychiatric phenomenon) (Foucault, 1978).

that weighed on the sexuality of children were lifted” (Foucault 1978, p. 15). In addition to the family, schools and educational institutions reproduce the social order control via the imparting of attentive and controlled knowledge. Althusser (1980) describes compulsory primary school as the number one ideological state apparatus; a space of reproduction and power relations in which is cautiously monitored. Foucault’s conceptualisation of institutions and power relations is central to our understanding of the fictionalised narratives, presented in this research study. The protected yet taken-for-granted status of the heteronormativity of school environments lies at the heart of the unease in which non-heterosexual issues are addressed in Maltese schools.

In Malta, schools, families and media are mostly silent on this topic. In maintaining silence, educators preserve a heterosexist view of the world and they would be in addition endorsing homophobic sadism against queer students (Atkinson, 2002). This is proved by Toynton (2006) who clearly points out that, “in any social or work situation a homophobic comment left unchallenged by others, leaves me feeling unsafe in their company” (p.189). Atkinson (2002, p.125) strongly contends that in every absence there is ironically a subtle presence since the construction of homosexuality is truly fortified through the deafening silence that surrounds the issue, and therefore through its absence:

Whatever the gaps in policy and guidance, we do teach about homosexuality from children’s earliest days in school: through the absence of its representation in discussion, study, inquiry or subject matter; through the policing and perpetuation of heterosexual norms and assumptions; and through the blind eye we turn, collectively, to heterosexist and homophobic practices (Atkinson, 2002, p.125).

Apart from discourses on homosexuality arising from the intricate webs of education, morality, religion and law, Atkinson (2002) claims that the lack of non-heterosexual role-models and the supposition of heterosexual identities continue to preserve the heteronormative identity of the classroom.

When Education Practitioners are ‘Othered’

Stuart and Thomson (1995, p.25) explain that educators “are working with people whose knowledge has been devalued by society” and who are thus ‘othered’ in society. Toynton (2006) affirms that if this is true, then when an individual who identifies himself or herself as

belonging to a devalued minority in society becomes an adult education practitioner, the already intricate web of relations between the learner and the teacher is further complicated. LGBT teachers report a feeling of ‘twoness’ and an internal clash between one’s external role and one’s true self as Evans (2002) concludes: “We are continuously aware that we are queerly swimming in heteronormative waters (which) . . . can create a sense of double consciousness” (p. 139). On the same line of thought, Lewis and Taylor (2001) suggest that it is probably more onerous and taxing for gay and lesbian teachers to keep their non-normative sexual identity secret than do other gay individuals.

In attempting to understand the nature of gay teacher identity, Dankmeijer (1993) argues that it is essential to examine how the general role of teachers is devised in society. The researcher explains that it is fundamental to consider the notions of “coming out, openness, identification, subculture, and lifestyle” (pp. 101–102) when examining the identity of queer teachers.

For several LGBT teachers, leading a secretive live and maintaining a twofold identity, is an unavoidable yet strenuous ‘choice’. Nixon and Givens (2004) explain that questions of identity formation and negotiation (being out) are fundamental to the way in which the LGB teacher seeks to bring together the difference between the public and the private self, responding to questions both in the staff room “(what did you do at the weekend?) and in the classroom (have you got a boyfriend, miss?)” (Nixon and Givens, 2004, p.7). Laura, one of the interviewees in Nixon and Givens’ study, shows that to be ‘open’ at the staff room is generally unadvisable. Furthermore, she reaches a point where she denies her sexuality, and is eventually shocked how this ‘forced deception’ can actually impinge upon her professional life. This concept of ‘dual identities’ is outlined by Clarke (1996, 2002) who explains that this is a source of tension for lesbian students and teachers. In fact, Quinlivan (1993) describes how such lack of truth may lead LGBT teachers to experience increased guilt feelings. Though Clarke’s research focused exclusively on lesbian teachers, the underlying principle from Harbeck (1993, pp.171-172) can be applied to gay male teachers:

We lead such double lives that we are often unable to discuss being GLB in unison with being a teacher, counselor or school administrator. We bifurcate our identities and then we end up not feeling like we truly belong in either world, or in any world. Although life is sometimes difficult, maybe the cruelest measure is that we have internalized society's negative messages about who we are, and thus, we inadvertently assist them in keeping us in our disesteemed place.

According to Griffin (1992) the separation of personal life from the professional career is a strategy that queer teachers negotiate to ensure their own safety and to safeguard their employment. In fact, Griffin (1992) presents a continuum of strategies to show how queer teachers manage their sexual identity and their professional career:

The continuum included being "totally closeted" (being out to no one at school), "passing" (actively trying to appear heterosexual), "covering" (censoring what he or she says), being "implicitly out" (assuming people know), being "explicitly out" (disclosing sexual orientation to a selected few), to being "publicly out" (out to the entire school community) (p. 177).

Watney (1991) claims that the effort to maintain a double life comes at a price because to remain 'undetected' would require LGBT teachers to isolate themselves from the rest of the teaching staff and their students and to live with the constant fear that their deviant sexuality may, one day, be discovered. The sense of inadequacy and relentless feelings of marginalisation "all contribute to lesbian and gay educators' feelings of stress at the workplace" (Town, 1995, p.209). Avoiding detection necessitates the maintenance of strict boundaries between the personal and professional lives of closeted gay teachers along with constant vigilant monitoring of the personal information that these teachers choose to share with school colleagues and parents. Findings of a study conducted by Woods and Harbeck (1992) confirm the split between the personal and professional lives of twelve lesbian physical education teachers. Albeit this research project is focusing exclusively on the experiences of gay male teachers in an entirely different context, the conclusions emanating from Woods' and Harbeck's (1992) research findings are still applicable to this study. Indeed, the results show that these lesbian teachers attempted to preserve the secrecy of their homosexuality by distancing themselves from students, teachers and the school's administrators. They additionally tried to pass as heterosexual and furthermore distanced themselves from matters that dealt with homosexuality. The same researchers point out that for teachers who teach subjects that clearly violate expected gendered roles (such as in the

case of a female athletic teacher or a male librarian) the need to navigate Griffin's (1992) continuum becomes more urgent.

On the other hand, teachers working in Religious environments may experience additional challenges. Following research with gay and lesbian teachers in Catholic elementary schools, Litton (1999) implies that the educators' religious beliefs are the main reason behind the teachers' choice to work in a Catholic school. Nonetheless, these teachers withstand conflict between their religious belief and their sexuality. Participants in Litton's research (1999) claim they were afraid to 'come out', dreading a lack of support from the school's administrators. In their mission as educators in a Catholic school, these teachers reportedly strive to implement in practise the message of the Gospel, i.e. to love one another. In addition, they felt that by excelling in their work as teachers, dismissal from employment would be less probable (Litton, 1999). This is confirmed by Watney (1991) who indicates that some LGBT educators hope that "by being excellent and conscientious teachers their jobs will be protected even if their sexuality becomes common knowledge" (Town, 1995, p.218).

This daily struggle drains teachers' energy and their efficacy as educators (Woods and Harbeck, 1992). Consequently, these strategies undermine the genuineness of work relationships (Woods & Lucas, 1993) whereas they restrict the queer teachers' ability "to serve as healthy role models for gay and lesbian students, who are at special risk of mistreatment by peers and of a variety of self-destructive behaviours" (Lewis and Taylor, 2001, p.135). This is particularly disconcerting since as Nias (1989) summarises:

To "feel like a teacher" is to feel you can be yourself in the classroom; to be yourself is to feel whole, to act naturally; to act naturally is to enter into a relationship with children, a relationship in which control makes possible the exercise of responsibility and the expression of concern; together these states enable you to "be yourself" in the classroom and therefore to "feel like a teacher" (p.191).

Epstein and Johnston (1998) remark how gay teachers must navigate the unavoidable yet hazardous terrain of sexuality with a sense of in-built insecurity. Revelations may thwart teachers' protected identities, these researchers assert. Queer teachers endure several problems in their career as research conducted by Kissen (1996) suggests. Not only do they risk alienation from their teacher counterparts, from students and from parents but they may

also witness homophobic harassment on the students they teach (Kissen, 1996). In examining how school principals and teachers deal with incidents of homophobia within the school context, Wright and Smith (2013) point out that when compared to heterosexual teachers, gay and lesbian educators are more reluctant to correct students who engage in homophobic bullying, since they would be highlighting their sexuality and consequently jeopardising their career. This recent research further reveals that while few teachers opt to be open about their sexuality, school principals are even more hesitant to divulge their homosexuality. In Wright's research project, carried out in Pennsylvania in the United States, around 350 teachers and principals took part. A third of the interviewed participants expressed fear that their employment could be at stake if they were to 'come out' to teacher colleagues or if they would draw attention to their homosexuality. Half of those interviewed were wary when interacting with parents for fear that they could lose their job (Bloom, 2013).

Kissen (1996) reports that queer teachers are more afraid of parents rather than their administrators since with sufficient complaints from the parents, they may easily lose the support from the school's administration team. It is also imperative for queer teachers to refrain from "acting gay" so as to avoid being revealed by teacher colleagues, parents or administrators (King, 2004). Interestingly, as McNinch (2007) points out, popular media continues to preserve the "classic split between mind and body" (p.197) to represent queer teachers. These teachers, delineated by their sexual deviance, are left to choose how to negotiate their identity in a community that fails to comprehend what 'being queer' intends. Teachers, particularly those working in elementary education, were also concerned about others' views of their sexual orientations (King, 1998).

In disguising their sexual identity, queer teachers distance themselves and end up isolated and invisible at school (Sanlo, 1999). On the other hand, McNinch (2007) mentions the possibility that some queer teachers may engage in heteronormative behaviours that are exploitive and oppressive in nature, and thus develop into an epitome of "agonistic teaching, in which self-inflicted, sado-masochistic homophobia becomes an excuse for teaching that is abusive in its brow-beating and belittling of those who don't conform" (p.200).

Queer Teachers as Role-Models?

Whilst Kumashiro (2004, p.7) accentuates that “there is much that teachers can never know about their students” the queer teacher may know “who is the self that teaches” (Palmer, 1997) but this self may not be visible to the learners. The feminist perspective that gives voice to those “people who are literate and highly educated but who have experiences that have remained hidden” (Reinharz, 1992, p.143) comes into play. In this thesis, the educators’ ‘particular ways of seeing and experiencing the world’ is of central importance to the participants’ approach to teaching and learning and to society’s understanding of their narratives.

In a study that focused on interviews with six lesbian, gay and bisexual trainee teachers in an Anglican Teachers Training College in England, the difficulty of constructing an identity for themselves both as teachers and individuals was a salient conclusion. In examining the trainees’ student experiences in relation to their sexual orientation, the researchers conclude that ‘various’ homosexualities allowed the prevailing heterosexual culture to inflict an identity on them which they are incapable of opposing. This is explicit in the words of Sally (one of the participants) when she wonders “if I told anybody, I wouldn’t be allowed to be a teacher” (Nixon and Givens, 2004, p.4). Indeed, queer teachers who opt to become visible may risk the alienation of others. Alternatively, remaining invisible would limit support to queer class members (Toynton, 2006).

Heteronormativity as entrenched in Maltese school systems implicitly suggests that gay teachers are not supposed to avow their sexual identity. The ‘coming out’ of queer teachers in their school environment (if this ever happens) is not the same for all teachers. Though different teachers decide to reveal their sexual identity in varying degrees, the socio-political factors involved in the teachers’ ‘coming out’ process are intricate. Dankmeijer (1993) confirms that the action of ‘coming out’ is politically, socially, culturally and historically perplexing to a heteronormative society and hence, it may be dangerous and professionally suicidal for gay and lesbian educators to ‘come out’ in their workplace as this may automatically lead to the destruction of their career. Gregory (2004) indicates that teachers who abandon the closet may potentially help students tackle issues of homophobia. Irrespective of the context, Cress (2009) and Sand (2009) both admit that in opting to ‘come

out' and therefore in choosing to share intimate and personal aspects, LGBT individuals go through an intricate process that requires "negotiation, disentangling and a skilled understanding of professional relationship" (Biddulph, 2013, p.237).

Rofes (2000), who opted to 'come out' as a gay teacher acknowledges a discursive silence that was present since his teaching preparation program and claims that he was not properly equipped to address the challenges that queer identity would pose in the heteronormative culture of mainstream education. In realising retrospectively how he had become more reserved in his approach to teaching, the author recognises how "[he] sacrificed parts of [his] identity that did not comfortably fit into the world's sense of what is appropriate conduct for a teacher" (Rofes, 2000, p. 449). Like Rofes (2000), Gust (2007) opted to reveal his sexual identity within the school context. Both researchers mention positive and negative outcomes arising from their 'coming out'. Undeniably, according to Toynton (2006), "the queer teacher is caught between empathy and alienation, resolvable only through the abandonment of empathy or the risk-taking of disclosure" (p.191).

It is curious to notice how despite the oppressive heteronormative nature of the teaching profession, queer teachers still opt for such a career. Kissen (1996) concludes that queer teachers choose teaching for the same intentions as others, seeing themselves as role models who could positively influence the holistic development of their students. It is interesting to acknowledge that although queer teachers endure conflicts at various levels, the desire to influence positively their students remains intact. Other queer teachers opt for this profession in order to resist the hidden curriculum that prevails in the culture of education (Kissen, 1996). These teachers may also serve to remind educational institutions of the rampant gender and sexual discrimination that, continues to be a sour reality in our schools (Nixon, 2006). The researcher thus sustains Jennings' views (1994) who claims that queer teachers "help to free our students, our colleagues, and our communities of the burden of bigotry which has, for too long, taught some members of families to hate their own sisters, brothers, mothers, and fathers" (pp.13-14). In fact, Grace and Benson (2000) explained that "when queer teachers are invisible in schools, queer students are denied the opportunity to identify with them as part of their own coming out and coming to terms with being queer" (p. 99). On the same line of thought, Evans (1999) underscores the importance of visibility of queer teachers since these educators may provide the necessary support to queer students as they come into terms with their queer identity.

Conversely, the editor of the *Dominion*(1993) suggested that educational institutions should not serve as sites for role models, whereas Marshall (1993) warned that through instituting their presence within schools, gay and lesbian teachers would be promoting the validity of a homosexual lifestyle. Furthermore, an *Evening Post* editorial claimed that given that heterosexual teachers do not advocate in schools for their heterosexual orientation, there exist no grounds why homosexual teachers should proselytise theirs (Evening Post, 1993). Extremist, irrational and prejudiced arguments against queer individuals referred to the assumed potential of homosexual teachers to corrupt in both the physical and ideological senses (Newton and Risch, 1981). These fears, stemming from prejudice, are mostly rooted in social constructions that have been made between paedophilia and deviancy, homosexuality and bestiality (Woods and Harbeck, 1992). Nevertheless, as the *National Youth Agency*(NYA) clearly accentuates, “being gay, lesbian or bisexual is not a way of life; it’s a part of life” (Armstrong and Moore, 2004, p.123).

Indisputably, queer educators in the 21st century, “are caught in the dilemma of wanting to be out as role models for young people whilst needing to be cautious and protective of their identity in the normative gaze” (Biddulph, 2013, p.235). Despite the enactment of supportive legal frameworks, it is pretty evident that several queer teachers still feel unsure whether they should be who they really are in a society that necessitates their visibility.

Queering Heteronormativity, Breaking the Binary

Research shows that social exclusion starts from birth, ties to the children’s deprived home environment and neighbourhood (Lupton and Power, 2002) or to the parents’ inadequate response to their child’s individual needs (Beckwith, 1990). *The Deficit Model of Education* (Bartolo, Hofsaess, Mol Lous *et al.*, 2007) sees the deficit as arising from within the students themselves rather than from a failure to teach or from a failure of the curriculum itself in celebrating the richness of diversity. Teachers who do not reflect deeply about this phenomenon end up believing that children who fail at school cannot benefit from schooling and that school is not for them and that there is not much one can do about the situation. They end up as passively or actively excluding children from the curriculum. Such an approach removes the responsibility of teachers to enable learning, whereas there is evidence that

teacher attitudes can greatly influence student adaptive behaviours (*Office for Standards in Education, OFSTED, 2005*).

Kevin Kumashiro (2002) highlights the importance of education in social transformation. He points out that, “learning is about disruption and opening up to further learning, not closure and satisfaction” (p.43) and that “education involves learning something that disrupts our commonsense view of the world” (p.63). Research conducted by Souto-Manning and Hermann Wilmarth (2008) shows that teachers are not prepared to help students think outside the binary regime of heteronormativity. The powerlessness of teachers is Squirrel’s focus (1989), claiming that “it is impossible to calculate the effect on teachers of hearing prejudicial comments and being able to do little about it” (p.32). However, surrounding the issue of sexuality in schools is a conspiracy of silence which Moran (2001) describes as an “unwillingness to deal with the social aspects of sex, particularly aspects which extend beyond the heterosexual nuclear family” (p.79). In understanding the repercussions of heteronormativity, McGregor (2008, p.4) accentuates that:

The challenge for educators is to dismantle such heteronormative figures through anti-oppressive pedagogies and practice... Legislative and/or policy tools are central practices by which such systematic wide measures can be implemented and therefore need to be central concerns of anti-oppressive educators and researchers.

As a matter of fact, teachers’ access to formal training on these issues is very limited in nature and educators are poorly equipped to grapple with complex issues concerning sexual orientation and identity.

Teacher education is an effective mechanism that equips the teacher to mediate in patterns of injustice (Muñoz-Plaza, Quinn & Round, 2002). With reference to teacher training, Banks (2007, p.17) claims that since “many gay youths are victims of discrimination and hate crimes... sexual orientation deserves examination when human rights and social justice are discussed”. The outcomes of a study on addressing LGB issues in teacher education conducted by Larrabee and Morehead (2010) indicated that educators were more inclined to institute and actualise classroom policies and practices for inclusion as a follow-up to LGB-themed training. Contrariwise, Taylor (2001) indicates that studies reveal how student teachers, mainly males, do not feel comfortable with issues of homosexuality and are even unenthusiastic to include homosexuality as part of the curriculum. Indeed, most teachers are

acutely sensitive of and professionally well-equipped (in both the undergraduate and the graduate education) to address issues of differences amongst their students such as disability and ability levels, ethnicity, racial differences, gender and socioeconomic status. This renders educators cognisant of such differences and consequently a curriculum that is responsive to diversity and which treats sexual orientation as an individual difference is developed (Larrabee and Morehead, 2010).

Goshert (2008) insists that the lack of queerness within academia is due to a lack of critical engagement with 'straightness'. In order to remedy this lack of engagement, Goshert (2008) encourages his students to "develop a more critical literacy about gender and sexuality, and about social structures that place such a high premium on gender/sexual conformity" (p.18). According to Doucette (2004), Goshert's (2008) model has students "look beyond their own sexual identity to uncover the power structures embedded in American society that construct sexualities, valuing certain sexual expressions while marginalizing others" (Doucette, 2004, p.8). On this point, Zacko-Smith and Smith (2013) refers to how sexual orientation and gender have evolved from fixed and static concepts to a more malleable nature of sexual identity. Practitioners in education need not only understand the implications of such developments on sexual orientation and gender but should promote the flexible notion of these. This educational perspective eradicates labels and the ensuing stigmatisation (Zacko-Smith and Smith, 2013).

An absence surrounding the expression of queer identity in 'official' discourses relating to the scope and definition of secondary teachers even where schools were more liberal has also been pointed out by research led by Biddulph (2013). According to the latter researcher, this further bars the expression of queer identities. Donnelly (2000) notes that the ethos of any educational institution is not just composed of the official, formal discourses contained in statements it makes about itself but also of what is defined as the 'hidden curriculum'. This includes the more elusive messages received about 'atmosphere' and unspoken norms derived from individual interactions between members of the school community during a school day.

Teaching about difference may be not that effective in challenging the status quo. "Learning about difference is often something we feel comfortable... doing, perhaps because it allows us to continue to focus our gaze on "them" and not really change how we think about "us"

(Kumashiro, 2004, p.84) so it is only through challenging and making visible the heteronormativity of the environment that the queer student or teacher can feel that they belong. Toynton (2006) explains that “where ‘they’ are hidden among ‘us’, difference can become threatening to the majority and the invisible queer can be made to feel further marginalised and exposed” (p.187). Visible queer students are still persecuted and queer teachers are “safe as long as ... they (do) not present their lives as valid” (Khayatt, 1992, p.243). There is thus an obligation to make the heteronormative and the (white male ascendancy) visible. Toynton (2006, p.192) states that:

In any subject, the use of particular words, even a choice of pronoun, can hide these assumptions, and where not challenged, they are by default, supported. Whether accidental or deliberate, comments by others in a learning space can cause discomfort or offence. Where marginalised individuals are visible, although challenging such comments or usages may be uncomfortable for a moment, the consequences of doing so are visible and understandable to all present. Where the ‘other’ is invisible, the relevance of the challenge may not be recognised by other learners. Where the ‘other’ is invisible, the relevance of the challenge may not be recognised by other learners. In this situation, the challenge may feel difficult especially for the invisible queer teacher, but the responsibility for making the space safe is theirs. The hurt, marginalisation and impact on the self-esteem of the queer individual caused by the lack of a challenge is no less real for itself being invisible.

Quinlivan and Town (1999), however, warn that ‘liberal’ pedagogies which speak of tolerance and kindness (Britzman, 1995) towards queer individuals may unintentionally reinforce heteronormative discourses. Rogers (1994, p.46) cite a series of recommendations which according to a lesbian student, could positively impact her schooling experience. The process of questioning and destabilisation can be quite a difficult task for teachers according to Meyer (2007). She insists that teachers need to start viewing schools as the place where alternative answers are sought:

A liberatory and queer pedagogy powers educators to explore traditionally silenced discourses and create spaces for students to examine and challenge the hierarchy of binary identities that is created and supported by schools, such as jock-nerd, sciences-arts, male-female, white-black, rich-poor, and gay-straight (Meyer, 2007, p.27).

Freire’s *‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’* (1970) can be linked to the experiences of queer individuals in educational institutions; school cultures, curricula and pedagogy:

A pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and it causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in this struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade (Freire, 1970, p.30).

Rofes (2005) emphasises the importance of queerness in classroom settings and educational spaces. As he implies a growing acceptance of the normative construction of 'gay' in some educational environments, the researcher calls for a more radical queer teacher presence in school classrooms and other educational spaces stating that:

All too often, as we've made these efforts, we've made these compromises and sacrifices that have gone unspoken and unacknowledged. We've gained limited entry into the classroom by denying authentic differences between many gay men's relationships to gender roles, sexual cultures and kinship arrangements compared to those of the heteronormative hegemony (p.119).

Biddulph (2013) questions why queer performance of gay male teachers (such as hypermasculinity, Kink/BDSM, drag and non-monogamy) is so invisible in their professional identity as educators. With reference to Bourdieu's sociological concept of embodied cultural capital (1986), 'the social' becomes internalised into the individual's habitus which Bourdieu (1990) defines as "embodied history, internalised as a second nature and so forgotten as history" (p.56). This 'second nature', internalised knowledge (Lawler, 2004) "has a direct bearing on the perceptions of the social capital, they feel they can bring to the respective spaces" (Biddulph, 2013, p.233). Halperin (2003, cited in Skeggs, 2004) notes that not only have lesbian and gay people learned to occupy ambiguous locations in social spaces but they have employed this same indistinctness to resist forms of power by making themselves "unrecognizable, difficult to read or appearing abject in a non-pathological way" (p.26).

The Way Forward...

In defining sexual health, the *World Health Organisation* (WHO, 2004) underlines the holistic well-being of the individual, making reference to the physical, emotional, mental and social well-being of sexuality. The WHO (2004) emphasises that sexual health does not only cover "the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity" since "sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the

possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence” (p.3). Considering Kinsey’s estimation (1948) that about a ten per cent of students may be homosexual adolescents, it is essential to assume that queer students are present at all times within the classroom context. Acknowledging the presence of queer students in our classrooms is already the first part of the challenge. This may lead to the identification of specific obstacles that these students encounter in their society and their school experience. Secondly, educators should endeavour to bring the exclusion of queer students from the curricula to a halt.

By becoming socioculturally-conscious practitioners (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), teacher can have a positive impact on the life of their queer students by ensuring that their students, all of them, are safe at school. Any individual who decides to become visible should be supported, at the same time, respecting the individual’s control of the knowledge of his/her queerness. Thomas and Larrabee (2005) insist that teachers not only have the obligation to be accepting of gay students but in addition they should perpetuate their support to their LGBT students by altering policies and practices that are discriminatory in nature. This may provide LGBT students with an increased sense of belonging (Murdock and Bolch, 2005). FRA (2009) endorse the statement that the provision of a safe school environment that is free from harassment and alienation ought to be a priority in EU member states. The agency suggested raising awareness to help both students and teachers to cultivate a sense of respect and understanding and to be careful on how to present objective information on gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation. Such objective material should be embedded within school curricula and should be an integral part of teacher training. The drawing up and the eventual implementation of government and school policies that combat homophobia and transphobia is also of fundamental importance (FRA, 2009).

Larrabee and Morehead (2010) encourage education practitioners to challenge any personal, cultural, political, social or religious bias or predisposition that maintains structures of inequality around sexual orientation. When practitioners engage in a process of critical self-reflection, they become more reactive to the needs of their LGB students (Larrabee & Morehead, 2010; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Freire, 1998; Little, 2001; Mathison, 1998) and the educators’ fear of teaching about the “isms” is attenuated (Grant & Gillette, 2006). The concept of a whole-school approach to address issues of homophobia is outlined in Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas (2001, p.131):

The constitution of heterosexuality as ‘the norm’, through policy, during lessons and by way of everyday conversations, jokes and gossip creates a context where certain young people (and also teachers and parents) come to think of themselves as, in some way, less than normal. This is why making schools safer places for lesbian and gay pupils is not just a matter of the provision of, say, the telephone number of a helpline, but is a whole school issue affecting all of those linked to a school community.

Furthermore, although Toynton (2006) warns that sharing knowledge of queerness may be disruptive to the work of the class, he insists that “by allowing false ‘straightness’ to be assumed through silence, the queer teacher does not offer their honest selves to their learners” (p.191). Similarly, Harbeck (1995, p.126) declares that “invisibility is no longer a sufficient excuse for failure to educate and to provide services”. Meyer (2007) explains that translating ‘queer theory’ into everyday practice requires educators to go beyond discourses of acceptance and tolerance. Teachers need to bring to light the limitations of “rigid normalizing categories” and help students expand these “beyond the binaries of man/woman, masculine/feminine, student/teacher, and gay/straight” (Meyer, 2007, p. 15). Such practice results in safe and just environments in which learning can take place effectively (Meyer, 2007).

Conclusion

The extensive review of the literature presented in this chapter, has outlined various issues related to social marginalisation, hegemonic masculinity, sexual identity, attitudes towards homosexuality and the phenomenon of heteronormativity in educational institutions. A synopsis on theoretical frameworks of queer, standpoint and the paradigm of intersectionality is included. Clearly, the discussed substantive findings reveal that being the ‘other’ in society is already problematic. Hostile attitudes, stemming from cultural beliefs, social discourse and from religious dogma may further complicate the life of individuals whose sexuality is categorised as ‘deviant’. These difficulties are exacerbated when the ‘othered’ individual is a teacher within an educating institution that is meant to maintain and preserve social order. This research combines these elements and reveals the significance and complexity of being a gay teacher in a culturally sensitive society, in the 21st century.

The fusion of research results, perspectives, voices, interpretations and personal views presented in this review serves to reinforce the rationale of this research and therefore, the aims that this study seeks to fulfil through the fictionalised narratives. The subsequent chapter examines the methodology used to accomplish these research objectives as it describes the motivation behind my choice of method.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

An Introduction to Research Methodology

The study *'The Narratives of Gay Male Teachers in Contemporary Catholic Malta'*, is based on the narratives of five male Maltese teachers, who self-identify as 'gay' albeit privately and/or selectively and who are all employed in teaching roles with children and young people aged three to eighteen years in Malta.

In this study the intention is to investigate the experiential meaning of being a homosexual educator within the highly conservative Maltese educational realm. The study is centred on one chief research question:

What do the experiences of local gay teachers reveal about contemporary Maltese culture?

These teachers, whose narratives have been enveloped by the deafening silence that characterises 'non-normative' sexualities within the culture of education, have distinct stories to tell in which I am particularly interested. These narratives divulge the significance of being a gay student and, eventually, a gay teacher in the Maltese setting. Their actual reported and recorded personal narratives are re-worked as creative fictionalised accounts (Clough, 2002).

In attempting to assess and capture the experiences of Maltese gay teachers, there are a number of methodology issues which require careful consideration; aspects which I address in this chapter. I begin this chapter by first defining narrative as a qualitative research tool within a review of the Theory of Narrative Identity. I then elaborate on issues of epistemology and ontology to eventually discuss the appropriateness of fiction as a methodological instrument in this research. A detailed description of the methods used in this research and a comprehensive examination of the essential ethical obligations is then provided. I end this chapter with a discussion on issues that relate to the validity, reliability and trustworthiness of this methodology.

A Narrative Inquiry

According to Sears (1992), the strength of qualitative data lies in the researcher's aptitude "to know well a few people in their cultural contexts" (p.148). Through qualitative research,

people are not seen as a source of numeric statistic but the fuller, unquantifiable context of participants' lives is given primary importance. Within this context, it is thus necessary to identify the roles that class, race, gender and sexuality – amongst other aspects of structure - play interactively in the agency of the participant. Critical theory is thus significant in the way that it enables people to address the very paradoxes, contestations and struggles that are part of the everyday lives of teachers, students and parents (Sears, 1992) and clearly, this cannot be accomplished through quantitative research.

The investigation of the research question of this thesis was constructed upon the foundations of a narrative analysis approach. Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes between two different forms of analysis; narrative analysis and, alternatively, an analysis of narratives. Researchers opting for an analysis of narratives interrogate a narrative and present the emergent data in a non-narrative way. Conversely, through narrative analysis, (the approach that I opted for in this study) non-narrative data is artfully fashioned into a narrative (Watson, 2011). Thus from Polkinghorne's (1995) perspective, narrative may either serve as the method of analysis or as the phenomenon under investigation. In a time when the "narrowing of the officially sanctioned methodological spectrum" is particularly evident (Barone, 2007, p.454), I feel it is crucial firstly to elaborate on the centrality of narrative to human existence prior to presenting fictional narrative as a legitimate representational mode in educational research.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest that people "lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives," whereas "narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (p.2). This view concurs with Bruner (1986) who suggests that human beings are natural storytellers yet the all-encompassing storied self is "both the storyteller and the stories that are told" (McAdams, 2008, p.244). Therefore, as Polkinghorne (1995) indicates, the narrative capture of experiences serves as the apposite research tool that uncovers the complicatedness and intensity of human experience. Plummer (1995) explains that the nature of narratives invites communities to listen and question, to have compassion for the involved subjects and to interact in cultural settings which prove to be key for the narrative's interpretation; "(F)or narratives to flourish there must be a community to hear; ...for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, their identity, their politics" (Plummer, 1995, p.87). This collaborative practice links people and social pressure groups and has been influential in assembling members of traditionally 'defiled' groups, such as 'queer' populations.

Interestingly, McAdams (2008) claims that stories compete for supremacy and acceptance. The researcher cites the feminist Heilbrun (1988), who argues that in Western societies many women “have been deprived of the narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over-take control over-their lives” (p.247). Clearly, life stories evoke economic, political, social and cultural discourses; arenas wherein human lives are positioned. They make explicit gender and class constructions and hegemonic patterns. Similarly, Bamberg and Andrews (2004) refer to the construction of counter-narratives which they define as the attempt to make sense of lives outside of, and in resistance to, prevailing cultural modes. Through the liberating and emancipatory agenda of counter-narratives “people may resist dominant cultural narratives, give voice to suppressed discourses, and struggle to bring marginalized ways of imagining and telling lives to the cultural fore” (McAdams, 2010, p.247). McAdams further explains that counter-narratives are particularly prominent among marginalised populations in society such as in the case of social ‘minorities’ and economically disadvantaged individuals. Indeed, in analysing the impact of ‘Master Narratives’⁸ on the lives of gay and lesbian individuals, Hammack and Cohler (2011) assert that a study of the gay identity will necessarily take into account cultural and historical factors; they believe that gay-identified individuals must meander through a world where the Master Narratives reject or otherwise invalidate their desires and experiences.

Life stories by definition can take us back to the past and help us to better understand the people who have lived this past; however, at the same time, they can help us look forward in our own lives and then figure out what we expect from those around us. This can provide individuals with a sense of purpose and unity in life (McAdams, 2008). Chase (2005) explains that “a narrative communicates the narrator’s point of view, including why the narrative is worth telling in the first place. Thus, in addition to describing what happened, narratives also express emotions, thoughts and interpretations” (p.605). Whether to corroborate, validate, dispute or amuse, the storyteller’s narrative impulse (i.e. the innate strong desire in humans to tell stories) serves a purpose which Chase (2005) defines as “meaning making - the shaping or ordering of past experience” (p.256). Riessman (2008)

⁸ The term ‘*Master Narratives*’ was introduced by Jean-François Lyotard in his classic 1979 work ‘*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*’. This term refers to story scripts, which are often used when we tell stories. These scripts, based on our actual experiences exemplify our expectations about how things function and dictate how we structure the stories that we tell, the individuals we interview, the questions that we put forward we ask and the work we generate.

extends this idea to claim a therapeutic aspect of narration and explains that sharing narratives about experiences of hardship helps individuals to order and contain their emotions in a way that generates actually this meaning-making process. Narratives empower participants to share stories which “impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives” (Riessman, 1993, p. 2). Thus participants “construct past events and actions in personal narratives *to claim identities and construct lives*” (Riessman, 1993, p.2; my italics). This idea is central to the theory of narrative identity and to the paradigm of narrative analysis.

Following Clandinin and Connelly (1994, 2000), a fundamental aspect of narrative inquiry is the emphasis on the distinctiveness of each participant’s experience; each human experience is understood in its own accord and not categorised in accordance with predetermined structures or categories (Phillion, 1999). van Manen (1990) explains that the study of lived experiences cannot be captured in “deadening abstract concepts and in logical systems that flatten rather than deepen our understanding of human life” (p.17). In narrative inquiries, researchers acknowledge the socio-political and cultural implications in shaping the experience of the individual; in actual fact, narratives are shared in such social relationships (McAdams, 2008). These ‘social phenomena’ are told in concurrence with norms and societal expectations, as storytellers situate themselves emotionally and socially in relation to their audience and as central characters they situate themselves vis-à-vis the other protagonists in the story. Indeed, McAdams (2008) underscores the cultural notion of texts: “Stories live in culture. They are born, they grow, they proliferate, and they truly die according to the norms, rules and traditions that prevail in a given society’s implicit understanding of what counts as a tellable life” (McAdams, 2008, p.246). In adopting this view, Rubin (2005) explains that the stories that tellers retain and remember are actually shared cultural (and hence necessary political) knowledge about life. And in this way, therefore, this kind of methodology, empowers participants to bring about social change “beginning with the individual and expanding into the greater community” (Phillion, He and Connelly, 2005, p.10).

Defining Narrative Identity

In the course of our everyday lives, we remember key stories; we may set aside some experiences; and we revisit other personal anecdotes at later stages. It is this revisiting

process which enables the construction and configuration of one's identity. When recounting a story, narrators sequence events in a specific and temporal order, connect stories to each other and consequently represent or re-present "the experience of continuity of the self over time, and in this way contribute to shaping our identity" (Rosenberg, 2009, p.3). McAdams (2008) points out the ability of stories to configure and re-configure lives through a process of integration, as fragments of narratives are assembled "into an understandable frame disparate ideas, characters, happenings and other elements of life that were previously set apart" (p.245). This configurative approach unites the different elements together "into a narrative pattern that affirms life meaning and purpose" (p.245). McAdams (2008, pp.242-243) affirms that:

...the stories we construct to make sense of our lives are fundamentally about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in our heads and bodies with who we were, are, and might be in the social contexts of family, community, the workplace, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, and culture writ large. The self comes to terms with society through narrative identity.

The Theory of Narrative Identity suggests that individuals shape their identity by amalgamating their life experiences into an internalised, evolving story of the self (McAdams, 2008). In the theoretical framework of narrative identity, the narratives of individuals reveal their intricate relations to culture and society since the story itself serves to locate the narrator "within the complex social ecology of modern adulthood" (McAdams, 2008, p.242).

Bluck & Gluck (2004) and Pasupathi & Mansour (2006) further claim that over time, individuals employ increasingly sophisticated forms of these processes; autobiographical reasoning and the produced narrative accounts of their self-defining experiences become newly coherent on each re-configuration. Concurrently, storytellers make sense out of a story through its assembly and through the distinct way that this is communicated (Berger and Quinney, 2004). This meaning-making process is substantiated by Taylor's (1991) Mobilization-Minimization Theory. This paradigm suggests that in reacting to negative events, individuals mobilise coping resources to eventually minimise the adverse effects of that same negative happening. In relation to the life story, "negative events seem to demand an explanation [and] challenge the storyteller to make narrative sense of the bad thing that happened" (McAdams, 2008, p.253). In such circumstances, individuals pursue the motive

behind the negative happenings they go through and attempt to illustrate how and why these experiences will not recur. In addition, ‘narrative sense’ provides storytellers with the consequences of events and with the repercussions that such events have on the unfolding of their story. This is clearly indicated in Polkinghorne’s (1988) interpretation of narrative which he defines as “*the process of making a story, to the cognitive scheme of the story, or to the result of the process*” (p. 13; my italics).

“The autobiographical storytelling self”, as defined by McAdams (2008) amends narrative understandings of the self, integrating “developmentally on-time and off-time events, expected and unexpected life transitions, gains and losses, and their changing perspectives on who they were, are, and may be” (Birren, Kenyon, Ruth, Shroots, Svendsen, 1996; Cohler 1982, cited in McAdams, 2008, p.252). Indeed, Ricoeur (1988, p.248) emphasises that narrative identity is neither unified nor stable:

Just as it is possible to compose several plots on the subject of the same incidents (which, thus, should not really be called the same events), so it is always possible to weave different, even opposed plots, about our lives.

Various studies (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999; Kraus, 2006; Hole, 2007) have employed narrative analysis as a theoretical framework to investigate the construction of social identity. Atkinson and Silverman (1997) recommend that researchers engaging with narrative analysis should critically examine the personal narratives that derive from interviews. According to these researchers, such critical examination is vital in enhancing the viability of narrative analysis as a research method. Although Atkinson and Silverman (1997) note and acknowledge that narrative researchers tend to overlook the implications of such critical examination, they claim that one cannot “gain greater analytic purchase on the general phenomenon, as well as some of its particular manifestation in social inquiry” (p.305), without incorporating cultural, historical and socio-political aspects into the examination of narratives. These should be critically reflected upon as cultural constructions because when “narratives are seen as the reality itself, rather than as interpretations of reality, they are immune to critical discussion and provide a poor basis for an ethically sustainable narrative identity” (Meretoja, 2014, p.103).

Epistemological and Ontological Assumptions

The nature of reality or “the science or study of being” is, according to Lawson (2004, p.1), the definition of ontology. The belief system of ontology reflects an individual’s understanding of what constitutes reality. Two important if artificially polarised ontological positions are objectivism and subjectivism (also known as interpretivism or constructionism). While objectivism “asserts that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors” (Bryman, 2012, p.33), subjectivism implies that “social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors” (Bryman, 2012, p.33). Framed by a subjectivist/constructionist ontological paradigm, this research study analyses culturally and historically situated interpretations to elucidate meaning. As opposed to universal idealism, the interpretivist framework that is adopted in the study validates subjective knowledge (that is contextually mediated) so as to help make sense of human experience.

Bruner (1986) maintains that humans make sense of the surrounding world and their experiences through two modes of thought:

- a narrative (hermeneutic) cognition that refers to the contribution of the particular and the specific to the whole; the personal and the highly-contextualised elements of an individual’s story (Josselson, 2004); and
- a logico-scientific paradigmatic cognition which constitutes of empiricist reasoning and proof, testing and validating hypotheses and producing generalisable scientific findings.

The narrative mode refers to the meaning that human beings ascribe to their experiences through stories. From an epistemological point of view, narratives incorporate the capacity to elicit meaning from human experience. This is because they establish stability and a sense of continuity between the past, present and an awaiting future and so “imbue life events with a temporal and logical order” (Riessman, 2008, p.10). In contrast to the unexamined life, which lacks depth and meaning (Pals, 2006), these stories serve to enhance the human understanding of social phenomena. This is due to the fact that not only do narratives problematise the taken-for-granted knowledge, but in shaping an individual’s identity, they

additionally reveal the purpose and meaning of life events to that individual. Furthermore, through narrative, individuals come to terms with society and the social life (McAdams, 2008). This point is discussed by Kraus (2006) who underscores the importance of personal stories in the analysis of relations between individuals, other people and groups within society. In attempting to investigate an individual's social identity, "understanding the construction of belonging" (Kraus, 2006, p.108) is indispensable. More specifically, Macintosh (2007) claims that in encouraging LGBTQ youth and teachers to share their personal stories, narrative analysis can demonstrate how they "form their identity as Other within the dominant heteronormative framework that defines the boundaries of authenticity and recognisability" (p. 36). From an epistemological stance, the paramount significance of narratives thus lies in their inherent capacity to help us discover 'human knowledge' about the world we live in.

On a rather contradictory note, Strawson (2004) fuels the debate as to whether we live or tell narratives and goes on to explain that the cognitive capacity of narratives to reclaim meaningful order is not ontologically neutral. Strawson (2004) insists that narrative processes of self-interpretation that attempt to seek continuity in actual fact falsify reality itself, and therefore "the more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you risk moving away from accurate self-understanding, from the truth of your being" (Strawson, 2004, p.447). He defines the 'narrativizing' of experiences as a psychological need for human beings and thus concludes that experiences are innately nonnarrative and hence that narrative may imply something essentially deceitful, as Sartre (1938, pp.61-62) argues:

This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it. But you have to choose: to live or to recount.

Notwithstanding this divergent perspective of narrative hermeneutics, I tend to agree with Meretoja (2014) who states that "living and telling about our lives are interwoven with one another in a complex movement of reciprocal determination" (p.96). This concurs with Bruner's stance on the matter and his claim that "life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (Bruner, 1987, p.31). Bruner's view thus opposes the notion that interpreting experience is a process of fabrication; the falsification of what is essentially true or real. Instead, narrative interpretation of experience is constitutive

of our own being – of human existence. Individuals are “the subject of a life-story which is constantly being told and retold in the process of being lived” and therefore interpretation and meaning-making is an ongoing cyclic process “in which the past is constantly renarrated in relation to the present and future” (Carr, 1986, pp.125-126). The popularity of this methodological approach in research may be attributed to the fact that the subject is conceptualised as “being constituted in a dialogical process of reinterpreting culturally mediated narratives” which not only reveal “the subject’s agency and active sense making but also the way in which our existence as ‘storytelling animals’ is socially conditioned” (Meretoja, 2014, p.99). These interpretations “affect the ways in which we act in the world with others” and they additionally “take part in the making of the intersubjective world” (Meretoja, 2014, p.101). With reference to ontological assumptions within the framework of sexuality, Biddulph (2012) claims that “not only are nations geographically distinct, but they are culturally distinct in relation to sexuality, resulting in an extraordinary variety of responses” (p.102). This adds on to the ontological significance of narratives for our own being.

Three features of narrative enquiry lead to its adoption not as the best or most appropriate, but as the *only* way in which the study as conceived can be carried out; effective and persuasive narrative enquiry is characterised by:

the moral, ethical and political importance of the story being told;

the cultural situation and conditioning of the story; and

the capacity temporarily to arrest the ever-evolving meanings that the individual creates from (in and by reflexively-lived experience).

Moreover, “narrative research has been presented as a method for giving a stage to the voices of people who traditionally have had not been heard” (Griffiths and Macleod, 2008, p.137). Narratives can expose acts of marginalisation that blend within a wider societal framework of power, wherein “a flow of negotiations and shifting outcomes” prevails (Plummer, 1995, p.26). In fact, this analytic tool has become a common methodological approach in studies that deal with marginalised social groups such as ethnic minorities (Deyhle, 2005), women (Reynolds and Taylor, 2005), gays and lesbians (Bernstein, 1997 and Plummer, 1995) and holocaust survivors (Behar, 1996), amongst many others. Furthermore, personal stories are

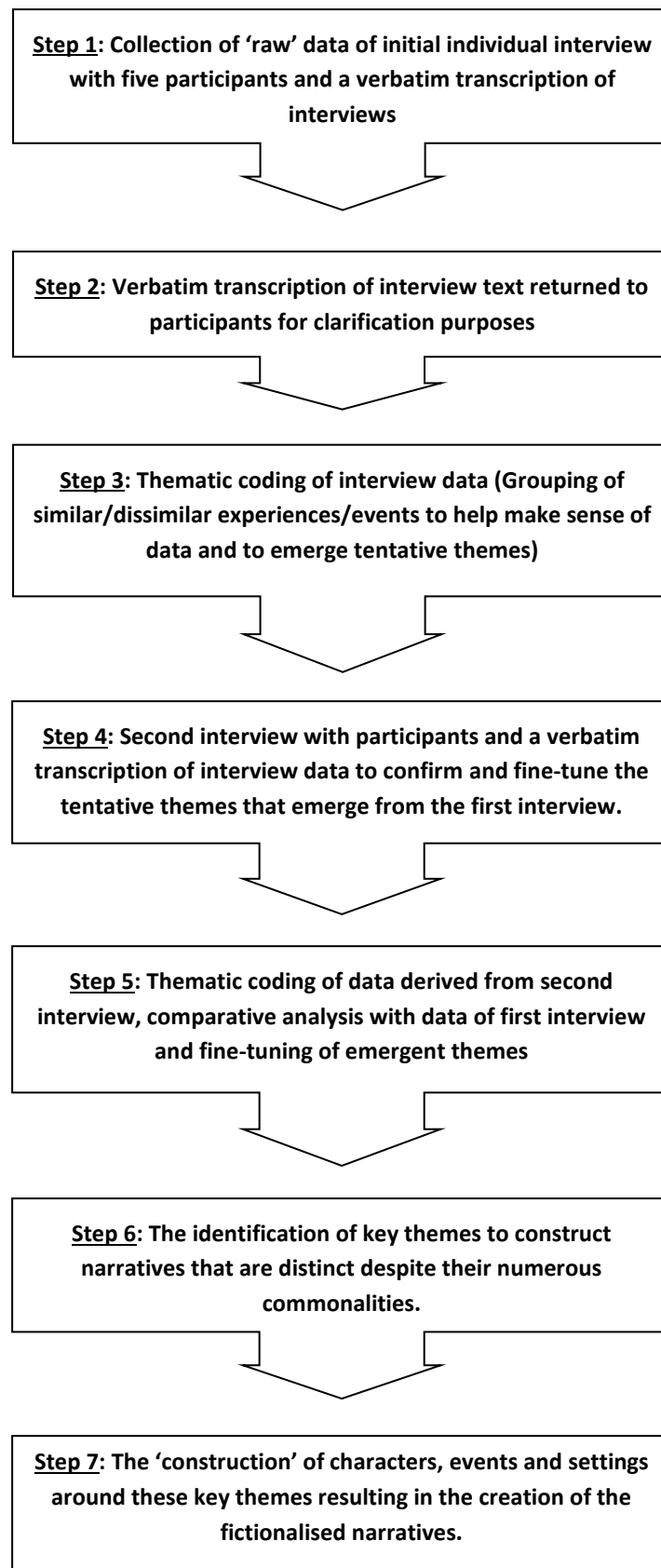
rooted in fields of power and inequality; hegemonic frameworks that retain storytellers from breaking the silence. In fact, the social knowledge that narratives embark upon, empowers the excluded in the way it enhances society's understanding of issues related to inequality.

The narratives featuring in this study are not mere confessions of the participants' experiences. These stories present complex experiences that are charged with cultural, historical and socio-political underpinnings. The participants' own interpretation of the experiences they go through, the construction of their teacher and sexual identities and their reconciliation of both identities in the Maltese educational milieu are also significant points which this research examines. My discussion of epistemology and ontology leads me to affirm that the narrative methodology in this research study reflects my ontological and epistemological positioning. This is because I adopt a phenomenological stance which emphasises how 'reality' is mutually-constitutive of objects, experiences and events as lived and understood through human consciousness. In simpler terms, this work reflects how the narratives of gay teachers working in the Maltese educational milieu can be created, shared and ultimately be valued as 'knowledge' or as a possible interpretation of reality.

The Research Process at a Glance

Prior to a detailed discussion of the different aspects and steps involved in the implementation of this research, I provide a synopsis of the methodological approach adopted in this study. As evident in *Figure 3.1*(see page 90), I first conducted in-depth interviews with the research participants. These interviews were then transcribed and the interview transcript was then returned to the participants for clarification purposes. Interview data was then analysed using thematic analysis. As a result, a number of codes or tentative themes emerged. A second interview was then carried out with the participants to elaborate on issues, themes and insights that were shared in the first interview. A number of iterative questions were asked during this second interview. The interview data, collected from the second round of interviews was again thematically coded and the developed codes served to confirm or fine-tune the tentative themes that emerged from the first interviews. I then grouped these codes in a number of key themes. These distinct themes served as the foundations for the construction of the fictionalised narratives that are characterised by a fusion of factual and fictitious characters, events and settings.

Figure 3.1: Phases of Data Collection and Analysis



Sampling of Participants

Research and research-based teaching which focuses on issues dealing with sex and sexuality may bring about certain difficulties (Stompler, 2009). Such research is sensitive (Liamputtong, 2007) because despite the fact that varied representations of 'sexuality' have, over the years, mushroomed in popular media, the topic of sexuality is still tabooed. In the field of education in particular, a discussion on sexuality may seem incongruous and perhaps unsuitable. A focus on non-normative sexualities is even more puzzling (O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994). Saunders (2008) discusses how this can be a challenge to sex researchers who intend to gather data that is trustworthy. Matters are worse, in a socio-cultural context like Malta where many individuals still perceive homosexuality as being opposed to the norm, as a flawed sexuality. Conducting such research in traditionally 'sensitive' environments such as schools becomes a challenging mission. All throughout the research process, I was aware that I was trespassing on dangerous territory.

The Malta Gay Rights Movement (MGRM), which to an extent acted as a gatekeeper to my informants, offered to assist me in identifying participants who met the criteria for this project. Following talks with the organisation, it was recommended to forward a mail shot to all its members. This email included a brief description of the project and the criteria for eligibility for participating; i.e. gay, male teachers, working in the local educational context. The following is a copy of the email that was sent out to members within the MGRM and which the organisation posted onto its web page:

Dear MGRM members,

*I am Jonathan Borg and I am currently reading for a Doctorate in Education at the University of Sheffield, UK. I would like to examine issues underlying the experiences of gay teachers who work in the Maltese Educational System. This research can be effective with the help and participation of gay teachers. Applying teachers should be Maltese who have taught in primary/secondary schools (Church schools, state schools or independent/privately-owned schools) in either Malta or Gozo. Not more than two interviews will be carried out with the eligible participants. The participants' details will be anonymised all throughout the process and total confidentiality will be ensured. Those who feel interested can contact me personally on 99****17 or can send me an email on eds****@sheffield.ac.uk for further details. I truly look forward to working with you!*

The criteria of eligibility neither required research participants to have a specific number of years as teaching experience nor did they have to specify their teaching sector (preschool/kinder, primary, secondary or post-secondary). Recruitment was ultimately dependent opportunistically on the potential participants' response.

Given the circumstances of the context in which this research was being conducted, I was initially concerned whether any eligible individuals would come forward to my request for participation. However three individuals soon got back to me, replying to the email address which had been published on the mail shot referred to above. Two of these were teachers working in the local educational field and were therefore considered to be suitable participants; the third person was not a teacher and could not properly be part of this research. With the help of the prospective participants, two more informants were eventually identified through 'snowball' sampling (Morgan, 2008) and the fifth and last person was a personal acquaintance whom I approached and who willingly agreed to be part of this project. The fact that these teacher participants came from different backgrounds and could therefore offer a miscellany of views, not limited to a specific educational age-range was an added advantage. The five participants work in the following sectors;

- in the kindergarten section (technically known as kindergarten assistants),
- in a primary school as a primary school teacher (two of the informants participating in the research study work in the primary sector),
- in a secondary school as a secondary school teacher and
- in the post-secondary sector as a lecturer.

Four of the participants, all from a middle-class background work in schools that are either run by the local Ecclesiastical Curia or by the State and one works in a privately owned, independent school.

A sample of five participants in a PhD research may be justifiably contested with arguments related to hypothesis and the generalizability of conclusions. However I am acutely aware that the kind of qualitative research I have dealt with in this study is a search for meaning, (a very deep one, too), and does not seek to make generalised hypothetical statements (Crouch

& McKenzie, 2006). The engagement of five participants during the data collection phase was not a decision I took because “if the sample is too large data becomes repetitive and, eventually, superfluous” or because I employed the guiding principle of saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) – that is; when the collection of additional data does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation (Mason, 2010). It might be additionally argued that I could have opted for a larger sample in an attempt to provide a (seemingly) more rigorous analysis.

Indeed, all eligible, willing participants that I was able to identify were involved in this research, however; I did not aim for a particular number of participants but I was more concerned with how these informants assigned meaning to their experiences and whether such data ‘answered’ effectively the research questions of this study. The multi-layered insights in the narrative interview data, supplied by the participants are not confined to the restrictive boundaries of hypothesis or generalizability. Boyce and Neale (2006) underscore the capacity of in-depth interviewing to investigate issues in depth or to acquire detailed information about a person’s thoughts and behaviours. Researchers adopting this qualitative technique conduct extensive individual interviews with a small number of participants. Although these interviews can be time-intensive and may be prone to bias, they provide richer data about the phenomenon under investigation (Boyce and Neale, 2006). The extensive interviews provided me with data that was rich ‘enough’ to help me fashion a number of thematically-defined narratives. I am cautious on the use of the word ‘enough’ since I feel it would be ethically unprofessional to determine the saturation point of possible themes/interpretations that may potentially emerge from the provided data. Nonetheless, I compare my approach to data analysis to a process of excavation, a process that examines the depth of human experience and that draws me closer to ‘the truth’, or ‘versions of the truth’ via human consciousness. Also, I held the view that the perspectives and perceptions of the research participants, as mediated by the fictional narratives, may provide versions of ‘truths’ whilst allowing the generation of a multitude of interpretations. A more elaborate discussion on this notion of ‘truth’ is presented in an evaluation of validity, reliability and trustworthiness in fictional research methods, later in this chapter.

Ethical Issues and Considerations

Representing the collected data through these fictionalised accounts was a decision I embarked upon after having considered other alternatives. I could have opted to illustrate my findings through a case study or possibly even through a life history project, nonetheless, these varied methodological tools could never actually represent the ‘messiness’ that is inherent in the lived human experience, notwithstanding their capacity to provide rich qualitative data. The alternative use of realist forms of writing or the application of a scientific attempt (Sparkes, 2002a) forthrightly to represent what I had experienced as a ‘witness’ (Smith, 2002) of another’s life’s story could, in addition, dent the fairness and ethical integrity of the respective participants’ accounts. Moreover, and of the utmost and ethical importance, in an island of around four hundred thousand inhabitants, participants may still be identified despite being anonymised. Such an eventuality would have potential damaging implications on the participants.

The study of lives requires a certain degree of intimacy between the participants and the researcher. Rogers (2003) defines research ethics as a domain of investigation that recognises ethical challenges and which consequently suggests parameters that protect participants against any harm. In particular, this research deals with issues of a sensitive nature in a social and cultural network which, in the main, is still unaccepting of homosexuality especially within the educational context. Given these conditions, I had to guarantee ethical conduct and research integrity right from the preparatory stages of the research by negotiating and establishing the nature of my relationship with the informants. From the outset of the study, I ensured that I was clear with the research subjects about the focus of the research and the time commitment that such commitment required. More importantly, however, given that this qualitative research intended to elicit deep level information from the informants, I was clear about a specific code of conduct regarding the respect and dignity with which levels of personal and private information is reported.

Given that the information gathered could possibly be sensitive and that prospective participants would need some time to absorb and appreciate it, I decided to stagger the process of obtaining informed consent - considering a ‘process consent’ (Smythe and Murray, 2000) or an “ethics-as-process” structure (Liamputtong, 2007, p.44) that allows the

negotiation of consent between both participant and researcher. Eventually all five prospective research participants were provided with a detailed information sheet (See Appendix A) about the subject and the research procedures during an initial meeting with me which I carried out on an individual basis. The study was explained verbally whereas all the pertinent information was presented on an information sheet. The detailed information included the subject, the key purpose of the research and the research procedures. The risks of the research along with steps being taken for protection were reviewed. Each potential participant was allowed ample time to ask questions. After reviewing the risks and benefits of the research along with steps being taken for protection, the participants could make an informed choice about proceeding or not, by signing a consent form (See Appendix B). The provided document explained the explicit nature of the interviews including processes for the respectful handling of sensitive information. However, I must point out that, at this stage, although the participants were given a copy of the consent form they were not asked to sign it. Instead, there was a period of time between communicating the information and requesting a signature on the consent form. The participants were encouraged to use this waiting time to discuss their potential participation with close friends, family members or trusted advisers.

During this first encounter, the participant was asked a number of open-ended questions related to the research study so as to ensure the participants' understanding of the requirements and the implications of the study. The following questions were put forward:

- Would you please explain to me what you think I am asking you to do?
- Would you describe in your own words the purpose of the study?
- Is there anything more that you would like to know?
- How can this research benefit you? What are the possible risks?

The potential subjects were additionally provided with a copy of the consent form to use as continual reference. A code of conduct was agreed with each participant to ensure that a professional and ethical code was adhered to at all times. This included:

- The purpose of the research
- The individuals/groups that may be affected by this study
- Why the particular person was singled out for participation

- Time commitment
- Benefits/risks of participating and how these will be managed
- Voluntary participation
- Reliability/validity
- Confidentiality/anonymity
- Outcomes and findings of research study

For the interviews, each informant could choose the best date and time for him and a comfortable place of his choice. Nobody was obliged, in any way, to take part in the research and, right from the beginning, participants were made aware that they could rightfully withdraw their participation at any stage of the process or refrain from answering particular questions (Borg and Gall, 1979). It was clearly explained that no financial compensation would be given to any of the participants. Nonetheless, the participants were concurrently made aware of the merits of the intended research as a study in itself and the potential to address issues regarding sexual diversity in education (Belson, 1986).

All five research participants confirmed their participation by signing the informed consent form. The respective teachers handed this signed document to me at the first encounter that we had. Communication was regular via electronic mail and/or through mobile phone especially to agree on logistic arrangements for the initial interview. All interviewees were reminded that a second interview could perhaps be requested.

Prior to undertaking the data collection period, I was apprehensive about the fact that I could find the interviews emotionally and psychologically distressing and I therefore planned to:

- limit interviews to one per week
- conduct interviews in the morning
- listen to no more than one hour of recorded data without a break
- keep in close contact with my supervisors and seek out help and support as necessary

Data collection proved to be a lengthy and time-consuming process. The life experiences of the teacher participants were collected through one-to-one recorded semi-structured interviews. I describe the interviews with participants as ‘semi-structured’ for a number of

reasons. I chose not to opt for a rigorous set of questions so as to allow participants express their views and narrate their stories in their own terms. Nonetheless, prior to the formal interview, I had thought in advance about a list of topics and about a number of meaningful questions that would guide the flow of the conversation. This helped maintain the focus of the interview on the topic under investigation in a non-rigid way (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). Also, this semi-structured approach allowed me to adapt the development of each verbal exchange according to the individual interviewee in a way that was coherent and attuned to the respective narrative. During the actual interviewing process, I therefore followed a list of topical questions but, at the same time, I was still able to follow topical trajectories that strayed from these questions whenever I felt that this was appropriate. This allowed new ideas and other rich data to be brought up and discussed. Harrell and Bradley (2009) claim that a semi-structured interview “collects detailed information in a style that is somewhat conversational... Semi-structured interviews are often used when the researcher wants to delve deeply into a topic and to understand thoroughly the answers provided” (p.27). Therefore the specific use of semi-structured interviews was not only aimed to merely ‘collect data’ from my research participants but it also respected the uniqueness and individuality of the story that was being told.

Throughout the interviewing process, I took the role of what Plummer (1995) identifies as a “coaxer” (p.21), who probes, listens and interrogates. The first five interviews were about an hour long (with the shortest taking exactly fifty minutes with the longest one taking almost an hour and a half). Eventually a second interview was held with all participants. This helped me, as the researcher, to expand on insights which the teachers touched upon and which were telling, significant or possibly still unclear to me. This second interview offered the participating educators the opportunity to share experiences which they might have set aside or forgotten during our previous encounter. It also served to further elaborate on the tentative themes that emerged from the coding of the first interviews, even through the use of iterative questions.

The Protection of Researcher and Research Participants

David, Edwards and Alldred (2001) explain that research ethics is not merely informing participants about the objective of the study for the sake of “doing ethical research” (p.348).

Since the onset of the study, I could foresee that the questions asked during the interviews were likely to generate an emotional response. Correspondingly, during the interviewing process I ensured that the language and my non-verbal ways of communicating made the participants feel secure and that the surrounding environment felt safe. Prior to the interviewing process, participants were asked to choose whether interviews would be conducted in either Maltese or in English. All participants opted for Maltese and occasionally code-switched to English.

These in-depth interviews could also raise issues that could potentially disturb the interviewee psychologically or emotionally. So as to protect the individuals who form the sample from possible distress, I allowed ample time for each participant to express significant emotions. Throughout the data collection phase, I acknowledged the importance of this to the well-being of my participants. In accepting such an emotional response, the participant feels secure and finds it easier to open up about his experiences and to disclose further information. However, right from the start of this phase in the study, I was explicit about my role as researcher and clearly explained that the interview should not be mistaken as a therapy session. Miller and Glassner (2004) remind researchers that narrative interviewing is neither a “romanticized view of seamless authenticity emerging from narrative accounts” (Miller and Glassner, 2004, p.126) nor a therapy session for either the researcher or informants, and that it must not be mistaken as such (Goodson and Sikes, 2001).

Because of the stigma attached to homosexuality in Malta, the vulnerability of the participants is an issue that necessitated careful thought. The risk of negative consequences could be heightened, especially if anyone of the participants became identifiable. All throughout the process I followed Melrose’s (2002) advice on the responsibility of researchers which asserts that:

...researchers have a duty to ensure that no harm comes to their subject...as a result of their agreement to participate in the research. If we cannot guarantee that such participation may improve their lives, we must ensure, at least, that our scrutiny of them *does not leave them worse off* (p.343).

In order to limit the degree of harm, the prospective participants were told that they could choose to terminate the interview at any time, if they are overwhelmed or if they feel too

distressed. In the meantime, I kept professional organisational details close at hand to pass on, in the event that anyone of the participants needed further support.

The following necessary precautions were taken so as to ensure the confidentiality of personal data:

- All of the data that were collected was kept strictly confidential and the participants' identity was never disclosed. However, if at any time during the research, I felt that the protection and/or safeguarding of students or children could be compromised, I was prepared to disclose, as I am duty bound to do, the information to the relevant authorities. This could include the disclosure of the participants' names. From the outset, it was made clear to the informants that in the event that participants revealed any form of criminal activity in the course of my research, I would pass on all information to the proper authorities.
- Nobody other than me and my supervisors had, under any circumstances except for me in my capacity as the researcher and my supervisors, had access to the interview data.
- The participants agreed that their names would be altered to protect their identity throughout the study. I respected their expressed views as to how they wished to be identified. Only me and the individual participants are aware of their real name and pseudonym.
- It was additionally agreed with participants that e-mail records and paper-based files will be deleted or destroyed upon the completion of the research study.
- All participants were provided with continual access to their interview data while a copy of the transcriptions was made available to them for their comments prior to its use in my thesis.
- I assume the overall responsibility of the data collection stage since I was the only person who analysed the data generated by this project and analysis of the data was carried out at my residential address.

- Participants were informed of the details of my supervisors and the University of Sheffield complaints' procedure in the eventuality that they could have had a cause for concern regarding the abuse or lack of ethical procedure.
- The interviews were carried out in premises that were mutually convenient, and importantly, conducive to a quiet relaxed atmosphere and surroundings that put the informant at ease. All throughout, I was extremely cautious and sensitive to the effect that questioning could have on the participant and whenever distress was evident, the course of the interview was modified or the session was terminated.

My personal safety was an aspect which I carefully considered and which needed to be kept in mind. Although my personal safety was never compromised, a risk assessment was made on each occasion. Whenever I met the participants, I always put measures in place to ensure my whereabouts were known to a friend or colleague with address, contact details and duration of visit. I also attended monthly supervision sessions during the data collection and the data analysis period – sessions which can indeed be useful for the ethnographer as Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest. Collaboration with MGRM was regular since I sought its guidance and assistance on multiple occasions, particularly, during the initial phases of the study. Eventually, MGRM was kept abreast with developments in my research.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the fictional approach to my research report naturally diminished the potential risk of harm to all those involved in this research study. The anonymity and fictionalisation process protected the identity of research participants. This ensured the participants' safety and guaranteed additional protection of other community members who, in small communities like Malta, might be easily identified. Participants were also unaware of any details about the other participants and therefore could not know who was taking part in the research. I am also aware that the potential benefits of the research and the knowledge gained outweigh the risk of harm. Building ethical relationships can be challenging yet necessary in maintaining in-depth relationships.

The Use of Fictional Approaches to Research

Conventionally, orthodox research methods in academe claim “the creation of true, objective knowledge, following a scientific method” which does not consider the influence of the researcher’s identity on the investigation itself (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000, p.1). By contrast, qualitative researchers deny the possibility of that separation of researcher and subject or topic. Narrative research has become increasingly accepted in the field of social science. Researchers in this domain may express their perplexity at the adoption of fictional forms to present their studies; fiction in inquiry is generally considered to be “outside the boundaries of what is constituted as acceptable by the knowledge making communities of social science” (Usher, 1997, p.35) and “to wander away from the facts... is to be irresponsible” (Silverman, 1975, p.93). Even within the educational domain, fictional narrative research may be considered as a challenge to the ‘hegemony’ of evidence-based studies since such research practices are still prevalent in mainstream educational inquiry.

However, whilst the use of fictional approaches to research traditionally appears incongruous, Usher (2000) also openly states that often the scientific “method ‘forgets’ that research is writing” (p.184). In fact, Rhodes and Brown (2005) cite Butler (1997) to suggest that social inquiry should go beyond the role of scientists, logicians and mathematicians and should instead consider the potential of ‘creative arts’ and their capacity to create plausible narratives. Butler (1997) in fact recommends that social scientists might “learn from the art and craft of the novelist, dramatist, journalist, film-maker, soap opera creator” (p.945). In liberating us from the “constraints of science” (Richardson, 1994, p.521), research as fiction comprises a number of epistemological and methodological advantages (Inckle, 2010).

Authors of creative fiction construct their accounts on ‘true’ events that happened to ‘real’ people, but in contrived set-ups or invented scenes that “they may not have witnessed, but that could have happened” whereas “at the creative non-fiction end of the continuum authors rework ‘factual’ data into fictional form” (Wyatt, 2007, p.319). Doctorow (1988) defies the traditional taxonomy of fiction and non-fiction, claiming that “there is no longer any such thing... there’s only narrative” (p.71) whereas Genette, (1990) regards both realms (fiction and non-fiction) as being “neither so far apart nor so homogenous as they might appear” (p.772). A more straightforward definition of the fictive ‘genre’ is provided by Whiteman and

Phillips (2006) who claim that in fictional approaches to narrative research, “empirical content is presented in a partial (or total) make-believe form for dramatic communicative effect” (p.6).

In his definition of this non-conventional representation, Clough (2002) defines fictional narratives as “stories which *could* be true” and that “allow the report of those experiences which might otherwise not be made public” (p.9). Clifford (1986) explains how in post-modern discourse, ‘fiction’ has lost its implication of falsehood and is not “merely opposed to truth” (p. 6). Interestingly, a significant body of ethnographic research is presented as fiction (Sparkes, 2002) and all biographies are to a certain degree fictions, says Mackay (2008). Pioneering in the field of ethnographic fiction with his work on disability and sexuality, Angrosino (1997), underlines the importance of this methodology in researches that deal with complex data that entails “another level of attention” (Frank, 1995, p.2).

Inckle (2010) defines ethnographic fictions as:

empirically based short stories which draw on empirical research and multiple real experiences and people, but are re-written into carefully crafted, themed vignettes, each dealing with key issues... the characters and events are composites which portray actual events without revealing any one particular identity or experience but which are, at the same time, directly applicable to real-life situations, including policy and best-practice interventions (p.257).

The strategy that Inckle adopts in his ethnographic research nurtures an intersubjective connection between the reader and the protagonists of the story, drawing “the reader into an intimate relationship with them” (Inckle, 2010, p.257). The author insists that this research method, is rooted in his own experience of non-normative embodiment, his numerous abject statuses “and the ways in which normative practices of research and representation reiterate objectification and alienation” (p.257).

Bracken and Thomas (2005) claim that fictional writing “enables us to negotiate a complex manoeuvre – that of relinquishing the privileged, all encompassing, omniscient voice from nowhere and everywhere, and of putting the storytelling into the voice of the main protagonist” (p.21). Convery (1993) argues that, “with fictional writing I seemed to recover control of the research”, arguing that this offers him acumen into “where conscious and

unconscious meet” (p.149). He further claims that “the fiction is contrived: my personal responses and realisations ... are not” (p.149).

Within the domain of organizational studies, Rhodes and Brown (2005) accentuate the effectiveness of fictionality to demonstrate the legitimacy of this method in social research. They propose that “fiction has emerged as a methodological concern in three related ways” because if we acknowledge that “(1) fictionality can be seen to be a characteristic of research writing in general, (2) explicitly fictional stories can be regarded as appropriate empirical” research material and therefore “(3) fictional genres can be used as a legitimate mode for the writing of research” (p.469).

Richardson and St Pierre (2005) present a thought-provoking evaluation on the use of this non-conventional tool in social sciences; that one’s work in ‘social science’ will naturally denote implications of truth, seriousness and incontestability. Conversely, in stating that one’s research is concurrently fiction and social science, “the researcher runs the risk, through disturbing the pact between author and reader, of not having their work read as social science (or indeed at all) and therefore dismissed” (p.961). In fact the funnelled restrictive approach of scientific research which traditionally aims at a focused closure contrasts strikingly with the openness, indefiniteness and intricacy that the interpretation of fictional narratives (both as a method and as a source of data) entails. Issues related to interpretation, validity and reliability will be discussed at a later stage in this chapter.

The Capacity of Fictional Methods to Reveal Human Phenomena

The contribution of creative authors to the study of politics is an analysis raised by Ingle (2007) in his critique of Orwell’s (1984) modernist account of the relationship between ‘ordinary citizen’ and the state. The author claims that “it has a lot to do with the imaginative insights of writers who, by dint of their expertise, seek to give us an understanding of an issue that could be called experiential as much as intellectual” (Ingle, 2007, p.730). In this vein, Winter, Buck, and Sobeichowska (1999) argue that “the operation of the artistic imagination through the writing of fiction can be understood, precisely, as a mode of critical reflection upon, and reinterpretation of, experience” (p.15).

The advantages of fictional research methods are numerous. Hunt and Sampson (1998) underscore how portraying one's experience through the fictional form can direct readers/listeners to a deeper self-engagement and self-understanding since "the fictional dimension can increase reader response and help challenge pre-existing assumptions in a creative and subversive way" (Whiteman and Phillips, 2006, p.16). One thus concludes that the author's imaginative touch provides an enhanced understanding of oneself and of one's social connection with other people. Nonetheless, Tierney (2004), working in educational research proposes that this kind of analysis goes beyond its inherent ability to help us "see ourselves as others see us" (Burns, 1786, p.192). Indeed, Tierney(2004) argues that:

the purpose in reading academic fiction has less to do with proving or disproving the truth of a text; instead, the novel might be thought of as a way to help academics think about how academic life has been structured, defined, and interpreted in order to create constructive change (p.164).

Tierney (2004) presents 'academic' novels as data to put forward "a moral tale about academic life" (p.164). He asserts how novels help us explore philosophical questions and states that these "allow readers to examine meaning rather than truth, existence as opposed to reality. Thus, the novel suggests what is possible, which reality forecloses" (Tierney, 2004, p.162). The power of fictional narratives both as an analytical tool and additionally as a source of data lies in "this process of systematization of ideas, tracking between the artistic source and the resources of social research, traversing the interdisciplinary seam... in which data and analysis elide" (Watson, 2011, p.401).

Within the domain of political science, Negash (2004), voices his concern on the ability of 'artistic works' to provide research insights and calls for "a more systematic answer to why this is" (p.187). However the author himself deduces that "the literary narrative accommodates the unpredictable side of life as well as purposeful behaviour - the fragmented and the coherent at the same time" and insists that "art is a privileged medium in the sense that it imparts knowledge about life ... at both the abstract level and at a deeper cultural level of meaning" (Negash, 2004, p.193). In his own recognition of the potential of literary devices to reveal phenomena that might have not been previously discovered, Negash (2004) justifies how "the arts, in their form and production, provide a site from where we can observe and experience aspects of political life that we cannot possibly achieve in other ways" (p.188).

Winter, Buck, and Sobiechowska (1999) believe that traditional representational strategies such as non-fiction jeopardize personal or emotional exposure and this may lead to one's distancing from controversial topics that are related to professional practice. Alternatively, metaphors indicate how individuals interpret the world, our approaches and suppositions that we may be unable to articulate or identify (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). This point clarifies how fictionalised narratives may have the capability to offer a more realistic and believable account rather than a 'factual' one.

Furthermore, these narratives provide researchers with "the opportunity to import fragments of data from various real events in order to speak to the heart of social consciousness" (Clough, 2002, p.8). Clough argues that these accounts may serve as the means to reveal truths, which may not be communicated otherwise. In the domain of educational research and reflective practice, Winter, Buck and Sobiechowska (1999) imply that an entirely non-fictional methodology "reduces writers of autobiographies to mere providers of data" (p.17) whereas creative narration can encourage autobiographers to become "theorists of their own lives" (p.17). Figurative narrative, what Muir (1993) would call the 'fable', is not limited to factual data or to conscious reasoning. Indeed, Muir concurs with Clough (2002) and insists that fictionalised tales can unveil truths about us and our life which might otherwise not be made conscious. Bridges (1999) argues that all research must be concerned with truth as or else "it probably collapses into incoherence" (p.597) yet although the 'real' is idealistic and always out of reach (Lacan, 2001), narratives effort to discover notions of truth and reality.

Even though Bridges (2003, p.96) argues that "the fictional must always be parasitic upon the factual narrative" and "the real has a kind of logical priority over fiction and represents a kind of measure, a gold standard against which the value or currency of fiction is judged" we have ironically "learned to dispense with the gold standard which, surviving only as metaphor, itself takes on a fictional or fabulous quality" (Watson, 2011, p.405).

Improvement towards social justice and 'human solidarity' is attained not through an entirely factual investigation, but via the tools of imagination. This is confirmed by the philosopher Rorty (1989) who suggests that fictional narratives equip us with "the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers" (1989, p. xvi).

Essentially, within the context of this research study, the fictional narrative serves a chief purpose: it enables and creates an unveiling of some Maltese gay teachers' constructions of their identities, values, emotions and assumptions about their life experiences, and this in social, cultural and educational territories where a hostile politics of inequality dominate. According to Whitebrook (2001), novels, specifically, are inherently illustrative for identity construction. He argues that he regards novels as:

accessible instances of narrative in practice. Turning to narratives – modern novels – allows for observation of how identity is constructed, through attention to content and form; plot and characterization; and narrative structure, style and techniques. The process of narrative construction is relevant inasmuch as it makes the point that identity is narratively made, and shows what that means for an understanding of political identity (p.5).

In the critical belief that the lives of gay teachers are best understood through experience rather than through 'mere' description, I adopt Clough's model of 'creative fiction' (2002) whereby it is the researcher himself who mediately creates the narrative. In the context of this model, the subjects become the 'objects' whose story is told for them via the mediation of the researcher's imagination. This method follows Brown's and Kreps' (1993) idea that stories derived from observations and interview data may be used to provide plausible narratives which merge "the actual dialogue told in specific stories to form a composite, interpretive narrative that relates an impressionistic account of the concept under investigation" (p.54). The 'constructed' fictional narratives thus embrace the "valuable combination of poetic and conceptual rigour" (Rhodes and Brown, 2005, p.7) and exploit "explicit literary and figurative devices poised in the space between 'fact' and 'fiction' where 'truth' is manufactured" (Linstead, 1993 p.7). The vibrant interplay between fact and fiction results in the creation of the research narratives which not only are intended to facilitate the understanding of embodied facts but they have the "potential to provoke multiple interpretations and responses from readers who differ in their positioning to the story provided" (Sparkes, 1997, p.33).

The inherent sensitivity of the topic and the close-knit culture in Malta which potentially and inadvertently might put participants at risk further endorses this methodological approach to research. In conducting research through the use of fiction, a writer has the facility to present 'camouflaged' issues which research based on facts and evidence would not be able to claim for ethical reasons. As a result, this facility may conceivably draw the researcher even closer

to ‘the truth’. In addition, fictionalised accounts can be safely communicated and debated. Through the synthesis of data into “fictionalised composites” (Sikes and Piper, 2010, p.568), the anonymity of research participants may be further guaranteed.

I conclude this section by summarising the rationale behind this choice of methodology. The value of fictional narrative research lies in its ability:

- to offer “an intelligible research summary of the huge body of data which qualitative research tends to provide”;
- to enable researchers to investigate issues that are “inaccessible or problematic by any other means”;
- to express “the ambiguities, complexities and ironic relationships that exist between multiple viewpoints”; and
- to “leave gaps for the reader to fill in and raise questions through the unresolved plurality of its meanings” (Bolton, 1994, p.56).

On the contrary, I acknowledge that this research method does not produce objective data since my location within the Maltese context makes it difficult to prevent researcher induced bias. Additionally, the generalisability of data is an aspect which this research forsakes. Regardless of analogous elements in the lives of the participants in the current study (such as context, profession, and sexuality) I do not claim that these narratives are typical of all Maltese gay teachers.

The fictional narratives that I present in this project are not merely products of a writing activity but a vibrant creative practice, a mode of investigation, analysis and discovery (Richardson, 2000). The Feminist Borderland Mestizaje and Border Epistemic perspective (Anzaldúa, 1999), suggest that knowledge is not only produced by theorising within the orthodox boundaries of academia and “high theory” but *la mestiza(o)* (sadness) and *la vida cotidiana* (the everyday life) can potentially generate knowledge. In the light of this perspective, even typical conversations have the potential to create knowledge. Through stretching the limits of my imagination, the creation of the fictional narratives in this project provided me, as a researcher, with a deeper knowledge on phenomenological aspects of human behaviour.

Analysing Interview Data and the ‘Construction’ of Fictional Narratives

I have earlier discussed the critical structures of fictional narrative enquiry as an effective representational mode of research. This section will discuss and justify the particular investigative approach adopted in this study.

In my role as a researcher I am expected to be accountable to the major ethical obligation: to use the generated data in ways that remain faithful, to the best of my knowledge, to the intentions of the participants, and to do all I can to protect them as vulnerable professionals and citizens. Representing the interview data was an initial quandary. On the one hand, the hushed stories of these gay teachers needed to be told so as to address the absence of non-normative sexualities in education. Yet on the other, I never wanted to pathologise the storyteller by recounting stories from the detached researcher’s point of view. This is an issue which I took very seriously throughout the different stages of this study.

Silenced stories that were “unrecognised or suppressed” (Frank, 1995, p.137) surfaced throughout the progression of data gathering. The applied narrative analytical technique emphasises the hermeneutics of restoration (Josselson, 2004) since the informants’ accounts were perceived as highly revealing of their subjective realities and their underlying meaning-making processes. What the informants thought, felt, saw and imagined was documented throughout the data collection process. I examined every uttered word, probed the triggers behind the subtlest signs of emotion and gave each gesture or verbal accentuation careful attention.

The texture of the narrative data was so dense and ‘thick’ (Geertz, 1973) that it would have been quite problematic to describe this form of life via alternative research methods such as through case studies or life history projects. Through the use of fictional writing, this research aims at representing data “in such a way to constitute an analysis through the generation of another narrative” (Watson, 2011, p.404). I have therefore opted to contextualise these experiences in a way that might lead the readers of these narratives to stand in the storyteller’s shoes and to be able to have a deeper insight into the challenges and successes of lives of these gay educators; a reality which, despite recent legislation, is still alien to the local culture of education. With all its benefits, fictional writing has proved to be the most

effective method to answer my research questions and in choosing this approach I am following the path trodden by an increasing number of social science researchers (Clough, 2002; Coles, 1989; Frank, 2000; Sparkes, 2002b; Watson, 2000). I particularly draw on Negash (2004) here who sees the intellectual writing of authors as significant *in its own right* since the constructions exemplified in the work reflects the “political realities in the here and now” (p.188; my italics). Moreover, the narratives presented in this research project “are influenced by other historical circumstances in time and space...” (ibid., p.188). This is reminiscent of Foucault’s concept of episteme which refers to “a configuration that circumscribes what it is permissible to think in any historical period” (Watson, 2011, p.399) and which in turn leads to the epistemic restrictions of social discourse (Watson, 2011).

As evident in *Figure 3.1* (See page 90), data collection and analysis was indeed a challenging and complex phase. Following the first interview, a verbatim transcription of the interview was returned to participants for clarification purposes. In the meantime, all data were examined closely and carefully several times and a number of codes or labels were developed for the different parts of the data. During the coding process (refer to *Figure 3.1*, step 3), the collected data were divided into segments and were examined for commonalities and distinctive aspects. In grouping analogous experiences and events that resulted from the coding stage, a number of tentative themes were identified. Notes taken during the thematic analysis of interview data led to the formulation of additional narrative questions to ask in the second interview.

The purpose of a second interview with my participants was to provide further insights into events and experiences that were shared during the initial interview (refer to *Figure 3.1*, step 4). This second interview served to enable a trusting relationship with the interviewees. Participants were also asked a number of iterative questions in order to strengthen the trustworthiness of the collected data. Moreover, analysis of this interview data served as a refinement of the themes that I tentatively listed following my analysis of the first round of interviews.

I transcribed the interviews with teachers verbatim including the “faltering, mumbling and confusions of everyday talk” (Plummer, 2001, p.150) yet “avoiding additions and omissions” (Pavlenko, 2008, p.314). The lengthy transcripts are clear evidence as to how participants spoke at length during the semi-structured interviews. Given the sensitive nature of the

accounts, details of the recruited informants that were included in the transcripts were fictionalised. This ensured anonymity, confidentiality and the protection of the involved participants at all times. The transcript was then returned to the participants for clarification and approval. In this manner, participants could simultaneously tell that I have been ethically faithful to their narrative contribution (Atkinson, 1998); research participants were also briefed with the aims of narrative fiction and with the way in which an author reworks data into an artistic form of writing⁹.

I here refer to Chase's metaphor of the 'lens' (2005) through which narrative researchers ought to look in order to help make sense out of the collected data. She reminds researchers of the distinctiveness of each and every instance of a narrative, inviting the researcher to employ this lens in order to focus on the differences and parallels across narratives (Chase, 2005). This meaning-making process locates the storyteller and his/her knowledge in a meaningful wider political, social and cultural context (Page, 2013). Quite specifically, Plummer (1995) indicates that "the ability to tell the story of a rape/of being gay shifts in different 'arenas' of interaction: economic, religious, work, home, media, government" (p.27). As narrators tell their story, they "establish coherence across past, present, and as yet unrealised experience" (Riessman, 2008, p.10). As I applied these views in the context of my research in relation to how I view my role as a narrative researcher, I realised how I needed to scan the personal analytic lens through which these realities were viewed and assembled by the interviewees themselves. As Watson (2011) puts it, "by examining these narratives, the academic holds up a mirror – albeit one in which a certain amount of distortion may be apparent – and sees a new relation" (p.399). I could not simply tie meaning to the logical events as expressed by the participants. Besides, throughout my analysis, I have given due attention to the participants' emotional response, their beliefs and their interpretations as they constructed their life events through narrative. I did not look at the participants' narrative interpretation of experiences as a coherent whole – a unified experience but as "a dynamic

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My approach to data analysis is somewhat comparable to research led by Holm (2009) in her investigation of the professional identities of Chartered Teachers. The researcher presents a 'playlet' to explore the ambiguity and confusion of these teacher identities and approaches towards these educators within the teaching profession. She analyses the interviews that she had conducted with teachers and school management teams and eventually comes up with themes that lead to the creation of her fictional account (Watson, 2011). With this fictionalised playlet, Holm intends to "illustrate issues... inform the judgements and decisions of practitioners (and perhaps policy makers) ... [and present] theoretical ideas about professional identity" (Watson, 2011, p.403).

interplay of countless narrative fragments that form ever new constellations, engage in relations of contest, conflict, and dialogue, and are subject to endless revisions” (Watson, 2011, p.101).

In order to capture the complexity of interview data, I opted for a thematic analysis of qualitative data that the in-depth interviews generated. Through this categorizing strategy, the data is reviewed, notes are taken and data is sorted into categories. Consequently, the researcher discovers patterns and develops themes. As Boyatzis (1998) explains, thematic analysis is a process of “encoding qualitative information” (p.vii). This means that in opting for this data analytic strategy, I developed codes, phrases or words that served as labels for different parts of the data. Boyatzis (1998) explains that this set of codes may be “a list of themes, a complex model with themes, indicators, and qualifications that are causally related; or something in between these two forms” (p.vii).

This analytic process has comparable elements to Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) processes of open, axial and selective coding within a grounded theory approach since the interview data helped emerge chief themes for the development of the fictionalised narratives. A meticulous analysis of the experiences shared by participants led to the identification of themes that were central and relevant to the research topic. The following themes were identified:

- The concept of a dual identity (professional vs. personal)/invisibility/silence
- The role and influence of Catholic religion on the lives of Maltese gay teachers
- Consequences of ‘coming out’; the acceptance/support/rejection of family members
- Homophobic/Heterosexist bullying
- The feminisation of teaching
- Gay teachers as role models
- The fusion of homosexuality and paedophilia
- Issues of inclusion and safety at educational environments/support of teacher colleagues

Nonetheless, the persistence of some of these themes across the interview data facilitated the identification of a number of overarching themes. During the coding stage, I frequently revisited relevant literature that specifically addresses education and (homo)sexuality as well

as the theoretical frameworks of narrative analysis. All data were coded through a continuous comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) which enabled me to have a richer understanding of the experiences of teachers in terms of similarities and differences (Patton, 2002). This required me to deconstruct the sequence of the data and to seek causal or co-incident relations between common/dissimilar elements in the narratives of these teachers.

The embeddedness of heterosexism and masculinity in contemporary Maltese society, the phenomena of silence and invisibility surrounding homosexuality in education and the immeasurable influence of Catholic religion on the lives of Maltese gay teachers were all inevitable themes that emanated from the interviews and which helped to ‘set up the scene’ for these narratives. The omnipresence of these core themes in the five narratives is evident in *Figure 4.6* (See page 225, themes 1, 2 and 3). *Figure 4.6* explains visually how the various themes feature in the respective stories.

The different events, sources and contexts emanating from interview data were then classified in accordance with their relevance to the identified theme. Although most of these themes are recurring throughout the fictionalised accounts, I decided to filter these universal issues so as to identify a number of key themes. In this way, each narrative was constructed in a way that it specifically addresses a main theme as can be seen in *Figure 4.7* (See page 226). The following key themes were formulated:

- Aspects of power in a binary gender regime
- The conflation of homosexuality with paedophilia
- The influence of Catholic religion (and gay teachers’ accessibility to employment in the teaching sector, especially in Church schools)
- Issues of safety for gay individuals in educational environments
- A culture of silence, invisibility and a dual identity

The fusion of this assembly of elements combined with a degree of my imagination resulted in the development of the fictionalised narratives - a ‘patchwork text’ in the words of Winter, Buck and Sobiechowska (1999) since these stories merge a range of themes, data sources, voices and contexts. Clough (2002) explains the composition of his narratives by presenting a model for schematisation. Clough’s model provides further transparency to the composition

of his characters, events and locations or contexts by outlining units of meaning, data sources and data methods. An intriguing citation by Bochner and Ellis (2002, p.749) sums up the criteria by which I strongly stood when moulding the fictional narratives;

How do we judge the merits of these stories? When do we know they're reliable and telling? (...) Is the work honest or dishonest? Does the author take the measure of herself, her limitations, her confusion, ambivalence, mixed feelings? Do you gain a sense of emotional reliability? (...) Does the story enable you to understand and feel the experience it seeks to convey?

Validity, Reliability and Trustworthiness in Fictional Research Methods

In Clough's words (2002), "translating life's realities *as lived* by men and women into story, and doing it in such a way as still to be believed, is *the* ethnographic challenge" (p.64). Yet while I intend to bring forth the experiences of my participants, I am highly aware of the subjective implications that my own views, values and, above all, my interpretation, bear on the research and also on the creation of these narratives. The study not only brings to light the experiences of Maltese gay teachers but it also intertwines my interpretation of their experiences (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000) – my view of 'a truth'.

Critical qualitative research is fundamentally constructed on the notions: (a) that all meaning is produced through discourse, (b) that all thoughts and discourses are "mediated by power relations, which are socially and historically situated" (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000, p. 291), and (c) that particular social groups are essentially privileged vis-à-vis others. In framing my research within these assumptions, I recognise that I have conducted this research process with an inherent awareness that the social context I live in, and its particular culture of education in which I am situated, is an essentially heterosexist community which views non-heterosexual individuals as 'others'.

I am additionally conscious that in examining the lives of gay teachers, I situate myself in an external, neutral locus while I shift all vulnerability onto the research participants. In fact 'giving voice' is an issue that requires our careful consideration. Although this may sound emancipatory, Behar (1993) argues that as researchers "we ask for revelations from others, but we reveal little or nothing of ourselves; we make others vulnerable, but we ourselves

remain invulnerable" (Behar, 1993, p. 273). There were instances along my research trajectory when I felt confused over my positioning in the research as this short yet self-descriptive excerpt from my reflective journal shows: [I ask myself]:

Am I going against the most basic principles of my own research? Is the fact that I do not disclose my sexuality to my participants but then place that of my subjects under the spotlight of scrutiny, oppressive in its own nature?

(Personal Journal Entry, June 20, 2013)

I would have been wrong to assume that with my research I would be ‘giving voice’ to Maltese gay educators. This would inherently imply that gay teachers have no voice at all and would ultimately and quite ironically lead to a construction of hegemonies of power. I do realise that in examining the subjects’ experiences, I automatically ‘other’ these educators in a manner that is purely exclusive. Such segregation paradoxically goes against the philosophy of inclusion that we strive for in the culture of education however critical qualitative research aims at a search for the ‘truth’; it does not ‘give voice’ but rather it ‘facilitates’ voice. The idea of voice as a “facilitating agency recognizes the interdependent and dynamic nature of voice and critical qualitative research” (Ashby, 2011, p.6). In acknowledging that research leads to the discursive creation of voice, I understand that I cannot eliminate my internalised discourses of oppression. On this issue, Ellsworth (1989) explains that "I cannot unproblematically bring subjugated knowledges to light when I am not free from my own learned racism, fat oppression, classism, ableism or sexism. No teacher [or researcher] is free of these learned and internalized oppressions” (p.99). Richardson’s advice (2003, p.197) is helpful in this regard:

The researcher self is not separable from the lived self, who we are and what we can be, what we can study and how we can write about what we can study are tied to how a knowledge system disciplines its members and claims authority over knowledge. Needed are concrete practices through which we can construct ourselves as ethical subjects engaged in ethical research, even if this means challenging the authority of a discipline’s cherished modes of representation.

My own interpretation of the data as presented through the fictional narratives, will necessary fail wholly to communicate the meaning that participants originally intended in their contribution. This is due partly to the fact that my situatedness in the context may vary from that of my subjects. On the other hand, although I have made use of open-ended semi-

structured interviews in my study I acknowledge that participants may have forgotten to describe experiences which they wished to share since occasionally I redirected the interviewing process when this went off at a tangent to the main focus of the study.

The distinction of what might be true and what is really true in narrative research reporting is an issue which researchers question. Nonetheless, scrutinising a fictional narrative to examine what is *really true* forbids the readers to identify their respective truths in what they read (Clough, 2003). Gergen (2001) stresses the futility of arguments that claim *the* truth as evident in the following citation:

To tell the truth, on this account, is not to furnish an accurate picture of what actually happened but to participate in a set of social conventions ... To be objective is to play by the rules within a given tradition of social practices ... To do science is not to hold a mirror to nature but to participate actively in the interpretive conventions and practices of a particular culture. The major question that must be asked of scientific accounts, then, is not whether they are true to nature but what these accounts ... offer to the culture more generally (p.806).

Interestingly, Gray (2002) shows that “some truths cannot be told except as fiction” (p.131). Nonetheless, subjectivity may often yet incorrectly be conceived as the *sine qua non* in qualitative research and Clough (2002) points out how researchers “never come innocent to a research task” (p.17). However critics of this “storying methodology” (Clough, 2002, p.83) might pose a justifiable query: “Is this not like the very worst subjectivity?” (Clough, 2002, p.92). The way my hands mould these stories might arguably be prejudiced in the way it ‘claims truth’ and in the way this is communicated. This is claimed by Badley (2003) who, through the ‘messiness’ of these fictionalised methodology, sees a “narrative truth that reflects something of the author” (p.444) – a ‘truth’ that is based on the researcher’s personal, ethical and moral interpretive response to the research experiences.

I could be asked: how would you locate yourself within the research; can you negate your obvious subjective imprints on your methodological approach? I would reply: I am everywhere and nowhere... as although these fictional accounts may represent different versions of ‘truths’ that were shared by participants, they are also indicative of how I see and perceive those ‘truths’ and what I ultimately present in my research is a “version of the truth as the researcher sees it” (Clough, 2002, p.18). Indeed, as I explore issues of life and self underlying the professional lives of Maltese gay teachers, I realise that the way in which I

have constituted these narratives is how I perceive and understand the world of gay teachers through my own eyes. The events that are told, how these are told and the way these experiences evolve, are all elements that constitute my expression as the researcher. In the context of this argument, phenomenology justifies this methodology: “these are my ways of seeing the world I both create and inhabit” (Clough, 2002, p.10).

In a reply to Badley’s review of *Narratives and Fiction in Educational Research*, Clough (2003) resists the idea that narrative research accounts should carry an eventual justification; “a methodological apologia” (Clough, 2003, p.447). He explains that in this world of enquiry where the orthodox standards of a social science accentuate the need for justification, stories are not allowed to ‘stand alone’ in spite of their ability to do so:

... we shall not in the end arrive at an account of truth-in-fiction which will meet the orthodox criteria of a social science. Such an account would be absurd, much as we might rigorously argue the existence of God. (Interestingly, in both cases, surely the question of existence is already answered, and the question is rather how this exists than whether.). It remains, however, in the examined world in which we live – where evidence genuinely matters – to offer some justification for the uses of fiction in social science which will help students to scoop with scholarly confidence – ‘without self-importance or self-consciousness’ (Inglis, 1969, p.15) – deep into their personal resources for persuasive writing which cannot be dismissed as ‘mere fiction’. To do this calls for a methodology which can deal analytic justice at the same time as experiential truth. This is a tall order. (Clough, 2002, p.88).

What distinguishes research fictions from novels is indeed their potential to represent ‘truth’ and this is why, according to Clough (2003), the requirement for stories “to be justified, to be accompanied by their methodological apologia” continues to persist (p.447). Trying to test stories through criteria of reliability, validity and replicability is according to Clough (2002) an inappropriate way of judging stories since they “inevitably reflect something of the teller” (Badley, 2003, p.442). Alternatively, these stories should be judged “by their aesthetic aspects, their verisimilitude, and by criteria of authenticity and integrity to the people they portray” (Badley, 2003, p. 442.). The validity of a story lies in the hands of “the artfully persuasive storyteller” (Smith, 2002, p.114) who renounces control over the story’s meaning to the readers who interweave their own interpretive and emotional responsiveness. The authenticity of these narratives depends upon the extent to which these stories capture “the essence and resonance of the actors’ experience and perspective through details of action and thought revealed in context” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, p.12). A compelling story

“isn’t a flight from reality but a vehicle that carries us on our search for reality, [a] best effort to make sense out of the anarchy of existence” (McKee, 1997, p.12). Stories transfuse “the pale abstractions of disembodied reason with the blood and bone of the senses and presents them for inspection” (Taylor, 2001, p.30) and tell of truths that “no amount of theorizing or recitation of statistics” (Denzin, 1999, cited in Bergess and Quinney, 2004, p.12) can expose. Such truths help resist the marginalisation of socially inferior groups as they help in the construction of social bonds. Furthermore, Griffin and Genasci (1990) claim the importance of this kind of research for educators to professionally understand and promote diversity.

They suggest that:

If we are to openly acknowledge and promote an understanding of the diversity among us, we need to begin a professional dialogue. Teachers and researchers have important responsibilities in initiating and nurturing this dialogue. We need research that is self-conscious, rooted in openly acknowledged values, open-ended, non-dogmatic, and grounded in the experiences and dignity of the participants (p.220).

Notwithstanding the fact that there are multiple ways in which researchers can analyse stories, Clough (2002) concurs with Bochner (1997) in seeing how stories can ‘stand alone’ and be left to connect with the experience of the reader. Bochner (1997) describes how “stories long to be used rather than analysed, to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled. And they promise the companionship of intimate details as a substitute for the loneliness of abstracted facts...” (p.431).

Perhaps quite paradoxically, the ‘openness’ of narratives, which allows a multitude of interpretations and “productive ambiguity” (Eisner, 1997, cited in Watson, 2011, p.403), rationalises the use of fictional forms in research. In sustaining this position, Barone (2007, p.466) advises that “our aim as researcher-storytellers is not to seek certainty about correct perspectives on educational phenomena but to raise significant questions about prevailing policy and practice that enrich an ongoing conversation”. Sparkes (2007) recognises the pressure to provide interpretations to research stories in a way that fictional narratives end up “swaddled within a researcherly paratext which provides authority and validates it, particularly in relation to citation” (Watson, 2011, p.403). Interestingly, Sparkes (2007) in his fictional account “about the embodied struggles of a composite and mythical (perhaps?) academic at an imaginary (perhaps?) university in England that is permeated by an audit culture” (p.522) renounces control over the interpretation of this account. He does so by

including response from academics and reviewers of his paper (Watson, 2011). So perhaps I can address the concerns around the validity and reliability in fictional research narratives by making some claims to the trustworthiness of my fictional research narratives.

Guba (1981) suggests four criteria that qualitative researchers should abide by if they aim to accomplish a study that is 'trustworthy'. In an attempt to distance himself from positivist paradigm, Guba suggests the following constructs:

- a) credibility (in preference to internal validity);
- b) transferability (in preference to external validity/generalisability);
- c) dependability (in preference to reliability);
- d) confirmability (in preference to objectivity).

Credibility or the congruency of findings with reality is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In this study, supporting data obtained from documents have been intertwined with some of the commentaries that follow each fictionalised narrative. This served as a way of triangulating via data sources. Also, the possibility that participants could withdraw from the study at any point during the research ensured that participants were genuinely willing to take part in the study. The use of iterative questioning as a means to strengthen credibility was incorporated especially during the second interview where I returned to matters that were raised in the first interview. The different issues arising from the interview data were also related to results of past studies. Shenton (2004) explains that it may prove challenging for qualitative researchers to ensure transferability. He suggests that researchers ought to make clear the boundaries of their study (such as the number of participants and the length of data collection sessions) before making any attempts at transference. Reference to similar investigations that were conducted in different environments may also prove to be useful since an understanding of a phenomenon is not gained from one project, conducted in isolation but it is gradually achieved through numerous studies (Shenton, 2004). On this aspect of transferability, I draw on Shenton (2004) who questions "whether the notion of producing truly transferable results from a single study is a realistic aim or whether it disregards the importance of context which forms such a key factor in qualitative research" (p. 71). In this research study, the provision of background data to establish the context of the study was instrumental in this regard. In order to address issues of dependability, I also provide an accurate description of the methodology implemented in

this research (Shenton, 2004). The fact that I bring forward any assumptions about the phenomenon under scrutiny heightens the confirmability of the research. An acknowledgment of any limitations of the applied research methods and a description of the repercussions of these methodological shortcomings on the research are important elements that help maintain confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

My interpretation of the presented stories should not be an ending in itself. With the commentaries that I provide after each narrative, I intend to encourage further reflection and possibly alternative analyses or ‘truths’ ... or endless interpretations (this is why I purposefully use the term ‘commentary’ rather than ‘analysis’). This concurs with Clough who argues that narratives and fictions attempt “to evoke rather than to explain” (Clough, 2002) and their judgement ought to be based on “verisimilitude rather than their verifiability” (Bruner, 1991, p.13). The commentary I provide is therefore not *an analysis* of narratives, as such, through the traditional dogmatic approach that one might expect. This commentary serves to locate the characters, images, themes and ideas that emerge from each story in a wider context. Despite the interpretive stance of this commentary, I feel it is my ethical obligation to reiterate that the stories are the core of this investigation – they are the cornerstone of this research project.

Clough (2003) holds that in artistic literary works, structures of analysis are “unimportant” since the focus is on “what works, what appeals, what persuades” (p.448). And it is via the capacity of effective fictions that “each reader brings to the reading his or her own structures of analyses” (Clough, 2003, p.446) to match the presented version of ‘truth’ with their lived experience. Clough therefore sustains Sandelowski (1993, p.2) who argues that:

issues of validity in qualitative studies should be linked not to ‘truth’ or ‘value’ as they are for the positivists, but rather to ‘trustworthiness’, which ‘becomes a matter of persuasion whereby the scientist is viewed as having made those practices visible and, therefore, auditable.

In the light of the above quotation, a study is deemed trustworthy if the reader of the research judges it to be so (Rolfe, 2004). In order to intertwine the possibility of different or alternative interpretations, I decided to take the ‘crafted’ fictional narratives back to my participants. I asked them to carefully read the narratives and to provide me with some response on each narrative in writing. Participants were not given any specific guidelines by

which they had to abide – they were left to write freely whatever they felt they should write. This was eventually included after each commentary. Also, the fact that the commentary itself is presented separately offers readers the opportunity to relate to the stories in a way that is distinct from my interpretative commentary.

To conclude, we can say, that the “ethically and morally responsive” (p.448) nature of fiction itself highlights the importance of narrative fictions in dealing with matters of social inquiry. A persuasive narrative links the personal experience to the public narratives, allowing society to ‘articulate’ itself through each individual. Stories therefore, help us mull over “the conditions under which the moral terms of the self... are constituted” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p.623). The inspiring quotation from Pelias (2004, p.1) with which I conclude my discussion on subjectivity sums up the role of my ‘researcher self’ in this study;

The [narratives] all originate in the desire to write from the heart, to put on display a researcher who, instead of hiding behind the illusion of objectivity, brings himself forward in the belief that an emotionally vulnerable, linguistically evocative, and sensuously poetic voice can place us closer to the subjects we wish to study.

This is what I ultimately intend to accomplish with the fictional narratives in this research project.

Conclusion

In this study I have chosen to use fiction because of the highly sensitive data that I worked with and for the affordances of creative fiction argued earlier. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, my adoption of fiction is no less a political statement of my stand on issues of sexual diversity in the Maltese education experience. In itself, this unorthodox representational method mirrors the risky aim of this research; to examine an issue that is highly contentious in the Maltese context. This strategy also functions as an emblem of the diversity of sexuality that defies the deeply-seated heteronormative culture of education in Malta. In fact, this is my commitment to the participants in this educational enquiry: that an understanding of this research will possibly better lives - not only the life of the participants in this study but of all those individuals in society who desperately long for a more equitable culture in education; and not least my own.

Chapter 4

The Narratives

In the preceding section of this thesis I have discussed the capacity of narrative methodology to more adequately capture and communicate human experience and social phenomena and justified its use in this thesis. In this study, the narratives of gay teachers prioritise individual agency over social structure and also provide a perspective, to the systematic marginalisation of homosexuality as a non-normative sexuality. The stories I present offer differing viewpoints and an amalgam of voices that struggle to make meaning out of the life events. From this perspective, these fictional narratives provide an interpretation of how five gay teachers construct their identities and also represent how their teacher identity intersects with their sexual identity.

Through the various literary devices employed in the construction of these stories, the narratives in this chapter capture the everyday essence of five gay teachers' experiences as they place an important emphasis on their emotional content.

The narratives, assembled into thematic clusters, are followed by an interpretative commentary which 'unearths' chief themes and which unveils main characters. This commentary offers the reader a chance to explore the philosophical underpinnings that these stories emulate. Furthermore, the research participants' interpretations of these narratives are interwoven in this discussion.

The narratives in this chapter offer readers an opportunity to examine philosophical issues, underlying the lives of some Maltese gay teachers, in a way that is not constrained by 'facts'. Readers of these narratives are encouraged to relate their own philosophical notions to the embodied ideals of each narrative. In introducing the narratives which follow I draw on an excerpt from my research diary which, for me, epitomises some of the work I want the stories to do:

With these dense narratives, I do not only want to reach readers on an intellectual level but also on a more emotional level, too. I think, what I really want in these stories is to take the reader by the hand on a meandering journey that evokes the imagination and that inspires empathy, thought and reflection. In simple words, I want these stories to reach to the heart.

(Personal Journal Entry, April 16, 2014)

Albert's Narrative

He was expecting the locksmith that morning. The lock needed some fixing. Even the kitchen drains stood in need of repairs. The façade needed a facelift too, but Albert had no particular urgency: it could endure another winter, he reasoned. The tiny Sliema townhouse he had moved to was over sixty years old. He had always aspired to acquire his own property. As a matter of fact, that unconverted property had been a good deal. Albert was cognisant of the revamp that the house required however it was something which he could cope with. Albert was an early childhood educator working in a private kindergarten school. Despite being on his Christmas recess, he had worked his tail off throughout the holidays to get a couple of jobs done before returning to school.

Upstairs, his mobile phone was ringing. He presumed it was the locksmith. With its intricate labyrinth-like streets, finding your way through Sliema can prove to be quite complicated. For people who are unfamiliar with the area, the odds of getting lost are high. And Ġorġ the locksmith *did* get lost. Albert has known Ġorġ for years. His father and his grandfather used to call Ġorġ whenever a lock needed mending. He had the reputation of being very efficient yet inexpensive. Year in year out, he kept on doing that same work even though he had retired a decade earlier. Keeping St Anne's niche as a point of reference, Ġorġ managed to find his way in that perplexing maze and in a few minutes got to Albert's residence.

"Are you Charles' son?" demanded the locksmith as he recognised Albert.

"I *did* tell you I'm the gilder's son over the phone..." explained Albert to him.

"ah... old age dear...old age. Well, I haven't seen your father for a while ... I've known you all for years... your mother, and her father... he was a good man God grant him eternal rest!" as he made the sign of the cross and looked up towards the sky.

Gaining confidence, Ġorġ addressed Albert with his family nickname.

"So when did you get married?" asked Ġorġ ingenuously.

Albert's reply was succinct. "Long story, Ġorġ ... Long story".

"ah, my son, how I understand. Nowadays they just leave. My neighbour's son has gone through the same unfortunate circumstances. Poor Ray! He first rescued her from her father's greediness ... that old pinchpenny... and then she just left in a matter of months!" exclaimed Ġorġ.

[Not that Ġorġ loathed his money - far from it... but he was kind-hearted, supportive and cheerful: a man whose company one would never get bored of]

"Beware, my son... watch out!" advised Ġorġ as he gently held Albert's shoulder to substantiate his genuine admonition. "I can see you're a good person but careful... it makes you easy prey!"

Certainly, his was not a case of a marriage in crisis.

Albert had been obliged to leave his parents' house – he had violated their rules: Albert is gay.

Good gilders are few and far between. To preserve the family's business and the tradition of gilding¹⁰, Albert's father had expanded the plant and employed a number of workers as he assumed a leading role. On the other hand, Albert's mother assisted her husband in an outlet which was positioned exactly beneath their house. In summer and on school holidays, Albert would also give a helping hand at the shop. Though he had never learnt the art of gilding, Albert took orders at the family outlet and coordinated much of the communication between the office and the factory.

Notwithstanding the professional way in which Albert used to do his duties, it was evident that the gilding business was not his line. Following sixth form, Albert chose to read for a degree in Early Education. His love for children was immense. Out on the streets, he would stop chatting to young children and stop watching them play at the swings or in the meandering village alleys. In addition, he had a good ability to attune his communication to their level and was very creative – an element which is an indispensable virtue in the career of an early years' educator.

Albert's sister, Sharon, two years younger than him had invested all her energy into her father's enterprise. She had completed secondary school but then took an artisan course in Italy where she specialised in gilding. Ironically Sharon ended up managing the company's accounts. It was however pretty clear that she was the next in line to take over her father's entity. Sharon and Albert got on very well with each other. He was protective of his sister and she reciprocated his care with sisterly love and affection.

Albeit their strong rapport, Sharon was oblivious to her brother's homosexuality. And so was his family. Aged eighteen, Albert started to sense an urge to confide his 'secret' to somebody. He felt it was not proper to dump the weight of his big 'secret' on his younger sibling. Instead he approached his cousin Lizzy whom he considered more as his best friend rather than a relative. She was relatively, his age. One fine day while Albert was at his aunt's, he decided to 'out' himself in a way he had never anticipated.

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The art of gilding refers to techniques for applying fine gold leaf (typically using 23.5 carat gold leaf) to solid surfaces. This craftsmanship which involves patience, imagination and creativity came to Malta from nearby Sicily. In Malta, gilding is commonly used to embellish the famous Maltese clock, (locally known as '*arlogg tal-lira*', meaning 'one pound clock') in a design that is distinctive and unique to the Maltese islands. Apart from the tradition of making these remarkable clocks, gilders work on wooden furniture such as frames, chairs and tables. They also embellish the numerous local churches, statues and feasts' decorations.

That morning he was alone with Lizzy at her mum's place. He suddenly dragged Lizzy out of the kitchen into the entrance hall, ensuring that her mother would not hear a single word of what he had to express and told her:

"Lizzy, I need to speak to you... please it's urgent."

"What's wrong? ... tell me Bert... get on with it, come on"

"Can you sit down for a minute?... It's something I have been wanting to tell you for a long time" whispered Albert as he firmly held both of Lizzy's arms. He looked at the staircase to check whether there was any sign of his aunt.

"She's in the laundry room upstairs Bert... Now are you going to tell me what happened?... and before you say anything I tell you one thing: if it's all about last Saturday, rest assured I am *not* going to tell mum that we've entered that club?!" she said in a hushed tone.

"I know you won't but this is far more serious. You might burst into tears, or maybe yell your head off but I think you will understand all this and hopefully be nice to me. That is why I've decided to tell *you* and not anyone else... I haven't got the courage to tell mum and dad... honestly!" said Albert convincingly as he paced impatiently around the room.

"All right... tell me whatever you want to say I won't say a single word... is that OK?"

"No, please do. I want you to tell me if it's ok or not and that there is nothing wrong with me...?", said Albert as he quivered with anxiety.

Lizzy raised her voice and asked indignantly "Why should there be anything *wrong* with you Bert, why... So what happened then? ... You are either going to tell me or else..."

"I think I'm gay", replied Albert briskly. There was a second of deafening silence.

Lizzy went up to Albert and wrapped her right arm around him. "So... ?" she asked smilingly. "... Are you that dumb to think *we* never realised you're gay", she replied astoundingly.

In the meantime, her mother could be heard coming down the stairs. Without a second of hesitation Lizzy screeched in a way Aunt Mary could hear her: "Mum... mu'... guess what?" said Lizzy as she started giggling, "Bert has just told me he's gay"...

Albert felt bewildered at such startling retort. He thought he was going to give Liz the shock of the century. He had imagined a million scenarios of the eventual aftermath but such a cool reaction had never crossed his mind.

“Finally!” was the only word Aunt Mary uttered as she appeared holding a load of clean and fresh smelling laundry which was already neatly folded in a pile. This reaction was even more surprising.

Albert gazed at her as she walked past him towards the kitchen looking as if nothing extraordinary had been told to her. She paused momentarily, looked back at Albert and said “by the way Bert... you should not worry... trust me... I will not tell mum about it... promise”.

Albert loved spending time at his aunt’s. Ever since he had ‘revealed’ his big secret, Albert felt like he could be himself, now more than he ever did – not that his attitude toward them had changed but spending time at his aunt’s felt therapeutic, unlike home. Aunt Mary and his cousin Lizzy rarely brought up the issue of homosexuality and if they did discuss it, they did so lightly. For them, Albert’s homosexuality was not an issue.

A month after he had ‘come out’ to his aunt and cousin, Albert ‘came out’ to his parents, in an almost inadvertent manner.

That summer morning, Albert was idling around. He had had a late night on Sunday and had agreed with his dad to take the following morning off work. He carried his cereal and a toasted slice of bread out in the garden to have his breakfast there. All of a sudden, a shrill from upstairs made him jump. It was his mother. Something must have gone terribly wrong. His sister Sharon came out of her room and Albert darted upstairs. His mother was enraged. Clearly, Albert had been the cause of her outrage.

“You will have to explain all this to your dad!” his mother shouted as she dashed to the phone inside her bedroom. She locked the door behind her. Albert and his sister could not make heads or tails of what was going on. His mother could be heard venting out her anger with her husband over the phone.

Dad got home in no time. His non-verbals suggested he had already been acquainted with the cause of mum’s distress. Albert’s mind raced as he wondered what he could have done. Dad looked absent. Soon after Dad went to the main bedroom, he called Albert into their room. Albert went in. His mother was closing the balcony’s apertures that overlooked the street. She felt the whole scene was dishonourable.

“Close that door, Bert”, ordered his dad. Trembling, Albert closed the bedroom door. His dad locked it.

“How could you ever do this to us?” whispered his mother as she moved nervously around the room. “Are you the same child I brought up?” she demanded angrily.

Albert's dad crossed arms as he rocked on the balls of his feet. He looked at Albert straight in the eye. Albert looked back. Raising his eyebrows and slightly lifting his head, Albert's dad signalled towards the bed. Albert stood aghast as looked at it. There it lay: a gay porn magazine he had got from the internet. His mother had been cleaning his room and as she moved the furniture she came across the magazine in a hidden corner right behind his closet. Albert was speechless. He burst out crying.

That afternoon, he did not report to work. Instead he spent the rest of the day in his room.

Later on that same evening Albert's dad went up to his room.

Albert had puffy eyes. He was lying on his bed. He had been crying all afternoon. Dad sat next to him. Albert turned to face the wall.

"Things could have taken a turn for the better if you had told us about all this yourself ... you should not have hidden it from us. You know how much we love you". Dad sounded very sympathetic. Evidently dad was not simply referring to his magazine. He acknowledged his homosexuality.

"So you still love me... both of you?" asked Albert.

"Ah that sounds so silly Bert, come on, you know we love you... you've shocked us – true but that will not affect our love towards you in any way... I don't want you to worry... I'll just see how I can help you sort this out."

It was a step which he never had the courage to take. The discovery of that magazine had inevitably outed him with his family. That had been Albert's sole relief. That evening, Albert's sister ordered a take-away for her family. Mother had cried all afternoon. She was not in the mood to prepare dinner as she normally did. Dad watched TV quietly. He was very quiet.

The next morning as Albert went downstairs into the kitchen, mother was having a coffee. Their eyes met. Apparently she hadn't had any sleep. She looked worn out. "You're all right, ma'?, I'm very sorry about yesterday."

"Darling, listen. Never hide *anything* from me. Next time whatever you tell me, I can keep a secret... you know that... I can never ever ever judge *you*, my son... I - we're here to help ... so share your worries. Do not hide anything from me... It's the only possible way I can help you... but if I'm not aware of what is going on in your life... how can I help you?... So am I right to say you're gay, Bert or...?"

Albert nodded in agreement. His mother hugged him.

Albert could not start off his day on a better note. This was about eight a.m. Albert left for work. His mother cried. And she cried justifiably. With the protective instinct of a mother she could foresee that her son, Bert was in for a tough time.

[3:15p.m. Downstairs, at the family's outlet]

It was a calm afternoon. Mother left the shop and went upstairs to prepare dinner. Dad was on the phone with one of his customers. Albert was reviewing some journals he had downloaded on his Dad's PC. Dad put down the phone. Staring out of the shop window he said: "It is you who needs to decide!". Albert didn't even realise dad was speaking to him. "Bert!? I said you have to decide", he repeated.

Confused, Albert swivelled round in his chair and looked at his father. He was now looking at his son straight in the eye.

"Decide what?"

"So you think you *might be* gay... But I tell you one thing ... It might be late now... If only you spoke earlier about it... we could have been in time to... help you with it... solve it and you'd be happy by now... You can still get the cure, though if you want to... Dr Zammit has offered to have a word with you".

Dr Zammit, was a priest and a well-renowned psychologist. He conducted shows on local radio and TV stations in which he read out letters sent in by distressed people who sought his professional and spiritual support. People queued onto the road at his office. Albert's father had spoken to him about his son's homosexuality. He said he could offer Albert a sort of reparative therapy. The only snag was that Albert had turned eighteen.

"Why can't you support me?" asked Albert as he stood up from his chair. His dad moved closer to him.

"Will you get the necessary help to treat your problem?"

"Problem?" Albert yelled, "Of course I won't!"

"Then we cannot live under the same roof if you're like that... and it's because you're refusing help and not because I have any issue against you being like that".

"So you're chucking me out of the house eh... is that what you mean?" Albert's heart throbbed with anxiety. He could not believe that it was his dad who was speaking to him. He was angry but he felt devastated.

"If you accept the therapy you need..."

Albert picked up his keys from the desk, got his things and closed the webpages that he had been browsing.

With a fixed stare, he looked in his dad's eyes and said, "Dad... if you think so... then your son has died today!"

Albert rushed hurriedly out of the shop as his father called after him desperately, "OK! So my son is dead and buried... But you're likewise dead for my business, too... and you're dead for the house... nothing... you're dead for everything!"

"Thanks. Very much appreciated", Albert retorted as he entered his home, determined to collect his things and leave.

It was a clever psychological game that Albert's father had played. Albert felt dad had betrayed him. He could no longer recognise his dad. He believed that dad has shown his true colours.

The way Albert slammed the front door was very telling to his mother who was still unaware of what had happened downstairs. Enraged, Albert rushed to the kitchen. Tears rolled down his face. His sudden proximity to his mother suggested he needed physical comfort.

"I won't be sleeping here tonight... You've got my number... You can call me whenever you like. I can meet you whenever you want... but not that beast downstairs... he's a monster... don't call me for his funeral when he dies... I hate him". His mother tried to calm Albert down. Her lips were pale and her face was colourless. Albert sank down on the kitchen settee.

"Out of my house my foot... *This* is your house!" she said firmly. She looked towards the CCTV monitors. There he was. His hands were folded under his chin. He looked anxious. "You stay there..." Albert's mother ordered.

She was downstairs in a flash. Albert glanced at the security camera that viewed the main desk at his father's shop. Though the footage was muted, his mother's expressive non-verbal cues were very telling. He could see his mother was pointing her index finger threateningly into his father's face. It was clear that she was warning his father that she would be the next one to leave if Albert were to be chucked out. Her husband did not make the slightest move. Instead he looked vacantly at her, expressing no reaction whatsoever.

Breathlessly, she returned to her son.

"Ignore what he's told you downstairs, you're neither chucked out of home, nor from the family business... He knows what he's just done is wrong... He's sorry for what he said" She

spoke frantically hoping Albert would have a change of heart. In spite of mum's pacifying attempts, Albert carried on with his plans: He left and never went back home.

For the three nights that followed, Albert slept at his aunt's as mum had presumed. His aunt would contact her to let her know that Albert was well. Eventually, thanks to his aunt's help, Albert managed to rent a tiny studio apartment. He lived in that studio flat for five and a half years. He worked in a ticket booth at a nearby cinema for three or four evenings a week. That way he could foot the bills and the monthly rent. It was in that single room where Albert strived to complete his studies. At the age of twenty-two, Albert graduated as an early childhood educator. All throughout, his mother's support was incessant and unconditional. By then, his relationship with his father had improved (to a certain extent). Albert would occasionally and co-incidentally come across his dad whenever he visited his mother. Their relationship had turned cold but at least they could exchange a couple of words without picking an argument.

A year and a half following his graduation, Albert took a loan to enable him to buy the Sliema townhouse – the same place where old Ġorġ had been called to repair the lock.

One summer morning, a woman, probably in her late twenties stopped Albert right in front of his house. He was leaving his house to run some errands. She had long, curly hair and beautiful brown eyes. She was clearly expecting a baby.

“Are you Mr Albert?” she asked timidly.

“Yes... that's me good morning...” said he.

“We're actually neighbours”

“Ah, I thought your face looked familiar... So I see... you're the young boy's mother then!” Albert realised.

“That's it... You'll be teaching Andre, this coming September... Andre - he's three ... he's at home with his dad right now” she said as she pointed towards their apartment which faced Albert's house precisely. “Should you need anything Sir... you know we can help... just give us a knock at the door” she said smilingly.

Having parents as neighbours is something which teachers normally are very uncomfortable with but this mother couldn't be nicer to him. Albert had lived happily in that neighbourhood for the past years. He had been employed at a private kindergarten school and he immersed himself in a job, which gave him so much satisfaction. He had cut off all connection with the family's business.

At school the principal was very fond of Albert. His first two years at the school proved his diligence. He worked whole-heartedly to gain job satisfaction, not merely a salary. There was care and affection in every single thing that he did. He planned activities that targeted different skills. He specified individual realistic objectives for each of his young students and strived to fulfil them by the end of each semester. He would professionally encourage parents to seek further support in situations where developmental difficulties were evident. He would speak to the parents as they pick their children up from school and he would then shift to the classroom where he would scissor all the required resources for the following day. He was indeed hard-working. His remarkable effort was appreciated and all his effort had earned him the parents' respect. Despite being the only male in that kindergarten school, he managed to obtain an excellent reputation. And above all, he was trusted.

Albert never disclosed any information to anyone about his sexuality. He had a good relationship with the rest of the female staff yet he did not feel safe to do so. He was always conscious that he worked with young children, very young children.

The holidays rolled by and school started following the summer recess.

Andre was there. Wide blue eyes, fair hair and tiny. Out of thirteen children Andre was one of the fairest children in that classroom.

One morning Andre's mother, now heavily pregnant approached Albert. She asked Albert whether he could give her son a lift home from school, given that she was likely to give birth any minute. She added that her husband could drive Andre to school in the mornings before going to work. Albert felt awkward and could not refuse. In fact, this arrangement was not at all convenient for him. He always stayed that half an hour working at school after work and he would also go to the gym every other day. Nonetheless it definitely was not in his nature to refuse and not in his nature to say 'no'. So he accepted.

"What if she finds out that I am gay?" he wondered to himself. This fear was Albert's eternal nightmare. His terror escalated since he started working with young children. The fact that his social standing could, at any time, be crushed by the very same people who loved and respected him was Albert's eternal nightmare.

Albert used to feel very awkward seeing Andre seated in his car's backseat but Andre's mother was always grateful. Every now and then, she used to acknowledge his kindness with a hamper of delicacies but for Albert that after school ritual had become the source of a morning dose of anxiety.

Andre did well at the kindergarten during the first term. His parents had forgotten their fear that he would not do as well as his peers. They were very satisfied with the academic progress he had registered over the first semester. That end of semester, progress was assessed more efficiently and professionally. Encouraged by the school principal, Albert had come up with a more encompassing way of assessing children's skills in their different areas

of development. He chose not to let the rest of the staff know that he had been the author of that innovative assessment procedure. The new format had been discussed and approved by all the educators. He had worked hard on it, but it had earned him a great deal of satisfaction. Parents sending their children to this private entity lauded the new methods of assessing children and many were those who complimented the school for being professional and so student-oriented.

That piece of work had served to consolidate the already strong relationship that Albert had with his principal. He admired the woman who managed to have a successful career notwithstanding the pain she had been through in an ill-fated marital relationship. She had separated from her husband a couple of years back. Throughout the process of formulating the new assessment format, the Head of school confided in Albert as she described how she struggled to provide a decent upbringing to her two daughters with nobody else's backing.

Everybody knew that the principal was no longer married. That did not make much difference.

Nobody knew Albert was gay. If they were to know, that would indeed make a huge difference.

As he listened to her troubles, Albert felt like he had identified with her. For the first time ever, he had found someone with whom he could relieve his urge to reveal that important part of his self: his sexuality. He wanted to get it off his chest. It was this recurrent impulse that made Albert share his story with the school's principal. As he had expected, she was very understanding, considerate and empathetic towards him. The fact that, at work, someone had now got to know the true Albert made a whole lot of difference.

Andre's mother gave birth to a lovely baby girl. A few weeks after, Andre's mother accompanied her husband into school where parents' day was being held. Mr Albert had been very anxious that day but the feedback he got from all parents was positive and encouraging... and Albert was indeed an exceptional teacher. Andre's mother felt she wanted to personally acclaim Albert for his hard work with the school's administration. She queued outside the Head's office and waited for her turn. It would also be the ideal occasion to show the newborn to the principal, she thought.

The meeting did not last more than ten minutes. But those who had been next in line were shocked to see Andre's mum trembling as she walked out of the Head's office like a zombie. That had been a blow for her.

Outside the principal's office, everyone thought that something must have been terribly wrong with her child.

The following Monday, Andre's car seat remained vacant.

A quarter of an hour after Albert had started the school day, the principal entered the class. The children were singing the numbers' rhyme as they watched the accompanying clip on the interactive whiteboard.

The principal did not look well. She avoided looking at Albert into his eyes.

As she quickly scanned the youngsters' faces, she said "Andre won't be coming to school".

"So he's sick then" was Albert's instantaneous reply.

"No. No. it's not that ... What I meant is that he won't be coming anymore... He's changed school".

Words spread like wildfire. Andre's mother attempted to oust Albert from the school by letting the other parents know that their toddler's carer was a gay man, a homosexual.

However, not even a single report was filed at the school.

His reputation had been conserved... and parents and their children just loved him.

Her pointless attempts had fallen on deaf ears.

A Reading of Albert's Story

Sources and Contexts of *'Albert's Story'*

Mirroring wider societal attitudes, the Maltese education system has played a leading role in policing and reproducing norms of heterosexuality through institutionalised mainstream practices that reject 'difference'. This collection of narratives of gay teachers sheds light on the examination of social roles since they are rooted in social discursive practices that differentiate the 'homosexual' man from the 'straight' man (Halperin, 1995). The effects of the socially constructed deviance of non-normative sexualities remain a strong subject throughout this research project. Specifically, Albert's narrative deals with two major themes: It first exposes the difficulties that a family network may experience after the 'coming out' of a family member. It, moreover, presents a challenge to current societal expectations about gay teachers who work in the early years of schooling since it corresponds to gay men who audaciously navigate the feminised territory of early childhood education.

Many of the locational components that constitute Albert's narrative are entirely fictional. However, the fact that one of the participants worked as a pre-school educator was instrumental in the modelling of this narrative. I was particularly intrigued by this exceptional 'male presence' in the field of early childhood education not only because women typically dominate these educational spaces but also because of my interest in how gay preschool educators construct their identity(ies) in the context of the Maltese educational system. My personal experience as an elementary school educator was an additional contributory element to the shaping of this story. During my university years, I had been one of the only two male undergraduates in the elementary teaching preparation programme. Contrastingly, male individuals outweighed female student teachers in the secondary education sector. I remember how towards the commencement of courses, a majority of lecturers used to remark on our 'unusual' male presence. This evoked in me the fear that I could be identified as 'divergent', if not 'gay'. I recall how this internalised sense of fear persisted throughout my undergraduate years and even throughout my teaching years as an elementary school teacher. Throughout the telling of their life narratives, all research participants in my study specifically explained that they had experienced such fear and apprehension at different stages of their life. Nonetheless, two interviewees; one who worked in a preschool and another from a primary school, placed a lot of emphasis on how society tends to relate gay teachers necessarily to paedophilic acts. The assembly of this narrative serves to prompt

reflection on how gay individuals may find that pursuing a career in elementary education is more challenging when compared with their male heterosexual counterparts.

The Feminised Construct of Early Childhood Care and Education

Youdell (2005) indicates that the relationship between schooling and sexuality has been characterised by an ever “uncomfortable relationship” (p.251). Historically, through the Victorian mores of sexual repression, only unmarried women could enter the early childhood teaching profession. Being female was therefore considered as a prerequisite for elementary education, particularly when primary teaching is seen as characteristically caring (Noddings, 1984). Byrne (1978, p.213) argues that, historically:

Women’s commitment to teaching is a tradition second only to her domestic role, throughout recorded history and in both East and West, and has acquired an aura of ‘inborn gifts’ and extended maternity that seems ineradicable. It is curiously noticeable that from the earliest days of state education, women have gravitated to and concentrated on younger children, on the infant and junior schools, the elementary and non-advanced sectors within the profession.

In Malta, as in the case of other countries, female chastity and a lack of sexuality were perceived as requisites for teaching young children. Western Victorian morality essentially split caring from sexuality since “one could not be nurturing and sexual since Eros was the feared demon that, if unconstrained, would overwhelm the goodness of a caring relationship with base, evil sex” (King, 1994, p.13).

These perceptions resulted in moulding of a patriarchal construct that presents teachers as desexualised subjects who are expected to care dutifully for young children. It consequently becomes problematic for society when teachers themselves violate their expected asexuality. Similarly, men’s work as care givers in the context of primary education where care is a requisite is altogether perceived as problematic. Although there is no evidence suggesting that men are inappropriate educators in learning contexts which involve young children, King (1997) explains that working in early childhood is problematically construed as ‘women’s work’ and when men do this job, this becomes a problem. Additionally, things get even further complicated if the early years’ male educator is gay. In discussing the (im)possibility

of gay teachers for young children, King (2004) emphasises how “the outdated versions of past teachers are used to regulate today’s teachers” (p.123).

Many hold the stereotyped belief that male pre-school or primary teachers are ‘homosexuals’ and that ‘homosexuals are effeminate’. Indeed some school teachers are gay and some men, gay and non-gay are effeminate. Interestingly, Edalmen (1994) claims that in order to be productively understood, homosexuality should be regarded as a text that ought to be read in terms of its femaleness since the underlying constructs of homosexuality reflect an opposition to what constitutes maleness. However, although gay teachers might be stereotypically described as being ‘like women’, they are still not attributed with the emotional and sensitive characteristics that are culturally associated with the female sex. On the basis of that perceived divergence, gay teachers are often constructed as “oversexed or sexuality not properly restrained, and as sexuality turned bad, or evil” (King, 1994, p.13).

Albert’s narrative embodies the hidden yet pervasive relationship between male educators and paedophiles. Research by Kelly (1982) and Newton (1992) shows that the majority of reported paedophilic offences typically occur within family boundaries between heterosexual men and young girls. However, the effect of catastrophic and erroneous correlations between homosexuality, teaching, gendered behaviours and sexual relationships between adults and young people have left an undesirable effect on the number of males who opt to enter the teaching profession (King, 1994).

The incessant fear of perceiving a paedophilic self is a recurrent theme in this collection of narratives. At one point in Albert’s narrative, Albert’s neighbour, who had previously trusted blindly her son Andre with him, has a change of mind. She had so far been more than satisfied with her son’s academic progress in Albert’s class and therefore her sudden, impulsive decision is disconcerting. The main reasons and conclusions behind the student’s sudden withdrawal are not given. The possibility that the mother had somehow become aware of the teacher’s homosexuality is however clearly implied. This is suggestive of the notion that if a gay man expresses his interest in becoming an early childhood professional, “others are prepared to think him perverted, paedophilic, and certainly wrong-headed in his intent to teach youngsters” (King, 2004, p.122). In 1932, Waller wrote that:

...the real danger is that [a homosexual man] may, by presenting himself as a love object to certain members of his own sex at a time when their sex attitudes have not been deeply canalized, develop in them attitudes similar to his own. For nothing seems more certain than that homosexuality is contagious (pp.147- 148).

Although Waller's views are condemned in today's world, gay teachers are often unwanted as they are often seen as recruiting and influential to children's sexuality even though it is clear that "by the time children reach school age, the contour of their sexual desire, and objects of affection, are well established" (King, 2004, p.124). The protection of young children from the imagined influences of homosexuality on students becomes mandatory and therefore proximity to gay teachers becomes equally problematic and therefore by definition has to be avoided, or comely monitored.

Given the way that homosexuality is conflated with paedophilia, it is not surprising that men, and not only gay men, may be put off taking up teaching as a professional career. But if 'straight' teachers consider themselves vulnerable because their work involves direct or close contact with children, gay teachers are even more vulnerable and more predisposed to such indictments simply because of social discourse on the mistaken fusion of homosexuality with paedophilia. This observation highlights Toynton's (2006) description of how the conflation of same-sex attraction with paedophilia had initially turned him away from a career in teaching. In fact, despite repeated calls for males into the teaching of young children, few male teachers choose to work with pre-school and primary school students.

In internalising these embedded beliefs gay teachers take on an extra layer of anxiety and "may try to correspond to others' expectations" (King, 2004, p.123) by keeping their sexuality inside the closet. They may also hope that "by being excellent and conscientious teachers their jobs will be protected even if their sexuality becomes common knowledge" (Town, 1995, p.218). In this narrative, the uncontrollable paranoia of being discovered is personified through Albert whose unease obliges him to constantly monitor his behaviour and interactions, in order to deflect any suspicions. This reflects King (2004) who in retrospect, reflects on his behaviour as a previously closeted gay teacher. He explains: "I constantly monitored my behaviours around my children. I was anxious about how other teachers, parents and principals would interpret my interactions and relationships with my students. The paradox that my self-monitoring engendered is complex" (p.123). He also concludes that

his own homophobia was mostly linked to his “fear that the parents had figured [him] out” (King, 1994, p. 15).

Rather than being a matter of pure co-incidence, King (2004) discusses how unjust cultural practices that dominate social discourse have rendered it more difficult for gay men to become teachers of young children. These absurd definitions, though unjust, are embedded in a way that they jeopardise the entry of gay teachers in the Early Childhood teacher profession. Three teachers participating in my research study claimed there were instances when they feared that they could one day face defamatory accusations in this regard. These participants have therefore internalised the belief that being gay might increase the possibility that they might be perceived to be *the* scariest of monsters – a paedophile, a perverted corrupter of the innocent (Toynton, 2006).

Silin (1995) argues that an unsatisfactory interrogation and a lack of analytical examination from which these constructs stem will continue to oust men, especially gay men, from a teaching career in Early Childhood Education. Albert’s narrative raises questions that go even further beyond the binary male-female regime. It challenges constructs which have arisen from outdated politics and portrays a gay pre-school teacher who strives hard in his work, who respects and cares for the young ones he is entrusted with. Albert is a gay teacher, a gay professional teacher. Though the suitability of all teachers should be seriously assessed prior to their enrolment in the educational services, the educators’ sexuality should not be a criterion that determines the candidates’ suitability for the job. In the narrative, this message is clearly communicated through the reaction of the other parents who chose to ignore Andre’s mother’s attempts to oust Albert from the school.

Aspects of ‘Coming Out’

The process of ‘coming out’ is another theme which Albert’s narrative deals with. This story shows how, ironically, in the place called home where children ought to feel secure, gay adolescents may find it even harder to disclose their sexuality to family members fearing a lack of acceptance. Moreover, the manner in which family members react to the ‘coming out’ of an LGBT young person may impact individual well-being. Family conflict in relation to the child’s LGBT identity may arise as a result of the parents’ lack of understanding about

sexual orientation. LGBT teens, rejected by their parents are at a higher risk of developing mental health and health problems as they grow into adulthood. These internalised emotions may heighten the possibility of LGBT adolescents engaging in risky behaviour patterns.

In this narrative, the immediate reaction of Albert's mother to her son's 'coming out' is shock and dismay. Eventually, she becomes more understanding and supportive of her son. During the interviewing process of this study, three participants tellingly justified their parents' initial, impulsive reaction suggesting that parents were almost expected to react in such a way, given their urge to protect their children from unavoidable discriminatory social treatment. Implicitly, this suggests that in Maltese society, discrimination as a result of perceived sexual deviance is somehow conceived as inescapable. Albert's dad's initial illusionary supportive stance is sadly obliterated by the expressed belief that his son's homosexuality could be 'cured' through reparative or 'gay conversion' therapy and the subsequent rejection of his son and his homosexuality. In the context of this narrative, the fact that the young man had in fact reached adult age however impeded this particular parent from obliging his son to initiate therapy. Evidently, the parent's negative way of dealing with the 'coming out' of his son is rooted in issues of culture and religion which eventually irradiate the lives of Maltese gay teachers (as is further discussed in the commentaries of the subsequent narratives). Instead of providing Albert with the support he desperately required at a most vulnerable moment, Albert's father chucks his son out of the house. Were it not for the Albert's resilience, things could have taken a very different turn.

The need to address familial rejection was evident from the initial phases of data collection wherein two participants told of events that highlighted parental rejection. Albert is rendered vulnerable through his own 'coming out'. In fact, many gay individuals are indirectly obliged to hide their homosexuality:

to avoid being rejected, thrown out of their home, or hurting their parents and other family members – who believe that homosexuality is wrong and even sinful. But hiding has a cost. It undermines a gay or transgender adolescent's self-esteem and sense of self-worth (Ryan, 2009, p.4).

Albert's narrative suggests that much of the fear that obliges gay men - particularly in the Maltese context - to remain secreted in their secure closet is a justifiable hesitation. This confirms research conducted by EU's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) (2012) which

claims that eighty-one per cent of Maltese LGBT survey respondents have either always (sixty-four per cent) or often (seventeen per cent) hidden their LGBT identity during their schooling. Although, in this narrative, Albert's 'coming out' was not fully deliberate, the protagonist of the story embodies gay adolescents and youths who upon 'coming out' to their parents face rejection. In rejecting his sexuality – which is definitely a core part of the adolescent's identity – Albert's father essentially rejects who Albert is.

Ryan *et al.*, (2009) confirm a clear association between high rates of family rejection with poorer health outcomes. When compared to peers who experienced low or no rejection at all, there is recorded evidence which shows that in the case of highly rejected individuals there is the increased likeliness to attempt suicide and to use illegal drugs. High levels of depression and engaging in unprotected sexual intercourse has also been reported (Ryan *et al.*, 2009).

On the other hand, performed within the realm of heteronormativity, the 'coming out' progression might not, really and truly, be a liberating process. As Halperin (1995) explains, in 'coming out' the individual would be exposing himself to a set of jeopardies and constraints. The individual who opts to abandon the closet may consequently become an easy target for some straight individuals to project all the fantasies they normally entertain about gay people. Halperin (1995) continues to suggest how an individual's every gesticulation, assertion, belief and expression will be entirely and irreversibly identified with the overpowering social significance of one's openly acknowledged homosexual identity.

Participants' Responses to Albert's Narrative

It was interesting to realise how Albert's story triggered off feelings of resentment in four participants. Three contributors emphasised how many individuals still hold this illusionary belief which in the words of one participant is described as *"the unfortunate and unjust false connection between homosexuality and paedophilia ... a connection that does not exist ... how ungrateful and unfair!"* Although only one of the participants could strongly relate to this specific narrative, given his work as a Kindergarten assistant, all teachers empathised with Albert and were mindful of the social discourse which constructs elementary school teachers and pre-school teachers as paedophilic monsters: *"This story reminds me of that extra source of tension that gay primary school teachers have"*, *"It is sad to hear such a story. It is sad that homosexuality is so often confused with paedophilia..."* This participant adds that although the events told in Albert's narrative may not necessarily reflect his personal circumstances he is still *"attentive"* to his personal actions lest these may be *"interpreted wrongly by others whose intentions are bad"*. The underlying nervousness emanating from homosexuality is a palpable reaction. Incidentally, this same person reflected on Albert's 'coming out' as he related it to his own 'coming out' process. He acknowledged how *"not all parents have such reactions... even though all parents would want to have straight children, get married and so on..."* He remarked how:

[his] parents would have loved to know what was going on in [his] life... they once told that I could have spoken up when I was younger but I was scared of this as many times we hear society pass homophobic remarks impeding me from opening up. It is in this way that I feel I can identify with Albert and his story.

Another participant summed up the validity of this narrative in describing how this story mirrored *"my fears... what I feared would happen if I were to tell anyone about me being gay"*. Similarly, another teacher participant reflected on how Albert's father *"was ready to lose a son because of his sexuality"* as he described how he felt struck by his attitude: *"It was as though his son had stopped existing and that his sexuality was the only thing that mattered."* This particular educator drew an interesting comparison between Albert's father and the mother of the young child as he described how she *"failed to see the person as a professional and instead saw him once again for his sexuality"*.

Nick's Narrative

Head-splitting petards blared across the clear July skies. Eight o'clock. I was idling in my bed as the announcer on the National Broadcasting service solemnly recited out the Angelus on the radio.



Figure 4.1 – Rivalry lives on at feast of St Cajetan in Hamrun, Malta
(<http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20120813/local/Rivalry-lives-on-at-feast-of-St-Cajetan.432625>)

Having reached the end of the *novena*, preparations for the much-awaited village *fešta* were now in full swing. Like all other children, we eagerly awaited that annual event. It was the only occasion when candy floss stalls flanked by the nougat vendor or the hot dog kiosk became visible in our village. The small town I hail from is still to this very day renowned for its two territorial band clubs which prompt rivalry in annual external festivities that border almost on the profane.

That morning I could sleep in if I wanted to, but I was too eager to rush to church and help the sacristan with the last-minute preparations. I hastily had breakfast and ran outside. The festive atmosphere and the villagers' intense excitement were palpable as I walked through the meandering alleys of that quaint village core. Some parishioners had decorated their balconies with wreaths of green ivy. Others had placed pictures that portrayed the village's patron saint on their front windows. One neighbour was still giving the last lick of paint to his façade. Nonetheless, the imposing village church stole the show. Century old chandeliers hung from the naves as they revealed the luxury of the seamless red damask which dominated that majestic temple. I was an altar boy at that same church - a dedicated one, I must say. I was running ten minutes late for the rehearsal of that evening's *triduum*. Upon entering the church, I instantly recognised the hymn which was being rehearsed on the organ. Some devoted parishioners were praying in front of the saint's statue, asking for his blessing and invoking year-round protection.



Figure 4.2 – Façade decorated for village festa
(<http://www.maltabulb.com/images/st-philip-feast-zebbug-malta.jpg>)

At the age of twelve, the Church was my refuge. It was the place where I met my friends, where the parish priest gathered us in weekly sessions and where I felt that I belonged. It was *the* only world I recognised.

My life revolved around Religion: hymns, incense, rituals and infinite ceremonies. I actually think that I have rarely missed the six a.m. service since my First Holy Communion. There, I never felt vulnerable. The security that I felt whenever I stepped inside the church, or whenever I wandered inside the friary on Saturday mornings, was something I craved for on school days. I found school tough. It was not bullying as one might naturally deduce; my homosexuality was never that easy to detect. God has been kind to me: luckily, I do not look effeminate or gay.

Initially, at school, I had difficulty with my handwriting. I remember getting painful headaches by simply looking at the whiteboard at length. I found tasks that required me to copy from the whiteboard overwhelming. Some of the school teachers had spoken to my parents about this difficulty. Initially, they had thought there were problems with my eyesight. I remember, had taken me to see a doctor, who certified I had perfect vision. As a matter of fact, I never wore spectacles. My work was never neat, and even worse, it was careless. Mum used to tear out pages of my copybooks almost every day. It used to take me hours to finish off my homework. That was how things worked back then. With total maternal affection and dedication she spent endless afternoons supporting me and trying to help improve my presentation skills.

Fortunately, our *festa* coincided with the beginning of summer holidays (and therefore with the end of the annual examinations) and so that period of the year was a relief. And with the festa celebrations in full swing, I could not be happier. As a special treat, during the week when the *festa* was being celebrated my friends and I would be allowed to return home late. We used to meet in the early evening right in the village square and chase the brass band in each and every street of that forgotten hamlet. I loved my friends especially ‘Gorg’ who also happened to be my next door neighbour.



Figure 4.3 – Feast of St George, Rabat, Gozo.
(<http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/u/T1>)

I never led the group. I passively followed my friends’ footsteps wherever they went. Their company was something

I yearned for all year round especially during that week of festivities.

That year, the *festa* took a slightly different turn.

Two of my friends came up with the brilliant idea to start chasing girls around. Shadowing girls was not the kind of amusement I ever wished to seek. I honestly enjoyed the boys’ company but back then I started to envy the attention they gave this group of girls who were barely teenagers.

We had always played together and we had always enjoyed our boys’ only company. I did not want them to go out with the girls. I remember encouraging my friends to play football

even though it was an activity which I hated. And my excuse? We were too young to go out with girls. Full stop.

But it was not just that.

I felt as though I was not able to flow with the current. Even if I wanted to. I simply could not do it, not even for the sake of gaining my peers' acceptance. Unintentionally marginalised, I began to realise that my friends fitted perfectly into criteria to which I was a stranger. Loneliness was a nightmare I constantly dreaded. It was an anxiety which evolved into a sense of possessiveness over my boy friends who did not seem to be concerned by the sudden disintegration of boys only friendships that had lasted for a good part of our childhood years.

But Gorg would never leave me on my own, I used to think. I used to feel a kind of indescribable closeness towards him ... I was still too young back then to be able to define this intimacy as sexual attraction. But I remember me liking him. He was only a few months older than me but his company was comforting.

But that evening, even Gorg was off with the other boys to flirt, leaving me on my own. He had betrayed me. And our friendship, too. By eight o'clock, to my mother's disbelief, I was home that evening.

This was how Nick introduced me to his story. Interesting, I thought: a situation of a child whose learning difficulty did not impede the advancement to a successful career or what can possibly be envisaged as an ideal case scenario that proves the value and effectiveness of familial support.

It was the first time I met Nick. He had greeted me inside his office as the last few teachers wished him a happy weekend before they left that seventeenth century friary. Nick had always taught at a Church school. He believes he would find it very hard to teach in one of the state schools. Not because of some sort of prejudice but teaching in Church schools provides him with a sense of security that other places can never offer. It is the climate, he says. While I was browsing the school's webpage, I had read that he had been co-administering for the last five scholastic years. Nick himself had contacted me. He said he wanted to share his story as a gay administrator of a Catholic Church School which is run by an ecclesiastical order. That's audacious, I thought.

The room where I met Nick was bright, airy and reasonably large. His office made one feel welcome. Nick's office was simply but elegantly furnished with a settee and two armchairs on the right hand side and a bookcase to the left. Behind the desk was a massive floor-to-ceiling window which overlooked the school grounds. His open venetian blinds provided ample lighting. An imposing portrait of an old priest sternly looking down was intimidating but the settee itself and Nick's bright smile rendered the atmosphere warmer and less formal. In his mid-thirties, Nick was already managing the school in the role of an Assistant Head. He was slim and of average height. His dark, short, curly hair, his brown eyes and his olive complexion accentuated his Mediterranean features.

He offered me tea, which I gladly accepted and made himself another one. He locked the office door and with a smile explained that the priests had all left for a weekend retreat - otherwise he would not have shared his story within the monastery. Nonetheless, telling his story inside that oasis of serenity gave Nick's narrative an enigmatic touch, rendering his story much more meaningful than I had ever thought.

And Nick began to share his narrative. And I listened.

I had managed to miss out on several Physical Education (PE) lessons in previous years but this new PE teacher was much stricter. He was very disciplined - intimidating to the extent that he never took heed of any justification I used to make up in order to skive off PE (all of my mates had learned my excuses by heart over the years). This new teacher had recently started requesting a hand written note signed by one of our parents to excuse us from participating in the PE lesson (I lost all hope... My mother would never sign such notes) and after that I never refrained from any other PE lesson till the end of the fifth form.

It is true - I never liked sports! It was widespread knowledge in our grade that sport was not my favourite area. I was always the last one to get chosen by team captains when they formed their team. They knew I could mess it all up. But, honestly sports was not *the* issue. It was all about those awful four to five minutes when we had to change into our PE kits and then back into our school uniforms at the end of the session. I felt awkward; it was an uncomfortable circumstance which I desperately craved to avoid. Although no one seemed to care about each other when we were almost *au naturel*, everyone did take a peek. I felt vulnerable and easy to be detected, caught and misjudged for feeling somewhat different. Notwithstanding my urge to take a peek at the other boys (mostly out of mere curiosity – as other boys did), I made sure that I controlled my gaze in a way such that I could not be accused of any sissy peeks. I had to endure this truly mortifying time for the rest of my secondary school years.

The bell finally signalled the end of the weekly PE session. That forty-five minute period had seemed endless. Seven more days to go now until our next PE lesson – that is what I used to think at the end of each lesson.

All students strolled across the school grounds towards the locker room as they dreaded what was left of the school day. A couple of students went to help the teacher, clearing up the plastic cones and other PE equipment.

A sharp clear whistle from behind grabbed my attention.

“What about you back there?” It was him: The PE teacher. “Harry! Harry!” he shouted, “When will you go and change into your kit? ... Next year? ... When?”

I kept on walking towards the changing room in a nonchalant manner but I knew exactly what was going on. I realised straightaway that Harry feared the inevitable: the weekly amusement in that locker room. Harry (known as Harry *l-Pufta*¹¹) was a quiet little chap, a new entrant in Form three, and quite effeminate. Like me, he too did not like sports. Those

¹¹The word ‘*pufta*’ has a derogatory connotation and is often used to refer to homosexuals in a vulgar and insulting manner.

first two scholastic terms, he had been repeatedly bullied at school, particularly in those locker rooms. That is why he idled out in the ground, poor boy.

“Because sir...”

“Because what? You got your period...?!” replied the teacher, interrupting Harry sarcastically. The group of students endorsed the teacher’s comment breaking into a frantic fit of hilarity. I joined in, even though I felt terribly sorry for Harry. But I could not do otherwise. I grinned in an attempt to secure concealment and to show the world that nothing was wrong with me and that I had nothing in common with Harry.

What they then did was vile.

Robbie, the class macho whom everyone feared, pushed Harry inside the locker room and quietly shut the iron door. My heart throbbed fearfully as I watched the amusement which by now had developed into a sort of weekly circus. Harry, terrified, knew what was coming his way. The stronger boys held the boy firmly from behind and stripped him naked. The other boys, three or four, threw him in one of the large trash cans. Other boys looked out of the window excitedly to make sure the site was clear as one of them pushed the bin on the floor, rolling it from side to side in that tiny room... “Fag! Queer! We know you like it...” they all shouted, “and you thought we never knew you’re gay... Homo! Fifty-fifty!” The look on Robbie’s face, as he attacked Harry was terrifying. There was rage in his eyes and his face was distorted in a devilish grimace.

I pitied Harry. I rarely spoke to him. I avoided the boy as much as I could since mingling with him could result in my own exposure and identification as a ‘somewhat similarly abnormal’ student. My attraction to other boys was an issue which I could not ignore. It was something I could not help. Still it was a cause of great concern. What if my peers were to discover my sexual inclination towards boys who were more or less my own age or that there was another ‘Harry’ in that classroom? The more I attempted to repress this feeling, the more it terrorised my nights.

It felt like I was the only being in the world who felt that way. Could I be gay? I wanted to know. I noticed how I had started to increasingly compare myself to my friends in terms of emotions... I knew that the way my friends felt towards other boys did not match my feelings.

They liked their company but were not attracted to them as I was.

In the abyssal depths of my heart I knew I was strange... I felt I was different. But in what way? I could not tell.

When I was about sixteen years old I gradually had become more accepting of the fact that I could possibly be gay. It was a reality which I tried to submerge but which continually remained afloat in my mind, reminding me that sooner or later, acknowledging that I am gay was my only choice. I only had to learn how to accept living with it.

Looking back, I say it had scared me out of my wits.

I had no friends. But it was my choice. Unknowingly I began to lose all my contacts as I sought excuses for every weekend encounter.

One evening, I went out on my own and fearfully entered inside this bar, dreading that somebody would recognise me. It was the only local *unofficial* gay venue on the island. I walked in and stood by the bar. I attempted to raise my eyes from the counter. Not much going on, I thought. The bar was tiny. There were no more than ten people. But wait... two men were hugging in one of the corners. It was the first time I had ever witnessed an intimate gay encounter. Yet this was far from the devilish kind of environment I had always expected to see at such places.

“You first time here?” asked somebody from behind my shoulder. I jumped.

It was the bar tender. I did not know what to reply. I panicked and immediately left the bar, running as fast as I could.

The fact that I would get reprimanded for being under age was not a major concern. It was the unspeakable fear that one day my parents would get to know that I am gay.

It was not till I turned twenty-two that I ‘landed’ myself into a sort of relationship. This boy was more or less my age. I was alone at the beach and he looked at me once, twice. He was very effeminate. I did not mind speaking to him. There was nobody in sight in that secluded part of the bay. It was safe. He offered me a cigarette which I accepted even though I had never smoked. We chatted for a long time and before we left he asked me whether I was going to get back to that same spot on the following day.

We met on the morrow and on the following day. None of us admitted our homosexuality even though we sensed the attraction towards each other right from our first encounter. I was beginning to love his company. I lied to my mother every day, telling her that I was meeting some of my friends from university. Instead I would head towards the beach and spend hours with Ben.

One evening, as we were about to leave the shore, Ben bent over and kissed me. It was the first time I had ever been kissed by someone in such a passionate and sensual way. It felt good but sinful. I gently pushed Ben back. I did not dare look into his eyes. The little we had done felt so wrong, even though nobody had witnessed our short moment of intimacy. And then I thought about the words Ben had said when he kissed me. I had not taken any notice of it until I was back home, upstairs in my bedroom.

And it was only now that I realised the meaning of what he had told me.

“We’ve already been together for a week”, echoed in my mind.

“For a week” I repeated to myself. I could never digest the idea that two boys could ever count the number of days since their first ‘date’ and that in a year’s time I could be celebrating my first anniversary... No... That sounded as though I had got engaged to him. The thought of it repelled me. It was an idea which put me off. I But I had kissed him. I had enjoyed it. And I would not hold back if we were to become more intimate, that is, physically.

It was a phrase that echoed through my mind, resulting in many sleepless night.

But for God's sake, it has to stop there. It felt silly.

I never returned to that secluded spot.

I never saw Ben again.

I decided to tell my brother first. Sharing my secret with someone I trusted had by then developed into an urge. My brother was one of a kind and the brotherly love he exhibited towards me was great despite a staggering gap of fourteen years and despite the fact that he had been married for a year or so. He was loved by whoever knew him. I knew he would be very sympathetic in the way he reacted to the news.

I had anticipated his reaction, well, sort of.

"That's all right my little boy" he said as he gave me a warm brotherly hug reminding me of how much he used to cuddle me in his bed when nights were stormy.

He encouraged me to tell dad but I explained I could not do such a move on my own. That same evening, my brother phoned home and spoke to dad.

The following day, dad came up to me first thing in the morning while I was having coffee. "Nick," he said as he rested his hand on my right shoulder. My blood rushed through my veins.

"You are my son, Nick. My son! You know how many things we've got in common; we both like good music, watch the same kind of films... read the same genre of literature... it's just that we have to get used to each other's differences... and... this... this is also something which we will have to get used to... so ... don't worry Nick. You know we've always loved you and that we will do forever" dad said, kissing me on the forehead.

Dad was a well-travelled man. He had worked abroad for many years and experienced different cultures and people from all over the world. He had always been much more understanding than mum.

"Thanks dad... I appreciate. But there's only one thing which is on my mind and I'm worried"

"And what's that? Tell me. I can only help!"

"It's mum"

"If it's just her... Then it's one less thing to worry about... I will be telling her myself Nick, rest your mind, please. You know... mum will take it in the same way as I have done"

But mum did *not* take it in the same way. It was the starting point of mum's long-term depression. I blamed myself for her mental illness. Seeing her burst into tears never helped.

"I pray to Lord you'd be busy and occupied all the time. That way you would never look for someone... who's... who is like you... It's the only way to save your soul" she would say.

Dad had been very understanding. One day an argument broke out as we were having lunch. I was 'calmly' having tea. Mum however looked very anxious. She was automatically peeling some vegetables. Dad was helping out. He was clearing the dishes from the drying rack.

It was evident that that was one of mum's bad days.

"But this is something I cannot understand" mum stated out of the blue.

"What can't you understand?" dad asked.

"It's this thing of having him like other men. He can be whatever he wants to be but... I will never allow any of your friends inside this house" she said, addressing me with piercing eyes. Her eyes were swollen and puffy. She looked exasperated.

"Oh come on... we'll get used to it in time, Rose. These things take time" dad comforted mum.

"Not in a million years! Never! Even this morning, co-incidence or not, at the grocer shop, Mary asked me if Nick had plans to find a girl, marry and settle down... You can't even imagine how painful it is for a mother of a child who's... who's like that... What could I tell her, eh? How will I tell my sisters now and what about *nannu Samwel*... Who will be telling my dad about it?" Mum was about to cry. "Please Fred," she pleaded as she turned to face dad "can't we fix an appointment with that priest who can pray on him and maybe give him the Lord's blessing?" she asked desperately.

Dad stood up from his chair; he was very angry.

"What? ... No way, Rose. Neither to a priest nor to anybody else... Listen, Rose he's twenty-two and he knows what he's doing... let him be HIMSELF... You're killing him... you've made his life hell!" he shouted, and left the house.

"You see what you've caused" Mum told me. "We've fought now and guess why? - Simply because we're desperate to find a way how to cure your sickness and see... Just look at how you've brought us to our knees!" she ranted.

For two consecutive *festas* our house remained bare. It seemed as if there was nothing to celebrate.

It was only when baby Kyle, my brother's son was born to my elder brother and his wife that things took a turn for the better.

Around that turbulent period in my life I had applied for a B.Ed. (Hons.) in secondary Education. I remember thoroughly enjoying the experience. Reading for my B.Ed. Degree helped me have different relationships with different people. Nonetheless, I never disclosed any information to anybody throughout my years of study. I occasionally refused to join in activities that were held by my course's colleagues. Trying to find an excuse for each and every invite was tiring and difficult. Everyone attended with a partner. Attending social events repeatedly on my own could raise doubts.

I remember how, in my second year of studies, my relationship with mum changed for the better through mere coincidence. At the time, my Aunt, my mother's sister, got to know that her eighteen year old daughter is gay - she's a lesbian. We learned that my aunt could not cope with the news and was completely shattered.

I decided to confront mum about the issue. I wanted to help in some way or another. Mum was upstairs. She was making the bed in her room. I knocked and went in.

"Ma'... you know about Auntie Sand' don't you ma'? Auntie Sandra's very worried. And you know why. Can't you find some time to give her a call and have a chat? She needs your help and I think..."

Mum smiled to instantly express her rejection to my proposal.

"Come on, I haven't even started the day... and have so much on my mind that I still need to do Nick... come on... get the other end of the sheet" she said from the other side of the bed as I took hold of it.

"OK mum. I will not annoy you anymore about it but talking to her surely won't cause any harm."

"We'll see Nick... We'll see... At one time I would have shot anybody who stuck their nose in my family problems. These are family affairs, Nic. And remember that we got to know through Anna, our next-door neighbour. Maybe she doesn't want to tell me her daughter is ... is what she is... anyhow - none of our business!" she exclaimed passionately and in an effort to cover her embarrassment she gave me her back and drew the curtains.

"After all... believe me, it's no honour" she concluded as she left the room.

Though things had absolutely changed for the better, mum had not yet totally accepted my homosexuality. She naively meant to love and protect me by rejecting my homosexuality. What I least expected to happen, however took place some days following the conversation I had with mum.

It was Friday and I only had a double lecture at eight a.m. By eleven I was already home.

"Ma'..." There was no reply.

That was not usual for mum, I thought. Her day was perfectly programmed and her hours were compartmentalised to the extent that everyone would guess where she would be and what she would be doing in any specific hour of the day.

I opened the fridge. I scanned the shelves to see whether I could pick something to eat. It was still early for lunch but I was peckish. I took an apple and drank a glass of juice.

Soon after mum was back home.

“Ma’ I’m here”

“Ah... you’ve scared the life out of me... How come you’re already done from university?” she asked as she hooked the keys to the key holder.

I could see she was nicely dressed and that she was not holding any shopping bags.

“Seems like you’re hungry Nick... Bring the red bowl out of the fridge... It’s tomato sauce... we’ll boil some pasta,”

“Where you’ve been ma’?” I asked. Things looked suspicious.

She looked at me, straight in the eye. Tears rolled down her cheek. She came up to me, hugged and kissed me on the forehead.

“I love you...immensely... Nick. What I have always done to you and told you was because I love you. I would never do anything to harm you, my son. You do know I love you.”

I felt a lump in my throat. Her reaction kept me from uttering a single word. I hugged mum. I knew she loved me. I was about to cry even though I could not make heads or tails of what was going on.

That fateful Friday morning, mum had gone to Aunt Sandra’s house. She had courageously called her sister and spent a very long time on the phone. They decided to meet up and have a chat. Mum had been worried about her.

“I wanted to help Sandra... ”

I listened.

“Sandra was miserable... and when she opened the kitchen drawer... Oh God! ... I can’t even say it! She showed me this piece of paper. It was a message which her daughter had written. It said that she felt so miserable that she even wanted to end her life because she couldn’t see the sense of surviving having to bear what she was going through at her place of work because of her sexuality ... and then she wrote that she could never be loved in the way she wanted ‘cause she knows it will be very hard for those around her to accept her as she is... heart-breaking isn’t it?”

“And what did you tell her?”

“I told her I have gone through what she’s living through now ... and that I could understand her perfectly. I showed her that it’s true; the shock is tremendous at first but it’s a phase, I told her, she will gradually get used to it ... Like I did. Poor Sandra... she needs to tone down her anger and misery. She’s distressed. I realised how your cousin is the one who really needs help and I showed Sandra how this girl needs to be loved and accepted unconditionally... and

that we will have to find ways and means to support her. She will still be your daughter and you will still be her mother... I told her”.

That has been my mum’s moment of healing and that has been the instant (perhaps ironically) when mum accepted that my sexuality was an integral part of me: part of me which I could neither reject nor cover-up.

This is now my fifteenth year working in a secondary school. I have taught in two different Church schools – twelve years as a teacher, three as an Assistant Head of school. In both schools, I was very much attached to my colleagues. Only one teacher from the second school I taught was aware of my homosexuality and the difficulties that mum had gone through when she got to know I am gay. We had been brought up in the same neighbourhood, so that sort of happened naturally. Her parents still reside in the same house and therefore knew what my family had gone through. There was no way I could escape that.

Once, at school, during break time, an informal tête-à-tête conversation evolved into a more intimate discussion in which I ‘came out’ to this teacher. Although I was not straightforward with her, I realised she wanted to express her support and friendship towards me.

This particular colleague had always urged me not to confide in anybody and to keep my sexuality to myself: “Let people think whatever they want to think... but never declare anything yourself... not even to your closest colleagues!” – She warned. Her words remain imprinted in my mind to this very day. She was a sincere and genuine colleague. The fact that one soul knew about me was in itself a relief.

When I first started working at the school, everyone assumed I still lived with my parents. Colleagues who were parents, and who spent the break complaining about the so-called ‘hardship’ of being a parent used to tell me how lucky I was to have everything prepared and that I did not have any housework to carry out after school.

Little did they know how I had similar domestic duties after school hours.

But I never followed up on any comments.

Allowing them to believe I still lived with my parents made me feel safe and guaranteed protection from any further probing comments.

There are times when my own vulnerability renders me overanxious, particularly after reports in the media revealed attempts by Church authorities to oust gay teachers from Church Schools. I made sure that my delivery is immaculate and that I had by far surpassed parents’ expectations. It was only through ultra-dedication that I could safeguard my career from any accusations that people could falsely relate to my sexuality.

And now I am an Assistant Head in this Church school. I would never dream of working in a private or a state school for several reasons. Spirituality and religion are part and parcel of my vocation and working in a Roman Catholic environment helps me to do my work passionately and with love. Words spread fast when you are living on such a tiny island. At

times I suspect that some of the priests working in this school do know about my situation but keep their thoughts to themselves...

My duty as an Assistant Head of school goes beyond clerical work and the academic monitoring of our students. Their well-being, their mental health and security are to me a priority. I speak to my students and I do my best to ensure that there is no bullying of students and/or teachers. I now have drafted an anti-bullying policy that is concise but strict and clear. I have clearly included the term 'sexual differences' in parts of the policy and even referred explicitly to homophobic bullying.

I was organising a seminar for students. It was aimed at educating Form three and Form four students about bullying. A few days before the seminar, the school rector asked whether I would mind letting him have a copy of my presentation paper once I had finished drafting it. I was apprehensive and feared he would ask me to amend the parts where I defined homophobic bullying and where I wrote that "there's nothing wrong with being gay".

Fortunately, I got the green light for that.

"Try not to allow too much time for questions... Aim for a mellow discussion and that's it. Remember time is limited" was his only advice.

The day I held the meeting, the same priest sat in the last row at the back, carefully listening to my presentation delivery with vigilant eyes and ears. Students were deeply involved - the presentation had generated their interest. A lot of questions were raised, some of which were answered with fearful hesitation, which I hoped was not apparent.

Towards the end of the seminar, I invited the Head of School to bring the meeting to an end. He merely reminded students about the importance of the approaching annual exams and about how necessary it is to start revising as early as possible. Still I can say that the seminar was a success. Some parents wrote to wish us well and encourage the stance taken against bullying.

One day I will try to do something similar on sexuality... which would focus even more on sexual feelings ... It all depends on my courage and on their ultimate endorsement.

Stepping back is not the mission of an educator. And that is why I have embarked on this vocation.

A Reading of Nick's Story

Sources and Contexts of *'Nick's Story'*

This narrative is a microscopic evidence of the silent pain and confusion that many individuals with a non-normative sexuality endure in a society where hegemonic masculinity is a requisite and where heterosexist practices have been normalised at the expense of other 'nonconformist' sexualities (Wilkinson, 2004). The authenticity of the narrative in terms of plot, characters and setting may be questioned. However one thing is certain: although 'Nick' may have never existed in reality, he is a representation of local educators whose employment hangs by a thread or whose accessibility and entitlement to employment can be questioned because of exigent 'substantive Catholic life choices' which educators working in Maltese Catholic Church schools need to exhibit. Catholic life choices in Malta are in many ways distinct from the life choices that Catholics in many other countries are free to exhibit without fear of reprisal.

The narrative's main focus is on educators who work in Maltese Church schools and therefore, religion emerges the main theme of this account. However Nick's story additionally interweaves other themes, for instance the masculine culture of sport (in schools) and the significance of familial support. Suspicions around gay teachers' accessibility to employment are also raised.

The Catholic parish church at the core of most Maltese villages dominates the landscape. It is highly symbolic of how the Maltese have located religion at the axis of their daily living. The power of the Church's institution is not only evident in the island's historical development and the religious saturation of its customs, rituals, fears and superstitions, but has necessarily had no less a concomitant influence on wider social discourses. This is emphasised by Borg (2006) when he refers to the Catholic Church in Malta as "one dominant culture" (p.61) which "works through education to reproduce its position within society" (p.62). This Roman Catholic hegemony has penetrated educational institutions to the extent that it conditioned syllabi, pedagogical practices and the careers of educators whose lifestyle is not compatible with the Church's teachings. Given the pervasiveness of this culture, I expected participants to raise issues related to religion and spirituality as it affected their life; religion is blended in the life of Maltese citizens and cannot therefore be treated separately from their life events. Moreover, I was intrigued by the choice made by some gay teachers to work in Catholic

Church schools despite the consequences that may possibly ensue. In my duty as a researcher, I felt responsible to use the data provided by a research participant working in a local Catholic Church school to bring to light the distinct complexities that these employees face as compared to other gay teachers who work in state or independent schools.

Fashioning this specific narrative in the summer months of 2014 was particularly intriguing for a number of reasons discussed below. The events which followed in December 2014 gave this narrative an unexpected ‘lift’ – a highly significant and expressive poignancy. [Not, of course, that this narrative could never stand on its own feet, but the ensuing occurrences seemed to confirm and justify the unease of gay teachers employed in local Catholic Church schools.]

Recurrent Issues of Religion, Culture and Spirituality

The fate of the tiny island of Malta was mostly determined by the rudder of foreign powers and religion - most often grounded in fear and superstition – minutely and inexorably pervades the day-to-day life of the Maltese people. Never, until my own attendance at a seminar on homosexuality and spirituality, had I realised the extent of the spirituality so deeply embedded (however subtle that may be) in the life of anyone who has spent a number of years living in the local context. Data which I recorded from this seminar showed how religion is the staple diet in Maltese culture; from bells ringing calling the faithful to Mass at half past four in the morning to catechism classes in the evening. Band clubs (usually named after the village’s patron saint) and centres where ‘religious doctrine’ is taught to children proliferate in most villages. Religious images, symbols and saints are ingrained in Maltese idioms and proverbs and it is very common for the Maltese to refer to specific days of the year by the patron saint that is celebrated on that day, such as *Il-Bambina* (meaning ‘Baby Mary’), referring to the birth of the Virgin Mary celebrated on September 8th) or *San Ġużepp* (meaning ‘St Joseph’), referring to the feast of St Joseph celebrated on March 19th. Furthermore, Catholic Church schools are in such a high demand that the selection process involves the drawing of lots.

The significance of the socio-historical backdrop in which events occur throughout the narrative is vital in modelling the understanding of the story (Polkinghorne, 1991). In this

case, Nick, typical of other people brought up in the insular world of his village culture, has, since birth, been exposed to the immeasurable influence of religion. Told through the first person narrative through a flashback, the opening scene of this story provides an almost instantaneous engagement. Festive scenes that set the stage for this narrative are described through the eyes of the narrator to accentuate how religion is embedded in this young child's identity; and it applies to all the characters assembled in these narratives. This being a main theme across the narratives presented in this research project. Though purely 'fictional', this detailed introduction embodies aspects of Maltese culture with which many Maltese individuals identify.

Nick, just like the rest of the parishioners, eagerly awaits the festivities celebrating the feast of the village patron saint, excitedly looking forward to fulfilling his duties as an altar boy. Engaging in such activities is comforting but the sense of harmony and refuge that religion offers, ironically evolves, into a source of constant tension that is responsible for much of Nick's confusion at different stages of development of his life history. He, who has always sought refuge and security in religious morality and who has always owned a strong sense of spirituality is now virtually annihilated by the guilt which that religion has now burdened his conscience with.

As the narrative progresses, the developing teenager feels condemned and rejected by the same religion that he has always embraced. However rejecting this integral part of his identity and his culture is something which he deems impossible. Nick, in this case, becomes a representation of all the individuals who feel they have been rejected by the same religion they have always embraced. Not only that. In a society that is already infected by the supremacy of masculine ideology, religious fundamentalism aggravates outlooks on homosexuality in the way it perceives the homosexual act as 'immoral'. Olson *et al.*, 2006; Schulte and Battle, 2004; Burdette, Ellison, and Hill, 2005 and Rowatt *et al.*, 2006 have all insisted how religion is one of the strongest sources of attitudes about homosexuality. Most religions such as Islam, Judaism and Hinduism have condemned homosexual activity and have viewed it as unlawful (Homosexuality in the ancient world, 2000). In Christianity, though emphasis has been placed on the aspect of chastity, sexuality became closely tied to the biological aspect of pro-creation and therefore homosexual activity is largely viewed as sinful (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1951).

With regards to the local context, the observations drawn from Nick and his story draw a parallel with the findings that emerge from a study led by Conti (2011) with psychotherapists working with Maltese LGB clients. In Conti's research, the domineering influence of Catholic religion on Maltese individuals and culture emerges as one of the major issues that these therapists encounter in their practice. In addition, religious fundamentalism is perceived as a strong determinant of homophobic bullying in Malta (Conti, 2011). Such fundamentalism, the overwhelming aspect of guilt, parental fear of children's spiritual well-being, a pervasive lack of societal acceptance and fear of the divine punishment are all issues that are clearly represented along this fictional narrative.

Gay Teachers' Accessibility to Employment in Catholic Church Schools

This discussion on gay teachers' accessibility to employment (especially in Catholic Church schools) is necessary to further understand the experiences of gay teachers in twenty-first century Malta. These reflections serve to situate these stories in a way that explains that these accounts do not represent 'out of date' stories, but are in fact, narratives that embody experiences which are typical of 'modern' gay teachers in the Malta of 2015.

Nick's employment with Catholic Church schools from the onset of his teaching career gives the impression that he eventually manages to strike a balance between acknowledging his homosexuality and maintaining his Catholic faith. But, although Nick loves his work and implements his vocation with a sense of pride, a subtle yet persistent source of tension characterises his employment – he does not disclose general facts about his personal life and even lets colleagues assume that he still lives with his parents. Undoubtedly leading this dual identity is far more secure to Nick yet it is also burdens educators like Nick with an insurmountable sense of guilt for not presenting their true selves.

A confidential Curia document, leaked in the local media in December 2014, revealed that the Maltese archdiocese were requesting Heads of Catholic schools¹² to discuss new employment terms which would ensure the exclusive hiring of staff who can be safely considered as "practicing Catholics" (Archdiocese of Malta, 2014, p.18). Although no specific reference is made to gay teachers, it is fairly evident that the conclusions of this

¹²Heads of Church Schools in Malta are considered as being the employers of the staff at their respective school.

document target life choices which may be “detrimental or prejudicial to the religious ethos or character of the school” (ibid., p.18).

The document, namely, *“Practicing” Catholic as a requirement for eligibility and selection of staff in Church Schools*’ warned of “decisive disciplinary action” against school staff whose “life choices give scandal or run counter to the ethos of the school” (ibid., p.19). A particular biblical citation characterises the conclusion of this document: “If you love me you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15, cited in Archdiocese of Malta, 2014, p.20) whereas references to the Code of Canon Law and to the Catechism of the Catholic Church are recurrent in this document. In aiming to preserve the ethos of Catholic Schools in Malta, this document demands all staff members to “clearly signify” their acceptance of such conditions. The document identifies the posts of Heads of School, Deputy or Assistant Heads, teachers of Religious Education, Counsellors and even Personal, Social and Career Development (PSCD) teachers as fundamental in assisting students “to address and make substantial life-choices that involve fundamental Catholic values” (Archdiocese of Malta, 2014, p.16). The suitability of prospective school Heads and teachers will be assessed according to “evidence... of the substantive life choices they are known to have made and adhere to, both in the personal and public forum; and whether or not those choices are compatible with the teaching of the Catholic Church” (ibid., p.19). According to this document, a school’s Board of Governors will need to be duly informed when holders of current posts adopt a life choice that does not mirror the teachings of the Gospel. In such eventuality, these life choices should be kept private and “in no way promoted or openly presented as alternative or acceptable choices” (ibid., p.19).

These proposals deny employment not only to homosexual teachers but also to divorced or single-parent educators. Despite recent constitutional amendments (Malta 2014, Acts VII and X) which explicitly state that nobody can be discriminated against on the grounds of his or her sexual orientation, a local Catholic Church school issued a call for applications for the post of an Assistant Head in January 2015, demanding that the applicant, “must be of a good moral character and a practising Catholic” (Assistant Head Must Live, 2015). Although the MUT objected to this clause describing it as a “clear breach of agreement, discriminatory and arguably illegal” (Assistant Head Must Live, 2015), the school’s administration insisted that it had the right to safeguard its ethos and to defend the choice of parents who intentionally choose to send their children to a Catholic Church school.

Gay teachers in local Church schools cannot challenge the heteronormativity of school environments as role models to their students and they are also obliged to veil and maintain a silence around their own identities. In assuming a leadership role, Nick may be shielding himself from any kind of homophobic harassment in the way he distances his personal identity from the rest of the staff members and teacher colleagues. On the other hand, there is evidence along the narrative that Nick would feel threatened if his superiors were to become aware of his homosexuality. In suggesting that there might possibly be further implications in connection with his employment, Nick's fictional account emphasises that LGBT educators, particularly in local Catholic Church schools live in constant fear and anxiety because of their sexuality.

At the Church school where Nick works, the Catholic hegemony (Borg, 2006) is the body that specifically regulates and restricts different forms of sexuality. The address that Nick delivers in the forum is constantly monitored by the school Rector, who imposes a limit on question time and who deliberately steers the conclusion of the discussion away from the topic of sexuality. In direct contrast to the episode as presented in this narrative, pedagogical theories and practices in the sphere of education should encourage the provision, and not the restriction of learning opportunities to students. Integrating a diversity of people and perspectives into the teaching and learning process has significant and considerable educational benefits for all students.

Hegemonic Masculinity in Sports within Educational Settings

Aspects of masculine hegemonic environment at school, and specifically during PE sessions were recurrent issues that participants raised during the interviews. This mirrors Anderson's (2011) conclusions who argues that sport has historically served as a means to express hegemonic masculinities, sexist and homophobic discourses which in turn leads to the production of a hierarchy of men, which consequently demotes non-normative masculinities to the bottommost level of this hierarchy.

Parts of the homophobic incident presented in Nick's story are drawn from the experience of one of the research participants, although some details necessary to realise the narrative are

fictitious. Though ‘Harry’ - the bullied student - and his story never ‘existed’ as told in the narrative, he undoubtedly embodies experiences which are real-life and which are well-known to students who violate the rules of heteronormativity. In addition I have included memories from my secondary school years where I had witnessed instances of physical, verbal and emotional homophobic bullying on fellow students. As a result, and through my own imagination, I crafted a scene that would encompass these amalgamated sources and which would be representative of the data that participants contributed to my research. The account is given in first person narrative and told through Nick’s eyes to help render the incident more vivid and intense. This contrasts with the previous scene in which my presence as the researcher is visible as Nick invites me into his office. The ‘interviewing’ scene as told from the researcher’s point of view helps provide a description of Nick and his working environment yet it also paves the way for the narrative’s development. The festive atmosphere in the introduction, the flashforward to Nick’s managing role and the eventual flashback to Nick’s school years help evoke multiple meaning-making interpretations.

In the context of this narrative, the changing room is a vulnerable space for Nick who dreads that his homosexuality could be identified during that intimate moment inside the locker room. He claims how, ‘providentially’ unlike Harry, he is not effeminate. Notwithstanding this comfort, he feels internally confused. The main character in this narrative is evocative of gay students, who, despite fulfilling the stereotypical criteria of machismo and maleness, feel perplexed due to their inability to self-identify.

In the field of sport, homosexuality is taboo and heterosexuality is compulsory. Researchers who analyse issues related to masculinity in the field of sport affirm that sport is a highly homophobic institution (Bryant, 2001; Clarke, 1998; Griffin, 1998; Hekma, 1998; Pronger, 1990; Wolf Wendel, Toma, and Morphew, 2001). This is confirmed by Messner (1992, p.34) who explains that, “the extent of homophobia in the sports world is staggering. Boys (in sports) learn early that to be gay, to be suspected of being gay, or even to be unable to prove one’s heterosexual status is not acceptable.” Indeed, Nick is forced into taking part in sport activities but when the PE session is over he counts the number of days till the next PE lesson, his next torture day. Hekma (1998) explains that “gay men who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise” (p.2). Pronger (1990) similarly reports that “many of the [gay] men I interviewed said they were uncomfortable with team sports... Orthodox

masculinity is usually an important subtext if not the leitmotif” (p.26) in such sport. In the sport culture, particularly, homophobic discourse prevents the acceptance of homosexuality as it preserves its role as a refuge of ‘undamaged’ masculinity. This narrative confirms how gay students are perceived “largely as deviant and dangerous participants on the sporting turf” (Clarke, 1998, p.145) in that they challenge culturally established structures of hegemonic masculinity.

While Harry is under the relentless threat of physical violence, Nick, with his justified fear of violence and having his sexual orientation discovered, is pressured to remain silent and avoidant. It is only in self-silencing that he maintains acceptance in the structured heterosexist environment that pervades the school setting. Several researchers confirm that sport does not only reject homosexuality but also venerates hyperheterosexuality (Griffin, 1998; Hekma, 1998; Pronger, 1990; WolfWendel, Toma, and Morphew, 2001). This is particularly apparent in Harry’s bullying incident. Nick, who in this specific circumstance is a passive onlooker, is indirectly pressured to join in witnessing the appalling behaviour, behaviour which was supposed to be amusing. Nick empathises with his bullied mate and pities him but smiles in an attempt to suppress his sexual identity and to gain acceptance. This instance of physical intimidation reminiscent of homophobic intimidation in educational settings, confirms the power of masculine hegemony in sport within educational settings. It additionally sheds light on the heightened risk of harassment in unsupervised areas.

Harry’s feminine attitude is one particular reason that instigates the students’ harassing attitude. Robbie, featuring as the chief perpetrator of the vicious abuse stigmatises the victim. In calling Harry ‘a fag’, Robbie raises his social status as a heterosexual to the detriment of his victim. He exhibits his fulfilment of one of the mandatory criteria of hegemonic masculinity, even if he might not truly believe in his peer’s homosexuality (Anderson, 2002). This incident similarly recalls Wilkinson’s (2004) relation of men’s voluble anti-gay attitudes for fear of appearing feminine.

The PE teacher’s attitude is representative of homophobic teachers who instead of acting as role models to their students, endorse similar bullying behaviour through spiteful homophobic remarks that are still overlooked. It would be unfair to claim that most teachers are homophobic but as Toynton (2006) claims “in any social or work situation a homophobic

comment left unchallenged by others leaves me feeling unsafe in their company” (Toynton, 2006, p.189).

The Support of Family Members

The role of family members in the lives of teachers is an aspect that was flagged or highlighted in almost all of the interviews with participants. Prior to ‘coming out’ to his mother, Nick confides in his brother who luckily turns out to be very supportive. He nonetheless agonises about telling his mother. Nick’s mother plays an important role in this narrative. She is strong, determined and a fervent Catholic. It is interesting to note how her mothering role evolves at different points along the narrative. In Nick’s school years, her supportive role is indispensable. Undoubtedly, Nick might not have taken up a career in education were it not for her ‘unconditional’ support. Notwithstanding his difficulties at school, she strives to help Nick improve upon his school work even though he had to learn things ‘the hard way’. But she had used all possible means to brighten Nick’s prospects for a successful career.

Yet, she collapses into despair when faced with the ‘tragedy’ of her son’s ‘coming out’; this is a reminder of the typical way in which some Maltese parents may react in this circumstance (See page 140). To some extent, Nick had anticipated his mother’s adverse reaction and was careful not to upset her. On the other hand, Nick’s mother is mainly concerned about her son’s ‘abnormal’ circumstance, the family’s honour, Nick’s sinful state and the salvation of his soul. Yet again, dogmatic religious fears condition the way she reacts to Nick’s ‘coming out’. She perceives his sexuality as a disease and ignorantly hopes her son’s homosexuality will one day be ‘healed’ through some sort of conversion or reparative therapy that would ‘convert’ him into a heterosexual. These adverse reactions are not restricted to educators and their individual experiences. In condemning their children as sinful, parents do not help them learn to value, love and care about themselves.

The role of Nick’s mother was created through the factual descriptions of two interviewees who acknowledged how parents’ reactions to their ‘coming out’ was for them very significant. Fear motivates Nick’s mother to try to protect her son by reacting negatively to his homosexuality. She vents her frustration and despair on Nick, to the extent that she

blames him for the sad circumstances she finds herself in. Nick's father and his elder brother are on the other hand sympathetic. The former was instrumental in controlling his wife's abusive stance, even though nothing seemed to help comfort the mother. The support of friends and other relatives, as has been similarly portrayed through the roles of Aunt Mary and cousin Lizzy in Albert's narrative, is an aspect which mitigates the trauma of exclusion that rejected gay individuals may experience. Research by Ryan (2009) confirms that "family acceptance promotes well-being and helps protect LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) young people against risk" (p.4).

A number of commonalities arise when this episode in Nick's narrative is compared to Albert's story and his 'coming out'. Both narratives expose the commonly held myth that some hold about sexual orientation. While some parents believe that being gay is a "phase" that adolescents eventually grow out of, others feel that their children are still too young to have their homosexuality confirmed (Ryan, 2009). Some parents fear that peer pressure or exposure to materials related to homosexuality may perhaps augment one's possibility of 'becoming' gay. Research has established that children start expressing their gender identity at age two to three (Ryan, 2009). Parents whose children display non-conforming behaviour are likely to be embarrassed and concerned that their children will be subject to ridicule.

A few years later, Nick's mother takes on a more empathic and supportive role. She helps her sister who is going through the same experience as herself when her daughter outs herself as a lesbian. It is only through this experience that Nick's mother becomes more accepting of Nick's homosexuality. As Nick questions his identity he feels the compulsory need to hide who he is so as to ensure acceptance. He is not yet open about his sexuality to his parents until he is about twenty-two years of age, as he increasingly becomes an isolate in his social systems.

Nick's story additionally confirms the omnipresence of the phenomena of silence and invisibility across this collection of narratives. The following commentaries discuss in more detail the challenges that non-heterosexual individuals are, at present, bound to face in the educational domain.

Participants' Responses to Nick's Narrative

None of the participants believed that Nick's narrative mirrored *their* story from beginning to end, however they all felt they could very much identify with aspects of this narrative. This observation was evident in the participants' response to these narratives. One narrator claimed that "*[he] could really empathise with Nick... The flow is superb and emotional. Very, very intense in the way it portrays the realities of gay teachers. Gripping indeed. It is a heart-rending story; there were moments where I could see myself in Nick*". Another interviewee expressed similar emotions in reading these narratives: "*It was interesting reading these narratives since I could relate to a lot of them in my life...*" One of the interviewees shared the following reflection:

When reading this narrative, I felt I could relate to a lot of the parts. The bullying when growing up was bad in my school and it used to make me feel sad. I was also the lucky one that was not noticeable. When growing up I could relate to the story especially since parts of it were similar to mine. But it is admirable that although there was the scared element, we still strive and move on, and never give up.

One participant claimed that although he is not much into village *festas* "*this narrative depicts well my youth and also my life as a teacher*". The invisibility of participants during their school years re-surfaced in one of the reflective writings on Nick's narrative where one teacher explained that "*at twelve, I had feelings for boys but I always hid these private feelings from everyone. I was even afraid to meet someone and I also never had any sexual experience*". Reading the narratives encouraged one participant to share a bullying episode he had been through:

This reminded me of the bullying I suffered at school. Boys at school calling me a homo and stupid names... and it used to get to me and insult me forcing me to have suicide attempts. Boys even wrote on a piece of paper the words '(participant's name) is a homo' and was found by a teacher of Religion who uttered the words in everyone's presence. It made me feel very bad.

All interviewees claimed that social isolation was not a far-fetched reality for most Maltese gay teachers. Comments such as "*At sixteen, I still did not accept my sexuality. I rarely went out with friends*", "*I did not have any friends*", "*I was too scared to meet people and reveal myself*", "*I had no youthful gay life*" evidenced the difficulties that these individuals had in constructing their identity and how these challenges led to their social alienation. Nick's

narrative prompted one teacher to reflect on his current circumstances as a gay educator. He claimed that *“upon reflecting on this story, I realise that today as a teacher I control my feelings towards students ensuring there is no personal rapport.”* This fact validates the fear that gay teachers often have of losing their employment. On the other hand, one interviewee explained that Nick’s character embodies his ideals as a gay educator since *“I ensure that gay students and no other student is bullied... and I try to help them out in the best possible way.”*

Silvio's Narrative

The dreadful news that a UK gay teen had committed suicide after being bullied to death drew Silvio's attention as he leafed through the newspaper that Sunday morning. The article described how a fourteen year-old boy had left two suicide notes explaining how he could no longer cope with the racist and homophobic bullying that he had been experiencing at school. His parents, according to the sources recalled how he had 'come out' to them some months earlier. His mother ironically - an anti-bullying campaigner - described her late son as sensitive and how he had wanted to set up his own anti-bullying campaign. The Head of school confirmed that the student had reported twenty bullying incidents in a span of three years.

As much as it had made Silvio feel sorry for the victim, the article spurred a sense of bitterness deep within. Quickly, Silvio scanned the article for a second time. He then closed the newspaper, folded the journal into half and threw it gently onto an adjacent coffee table. That article saddened him. He took off his glasses, stretched out his legs and rested his head on the back of the armchair as he watched his teenage years unfolding into terrorising flashbacks.

The long, loud peal of the bell signalled the end of the mid-day break. Students rushed to line up for the end-of break time prayer, like a herd of elephants. Silvio was the last one to line up. He stayed a couple of feet back from the last student and swung himself nervously from side to side, holding back his tears. He could no longer put up with being repeatedly humiliated. It was costing him his life. During that particular break Silvio had been pushed onto the ground and kicked in the stomach several times. Students from his classroom and by-standers who he never even knew teamed up to hurt him, to assist in a 'sport' which no doubt they found exciting.

The vile laughter, the atrocious facial expression of the chief aggressors and encouragement of applauding were brutal, and cannot be easily forgotten. Nobody could ever dare stop the barbaric acts of those bastards. Thankfully, two fifth formers had locked him up inside the bathroom. At least, it felt safe in there. He had spent the rest of the break locked up until he was accidentally discovered by one of the school cleaners. Silvio made it just in time to line up for prayers to thank God for His blessings and for the lovely break time they had just had.

And the supervising staff? They had been too occupied to give a damn. One of them shared her weekend engagements and the Assistant Head had been telling her two other colleagues how marvellously the brand new furniture fitted inside her new apartment. Another teacher was busily correcting homework that she hadn't seen over the weekend. An eighteen euro hourly rate for break time was good money after all.

A week before, somebody had typed out fraudulent love letters using Silvio's personal details. These were left in the school bags of other students in this boys-only college. That had been traumatic and embarrassing for Silvio. This proliferating abuse had initiated from mere teasing as a result of an 'incident' which took place while the boys had been on a school excursion. As they were returning to school, Silvio, who on the bus had been sitting next to his best friend, asked "Would you ever give me, your best friend, a kiss?" That suicidal question had been the cause of the abuse that reverberated throughout Silvio's secondary school years: explicit injustice which educators overlooked (boys will be boys) or which was,

even worse, considered essential (by a few others) to purge Silvio of his homosexuality and help him discard his femininity.

Mr Calleja was a case in point. He taught Religious Education. Following the bullying episode which took place during break time, these Form three students entered the classroom for the Religion lesson. In a nutshell, during a lesson about forgiveness, the teacher questioned why it tends to be so difficult for humans to forgive one another. In a puerile attempt to clarify his explanation, Mr Calleja brought up a case scenario: “So let’s imagine this situation, there’s this boy, called Silvio and this Silvio is a homosexual... You all know what a homosexual is, don’t you? ... He’s what many of you would call ‘gay’.... A man who likes other men...” Some could not help giggling.

Silvio had a mental shut down as he stared fixedly at his desk. All he could hear was the snickering laughter of fellow classmates who could no longer help it. Others murmured disparaging comments. The teacher attempted to silence his students, giving the impression that he was totally unaware of what had stirred that commotion. But Silvio knew that what his teacher had done was cruelly deliberate. Everyone around the school knew his ‘story’. The fourteen year old boy had long lost all faith in everybody and he no longer trusted anyone at school. He did not even dare approach the school counsellor, and so opted to contain his fears. Skiving from school was impossible since his father used to drop him exactly in front of the school entrance. Then again, if he were to confide the horror he was going through to his parents, he would risk revealing his homosexuality. He was not sure that he would get their full support and understanding. He could not foretell how they would react to such news. Just imagining the disclosure of his homosexuality to his parents gave him creeps.

Though Form three proved to be the most arduous year for Silvio, sporadic episodes of abuse of either a verbal or a physical nature also took place in the last two years of secondary school. Much of the abuse took place in unsupervised areas within the school; the corridors and the restrooms being a case in point. Silvio did his best to evade places where he was vulnerable and open to any sort of intimidation. Focusing on studying and examinations became impossible. His marks plummeted. Silvio’s parents had then blamed his own lack of motivation as the cause of his academic failure.

According to his teachers’ reports on parents’ day, he was not persevering enough in his studies. At times, he had his head in the clouds, they remarked.

Silvio struggled to make it to sixth form. Following months of private tuition and examination resits, he finally managed to make it to a post-secondary school where his marks improved considerably. He specialised his studies in the Italian Language and Literature and eventually read for a BA degree at university. He then studied pedagogy and successfully completed a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE).

Silvio experienced moments of hesitation particularly prior to his initial teaching practice placement. All P.G.C.E students were eagerly waiting for their allocated school’s name to be revealed. The school that student teachers are posted to, does not strictly determine the students’ end result, but it is a factor which undeniably plays an crucial role in determining the students’ academic fate. On seeing the name of the school he was posted to, he broke out

in a cold sweat. It felt like he was doomed to failure. The school he had been posted to was notorious for the rampant bullying that had gradually but severely tainted the school's once glorious past. The evident difficulties at school were deeply-rooted in a multitude of social problems. The school's catchment area was a no-go location, saturated with concentrations of deprivations, prostitution, drugs, crime hotspots and domestic violence. The area was truly another world, a world which Silvio could not and did not want to recognise. However, this was not what caused him so much anxiety. He dreaded the lack of openness, the insular culture where ignorance meant more than mere illiteracy.

And Silvio visited the school for the first time.

Walking in the corridors of that school felt like walking through uncharted territory. Going past the classrooms, he could sense that students attended school because they were obliged to do so and because their parents hated that monthly school absenteeism penalty. He avoided looking inside the classrooms. He feared that students could easily detect his 'difference' the moment he looked into their eyes. A group of about four students shuffled; a gait that declared their apathy for the school system. They were possibly fifth formers who were not even a decade younger than Silvio but who had a much sturdier physique than his. Upon perceiving his foreignness, the students stopped chatting and scanned him from head to toe. Their presence was deliberately intimidating. As they passed by, Silvio tried to keep a straight face as he desperately tried to glean a word here and there, anything which could give him an idea as to whether they were talking about him. He did not dare look back. He began to fear that this would be the beginning of a six weeks' inferno. He thought that leaving the school and resigning from the course was perhaps the best solution. Yet his parents' words echoed in his head. They explained time and time again that with a BA in Italian, his chances of finding a job were restricted. On the other hand, he had never even considered the possibility of going abroad. He had therefore embarked on the pedagogy of teaching and learning through a P.G.C.E. course to widen the horizons of his career.

Silvio nervously arranged the knot of his tie before he entered the first classroom as he unsuccessfully tried to breathe deeply. He greeted the students and introduced himself. Twenty pairs of investigative eyes scrutinised the student teacher and followed his each and every move. There was absolute silence as Silvio courageously roamed in between the aisles to make his students aware of the basic procedures. He made the students sign a behaviour policy contract and did not ask them to describe themselves, as other new teachers would normally ask them to do on their first encounter. He explained how he wanted them to work hard yet enjoy their time with him. His tone was fairly strict. He tried hard to look disciplined and in control although this was definitely not in his nature. You could tell that the students' first impressions were positive. He started off the day by showing his students a short humorous clip in Italian. It was something they started to look forward to with enthusiasm. Many of their teachers never bothered to turn on the interactive whiteboard. But this one worked hard and deserved their respect and obedience, the students thought. The students began to realise that this teacher worked hard, worked hard in their interest, and decided that this new teacher deserved to be respected and obeyed.

"So sir, will you be playing in the Christmas football tournament?" asked one of his students. His query, though not relevant to the lesson, was honest. Silvio never belonged to the football culture and demonstrated zero per cent interest in this sport. He feared that his negative reply could match the stereotype that sport is not for gay men and consequently enable students to categorise him as gay.

“Yes”, he replied concisely. He would obviously find ways and means to avoid participating on the day, he thought. But his response had temporarily safeguarded him. His homosexuality was a constant disadvantage which accompanied him wherever he went. Comparing himself to other student teachers, he realised how his sexuality was causing so much pressure on him. He constantly ensured a manly gait, a deep and masculine voice and that his body language did not threaten his assumed heterosexuality.

During that particularly period of teaching practice, Silvio worked like a horse for days on end. His diligence and rigorous preparation proved how much he wanted to instil in his students the love and enjoyment of learning Italian. But it went beyond that. He aimed at building a trustworthy relationship with his students; a relationship which could potentially dodge bullying and eliminate the possibility of having his sexuality revealed. Students looked forward to his lesson. After seven consecutive lessons with two different year groups, his last period was free. He decided to go to the staff room to unwind and at the same time mingle with the other teachers. One teacher asked him how things went on his first day. As soon as he heard Silvio’s voice, the teacher who Silvio had replaced for the teaching practice period lifted his head from behind his laptop, acknowledged his presence and carried on looking for a flight to London for the Christmas sales. He could not even bother to ask how Silvio had fared with seven different groups on the first day of his practice.

Silvio took an apple out of his bag and decided to make himself a cup of coffee. As he was filling the kettle with water, a voice from behind sounded familiar. He felt as though he could match a face to that voice. He travelled back into years which he thought he had permanently erased from his memory. He feared that what he dreaded most was real. He was not thinking straight, the kettle was almost overflowing. He closed the tap in time. His mind was not there. Turning around, he confirmed his worst fears. It was him.

A tall man, probably in his mid-fifties was cracking jokes; actually stupid anecdotes that encouraged bigotry and homophobia.

“So let’s see how clever you are Ms Lisa ...” he asked as he laughed his head off, “how would you fit three faggots on a single bar stool?”

“Come on Joe, I can’t tell you... I’m not gay... haven’t got a clue” replied the Math teacher as she expected him to quickly answer his own question.

“I’ll tell you how...” replied the Head of school as he entered the staff room. The rest of the staff turned their heads towards the doorway to look at him. “Turn the stool upside down!” Those who were present burst into fits of laughter.

“You clever bastard!” the other one replied... “Good one, isn’t it?”

Silvio smiled at the joke. He could not risk alienation on his first day at school. That joke had taken Silvio eight years back to one of the darkest periods of his life: his secondary school years. The eyes, the posture, the body language: they all looked familiar. He was right. It was him. Mr Calleja: The same teacher who had personally bullied him and instigated obnoxious bullying acts on him by fellow students.

The click of the kettle brought Silvio back to the land of the living. This co-incidence was beyond belief. Though Mr Calleja had obviously grown older, Silvio thought of how his homophobic sentiments had remained unchanged and how any 'safe' ambience inside the staff room had been infested and contaminated with the disease of ultra-heterosexism.

In a matter of a few days, the students got used to Mr Silvio. They used to await his sessions enthusiastically. He became known for competitive games that he used to include as part of his explanation and the relatively easy tasks that he used to give for homework. Not that the 'stuff' was truly easy, but having to write on a handout rather than copying every single word on copybooks had already made life easier for these students. And he did manage to collect work from a good percentage of his students. Some came up with an excuse while others didn't even bother about the work that was due. But they loved him and few were those who did not co-operate. Inside the staffroom, his colleague teachers were stunned to see how he actually managed to collect about fifteen assignments from a class of twenty-four students who never gave a damn about schooling.

On the other hand, Silvio was horrified at the 'club' culture that characterised the school's staff room. In the far end corner, one teacher hemmed her husband's trousers, two male teachers were lost in a game of chess and three went to the nearby open market to buy some groceries with the Headmaster's blessing; all this took place inside a building which people would innocently refer to as a 'school' – 'an educational institution'. The students did have their own difficulties but the majority of the teachers had given up, and, could not care less about their students, and consequently ruined the schools' reputation.

"So Silvio, all you need to do is jot down your name either under column A or column B" was the request of a newly-graduated teacher. This teacher handed him an A4 sheet with a couple of straight lines which had been marked in black ink. "It's the football tournament we do every Christmas... we usually do it on the last day before the holidays."

"Oh I see.... I'm actually not very interested in taking part... I do enjoy watching a match every now and then but I'm not very keen on football ... not that good at it... so better if somebody else replaces me..." was Silvio's reply.

"Come on Silvio, you'd be the only male not to take part in the game" said one of the older teachers from the other end of the table, "all male teachers take part or are actually expected to take part. Believe me; your students would not like it if you're not on the pitch on the day" she remarked.

"I imagine that, yes but..."

"Even our Headmaster with his big fat belly chases the ball on the party day and *he* truly hasn't got an idea of what football is" the same teacher remarked as the staff laughed. Refusing to take part implied that Silvio was 'a softie'. These uncontrollable thoughts and fears filled him with anxiety. The intensive preparations typically required for teaching practice were a perfect excuse to describe his lack of outings during weekends.

"So how was your weekend Silvio?" many would ask on a Monday morning.

"Very busy... had to prepare all my resources and update my file plus I had to do some paperwork which could not be delayed" he would reply.

“Ah! If only all sons were like you. Your girlfriend must be very patient and lucky to have you...” commented one of the teachers as she winked at Silvio who, in turn, reciprocated with a smile.

Silvio became accustomed to the pressure he had to withstand daily. Prior to initiating a conversation, Silvio was always cautious not to slip into arguments or discussions that would stir other people’s curiosity about his lifestyle. Not only inside the classroom but even with his teacher colleagues inside the staff room, Silvio was careful and very much aware of his physical behaviour as he ensured that even the way he walked, talked and moved his hands fulfilled the standards of maleness. Crossing his legs when sitting down was a position he sought to avoid; sitting down with legs wide apart would minimise the possibility of having his homosexuality detected... It was a daily ordeal that Silvio had to learn to endure for the duration of the six week placement. Despite fearing the school’s culture and the students’ attitude, Silvio was concerned about the worrying homophobic attitude of staff whose role is to educate about diversity rather than incite further resentment towards difference. The students loved Silvio. They did not want their actual teacher to return teaching Italian in January. Neither did he.

It was only on the last day that Silvio let his students down: the fateful day of the annual Christmas football tournament.

That day, Silvio reported sick.

Silvio sat on his sofa. This was his eighth year as a graduate teacher of Italian.

He has worked in the same secondary school since then and is the most loved and respected teacher in the eyes of the students. Nonetheless, at school he doesn’t spell out his homosexuality to his colleagues. His personal life is ultra-personal; he barely discusses it with his friends. Despite their good relationship Silvio’s friends know very little about him, his lifestyle and his family.

He’s been going out with his boyfriend for the past nine months. They tend to avoid meeting in public and always ensure that there would be nobody familiar around before they enter their preferred cafeteria. On Mondays he would want to tell the other teachers how he had spent the weekend and the great places he had been to the previous Sunday afternoon. But he can’t risk it. He lives with the constant fear that one day he might get chucked out of his job.

He hasn’t outed himself with his parents as yet. Silvio explains that, unfortunately, his mother, a devout woman in her mid-sixties adheres strongly to whatever she hears from the pulpit in Church. This, in Silvio’s opinion discourages him from revealing his sexuality to her. He doesn’t even consider this an option at this stage. He still believes she isn’t ready yet; she has to be prepared for it.

A Reading of Silvio's Story

Sources and Contexts of ‘*Silvio’s Story*’

The development of Silvio’s story is rooted in the description of excruciating harassment which teacher participants shared when describing their schooling periods. During the data collection phase, two of the participants shared and described episodes of both verbal and physical harassment which took place from their late primary school years right through to the end of their secondary schooling. In one case, bullying was incessant for a number of years, whereas with the other participant bullying incidents were sporadic though intense. The shocking news of a fourteen year-old Italian teen who had committed suicide following relentless homophobic bullying made me deeply reflect upon the dire (possibly even life threatening) consequences of bullying (Avery, 2013). The death of the Italian teenager - an incident which had coincided with the data collection stage of this research project – considerably amplified the significance of the participants’ narratives. This strengthened my resolution to advocate the urgent need of education authorities to help address the insufferable, crude, unethical reality of homophobic bullying in local schools via this specific narrative. In this story, interview data was intertwined with factual information. This synthesis of events, reworked through my own imagination led to the construction of *Silvio* and his narrative.

Silvio embodies the challenges that non-heterosexual students and teachers are made to directly or indirectly endure in homophobic school environments. His story also raises very real concerns regarding the safety of school environments for LGBT students and teachers.

The Penalties of a Heterosexist Society

During adolescence, essentially a phase of awareness, experimentation and discovery - having same-sex feelings is likely to cause confusion about one’s own sexual identity (*American Psychological Association [APA],2008*). In this process of exploration and discovery, adolescents may be unsure, still discovering or possibly even apprehensive about applying social labels to themselves as society expects them to do. Research confirms that ‘questioning’ youth (often referred to by the letter “Q” in the LGBTQQ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning] acronym) are at a heightened risk of

victimisation, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts and alcohol abuse when compared to adolescents who would have already identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual (Hutchison, 2010).

In the course of this narrative, Silvio suffers flashbacks and nightmares which are visibly linked to a history of bullying in his school years. Upon reading the article in the newspaper the teacher feels perturbed. That written piece is reminiscent of the bitter homophobic bullying he endured at different stages in his life. The flashback that follows is founded on a combination of both true and fictional segments which constitute an ultimate fictional whole. The application of fiction was instrumental in making the description of Silvio's abuse more vivid. The resulting blend is highly poignant since such a detailed portrayal encourages readers of the narrative to re-live Silvio's plight, to empathise with him and seriously consider the implications of his story.

Research by the *Fundamental Rights Agency*(FRA) (2012) confirms that eighty-eight per cent of Maltese respondents were never (seventy per cent) or rarely (eighteen per cent) open about them being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Moreover, verbal harassment and misconduct at school because of their LGBT identity was 'always' experienced by twelve per cent of the sample, with twenty-nine per cent claiming that this occurred 'often' for them. Survey results also concluded that twenty-six per cent stated they witnessed negative comments or conduct because of a peer's perceived LGBT identity, while forty-nine per cent asserted that this was a frequent happening during the years of their schooling (FRA, 2012). This is evocative of Remafedi (1999) who explains that such abuse may also lead to an increased risk of dropping out of school.

The depiction of abuse underscores the trauma that many individuals who experience such mistreatment may carry into adulthood (Pappas, 2013). Silvio's flashback is a case in point. Although Silvio may at the end of the day emerge as heroic (given that, notwithstanding his miserable school experience, he is successful in his educational career), there is no doubt that harassment may be so emotionally and psychologically devastating as to lead bullied individuals to attempt suicide. Suicide ideation was specifically mentioned by one of the interview participants in this study. The following is an excerpt from an interview with one of the research participants. I include this interview data to 'uncover' the source of Silvio's story:

(During my secondary school years) I used to be bullied. It was either because I liked keeping my hair long or because I was not good at football... I actually suffered a lot...

... Name calling ... abuse... verbally and even physically... hitting me, calling me ... 'pufta' ... In the (school) playground... It was hell... I always hid it (my sexuality) and that is why I hid it.

... It was the fear of society... watching TV programmes ... always hearing derogatory remarks... even mum and dad used to pass these comments... rubbish they'd say... two fags kissing on TV... and then I'd go to school and listen 'pufta pufta' ... it was so frightening I did not want to accept it.

(...) my aunt knew I was suicidal... she knew I was gay... but she had kept it to herself... but she eventually realised I was becoming suicidal she helped me a lot at the time."

The interviewee's discussion of his thoughts of suicide, entirely non-fictional in nature, was one of the fragmented puzzle pieces which eventually led to the creation of 'Silvio's Story'. Rivers (Spiteri, 2008) suggests that around half of gay, lesbian and bisexual pupils consider harming or killing themselves, that four in ten harm themselves at least once and that a third harm themselves on more than one occasion. Although clearly, homophobic bullying is not the sole factor that contributes to the contemplation of suicide and self-harm, River's study points out that seventeen per cent of bullied individuals show symptoms related to post-traumatic stress disorder later on in life.

As with the other narratives, Silvio's story embodies the difficulties that gay adolescents experience. Developing a healthy identity in a hostile context saturated with negative stereotypes and prejudice, often without familial and societal support becomes an amplified difficulty. The constant fear of being discovered, the confusion and the sense of isolation that the main characters in these narratives experience are all issues which may have adverse effects on psychological well-being, self-esteem and identity formation (Kreiss and Patterson 1997; Remafedi, 1987). Research shows that a disproportionate number of suicides are among homosexuals with a higher risk in ethnic or racial communities where homosexuality may be

more stigmatised (Remafedi, 1999). An individual's inability to disclose his orientation to anyone and a conflicting state of mind over one's orientation is considered as one of the reasons for LGBT high-school students to attempt suicide. Remafedi (1999) explains that other circumstances which heighten the possibility of suicidal attempts include the acquisition of a gay identity at a young age in hostile contexts, the presence of family conflict and the rejection of LGBT children as previously discussed (See page 140).

In Malta, the incidence of gay suicide is relatively unknown popularly, and the issue continues to be considered a taboo topic for discussion. Local cases of suicides go unreported in the Maltese media yet an anonymous article in *Malta Gay News* (an online portal which communicates Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex (LGBTI)-related issues) reported that an interviewee of high standing in the political scene spoke about gay suicide in Malta. He explained that people holding positions of power on the island do their utmost to stop the publication of material about the reality of suicide in Malta, believing that "by talking about all these people killing themselves you are encouraging more suicidal behaviour" (Spiteri, 2008, p.5). In pointing out that "sticking our head in the sand, like an ostrich" (Spiteri, 2008, p.5) is only a way of escaping the issue, the interviewee expresses his concern that local authorities fall short of identifying and addressing the contributory factors that may worsen suicidal tendencies in Malta.

A study of suicide rates in eleven European countries, including Malta, confirmed that Malta has time and again registered one of the lowest suicide rates in Europe. However, Malta failed to experience the decline in suicide rates, experienced by other European countries in the 1990s and 2000s. On the other hand, overall low suicidal rates in Malta are contrasted by an increase in suicide rates amongst males (Debono, 2015). Indeed, the study, conducted by Finnish researchers and published in the *Malta Medical Journal* demonstrates a seventy-fold increase in male suicides between 2005 and 2009. The conclusions of the Finnish research accentuate the need to work on suicide prevention programmes that help address difficulties at their rudiment (Debono, 2015). The need to educate and to tackle the problem at its roots is emphasised by John Bowis, a member of the United Kingdom's *European People's Party* and *European Democrats*, who claims that:

We need to highlight to MEPs that homophobic bullying affects youth indiscriminately. Some victims are LGBT, many are not. Homophobic bullying is particularly destructive, and educators can be ill-prepared to deal with it in a manner that supports the child. This lack of preparation can lead to some dramatic consequences... we're well aware of the elevated rates of suicide amongst LGBT young people. We have to let victims know that they are not alone, and this written declaration will go a long way towards doing just that (Spiteri, 2008, p.2).

Silent and Invisible

In a mainly heterosexist society which idealises maleness, it is perhaps inevitable that gay students fear opening up on their psychological pressures, particularly when they themselves may not yet have accepted their internalized and socially-constructed sense of difference or when they experience feelings that do not fulfil the criteria of hegemonic masculinity.

In maintaining such invisibility, LGBT adolescents undermine their self-esteem or their own sense of self-worth. For 'invisible' students in hostile school environments, coming to terms with feelings of homosexuality may result in additional difficulty. The issue of invisibility surrounding gay students and teachers demonstrates the power and control of heteronormativity in hiding non-conformant aspects and in naturalising conformant heteronormative practices.

With reference to education, heteronormativity is a problem for all students and teachers independently of their sexual orientation. Such assumptions regulate and restrict individuals' behaviours and beliefs and hierarchies of power are created and maintained. Our classrooms are not immune to such assumptions and as a result, the spectrum of expressions or ways of identifying for all students are restricted and, in turn, the type and quality of learning and teaching that can take place in the classroom becomes increasingly limited. Heterosexuality is reproduced through daily classroom practices as demonstrated at different stages of Silvio's narrative's progression, where Silvio is 'invisible' since his needs are neither acknowledged nor addressed. The power relations, ingrained in society and culture have normalised heterosexuality into an assumed norm; rendering it an invisible marker of one's sexual identity (Syracuse University Academic Plan, 2001).

A discursive silence also prevails in the teaching preparation programmes in Malta. This renders educators unequipped to address the challenges that a ‘non-normative’ identity would pose in the heteronormative culture of education. In Malta the invisibility of LGBTI issues was raised by the Malta Gay Rights Movement (MGRM) which stated that:

...it is therefore unfortunate that the new National Curriculum Framework [NCF] currently fails to make any specific reference to issues that most affect lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students. This continues to render members of the LGBT communities – students, parents, administrators, teachers, and other staff — invisible in the Maltese education system (MGRM, 2012, p.3).

Indeed, the NCF does not refer specifically to the physical and emotional safety of students when safety itself is a precondition for learning. Gabi Calleja, co-coordinator at MGRM (2012, p.5) emphasises that:

educational institutions should be committed to providing each student with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours needed to live in a complex and diverse world. This includes ensuring that any language or behaviour that deliberately degrades, denigrates, labels, stereotypes, incites hatred, prejudice, discrimination, harassment towards students or employees on the basis of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identification will not be tolerated and the prohibition of such language and behaviour should be included in student and teacher Codes of Conduct.

The *European Union’s* (EU) FRA (2012) claims that eighty-one per cent of Maltese LGBT survey respondents have either always (sixty-four per cent) or often (seventeen per cent) hidden their LGBT identity during their schooling. The domination of heteronormativity in school environments standardises heterosexuality and ignores the ‘non-normative’ sexuality that other students and teachers experience.

The Safety of School Environments for Non-Heterosexual Individuals

A 2015 survey in the UK which questioned more than a thousand gay or bisexual males aged between fourteen and nineteen revealed that fifty-five per cent of respondents claimed they had been bullied and discriminated because of their sexual orientation. Of serious concern is that more than a third (thirty-nine per cent) of these students explain that they had experienced homophobic bullying by teachers and other adults at school (Green, 2015).

Research studies in mental health (Raphael, 2000; Rowling, 2005), anti-bullying programmes (McGrath and Noble, 2006) and school effectiveness and well-being initiatives (Zins, Weissberg, Wang and Walber, 2004) have correlated the quality of school relationships, prosocial behaviour, resilience and academic results with mental well-being. Apart from personal resiliency factors that protect young people from harm, individuals who grow up in adult caring environments that provide high levels of family support, teacher care and school safety show significant decreased association with suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, whereas these individuals are less expected to report a history of suicide conduct (Eisenberg and Resnick, 2006). The implications of such on the education system are vast.

Silvio's narrative sheds lights on aspects on school safety and an education of care; issues that emerge from the recently launched national policy entitled '*Addressing Bullying Behaviours in Schools*' (Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, 2015). The policy suggests "that the perception of safety affects not just the reporting of bullying but also the disclosure of one's sexual orientation or gender identity and the ability to question and explore this aspect of one's identity" (p.13). Although the newly-introduced anti-bullying policy focuses on addressing bullying behaviour in schools, it does not specifically address homophobic harassment that is experienced by LGBTI teachers, who are bullied by their own students or by their teacher colleagues. The policy considers LGBTI students as vulnerable, and explains how "LGBTI students, as well as those students perceived to be LGBTI are more susceptible to bullying" but despite being part of a framework termed *Respect for All*, the policy clearly excludes the well-being of educators who are essential constituents of the teaching and learning community. In the way it views LGBTI students as 'vulnerable', the recently launched policy only highlights the difference as it preserves heterosexuality at the top rank of a hierarchy of sexualities. This view is reflected in Kumashiro's (2004) work , where he insists that teaching about difference may be not so effective in challenging the status quo since "learning about difference is often something we feel comfortable... doing, perhaps because it allows us to continue to focus our gaze on "them" and not really change how we think about "us"' (p.84).

Both Silvio's caregivers and his teachers correlate his academic failure with a lack of motivation and initiative. Clearly missing the woods for the trees, they fail to inquire over the origins of the student's anxious state. In fact, the prevailing 'culture of apathy' in Silvio's narrative is representative of the education system's insensitivity to human issues and

humane responses that are central to the development of well-being. As the story develops, the passivity of the teaching staff is regarded as compliance with the atrocious acts of homophobic harassment. The students' view of educators is disheartening. Silvio's view of his teachers represents the standpoint expressed by one of my research participants who defined his attempts to speak about his bullying experience to a school counsellor as pointless. The teenager ensures his security by further detaching himself from society through isolation.

Silvio dreads his teaching practice, fearing the recurrence of bullying, this time round by his own students. He is put under severe pressure and considers resigning but eventually ends up being one of the most loved educators in the school he is posted to. Ironically, a vital aspect which stands out in this narrative is the virile atmosphere among the teaching personnel in a staff room that breathes heterosexism. George(2014) reports that a third of teachers have heard their colleagues making use of homophobic language and the majority of teachers said they were unsure as to how they could protect Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual (LGB) students against bullying. While the vast majority of teacher respondents in George's (2014) study considered their pledge towards challenging homophobia as their duty, ninety per cent of primary school teachers and seventy-five per cent of secondary school teachers have not received any specific training on how to address homophobic bullying.

As his career progresses, Silvio's assumed heterosexuality proves to be a source of tension for the young undergraduate. While a teacher colleague refers to 'his girlfriend' during a typical staff room conversation, he avoids speaking about his weekend activities and instead directs the focus of the discussion on the academic work that is required during a typical practice placement. On the other hand, in being the 'only male' who did not participate in the annual Christmas football match, Silvio fears drawing attention to his 'non-conformity'. And now that his engagement in a relationship with his male partner can be perceived as a positive step towards his social and emotional development, Silvio does not feel safe enough as yet to 'be himself' at school, despite this being his eighth year of teaching.

Participants' Responses to Silvio's Narrative

The response of teacher participants to Silvio's narrative was varied. One participant remained somewhat detached in the way he commented on the story: *"I empathize with the teacher ... he had a very hard time and a traumatic childhood..."* Nonetheless he did not expand his reflections on whether he could relate to the story. On the other hand, a striking comment of one of the participating teachers described how teachers' sexuality may imperil their career despite the enactment of legislative policies which aimed to legitimately protect LGBT individuals from such negative outcomes:

We are now living in a liberal world and ever since the law of equal rights and gay marriage was passed, Malta is being seen as a country of modernity. Yet this story is still valid and very real. This very week I heard comments at my place of work which made me apprehensive as to how I was supposed to react. Straight couples come to work on Monday morning and talk about what they did during the weekend. On the other hand we still have to think and plan what to say or what not to say on Mondays. In these conditions having a personal life can be very stressful ...

One participant claimed he thought this story was very evocative in the way it reminded him of the sad reality of suicide which, he claims, *"many LGBT youth are made to endure"*. He continues to state that as the story suggests, bullying had in his case, been the cause of a suicide attempt:

This is a moving story. I had attempted suicide by taking an overdose of XXXX (mentions a drug brand). I deeply empathise with Silvio. I can see myself in him, because of all the bullying, I ended up in a state of despair... I had failed all my examinations because of the trauma. In the meantime you continue bottling it all up.

The aspect of secrecy and invisibility was raised in the commentary of one other teacher who describes how he *"could not tell anyone about [his] sexuality till the age of twenty-seven"* and that *"it was a nightmare hiding this secret"*. He says that the narrative reminded him of his relationship with his partner in the way they used to flee the public eye: *"we avoided meeting in public, we went to a Valentine's Day dinner a day before the occasion and we constantly ensured that no one familiar was around"*. A different teacher explained that he entirely understands Silvio's anxiety as he refers to his personal experience as an educator in

Malta saying: *“As a teacher, I am always afraid of revealing my identity to colleagues, other teachers and students”*.

One particular participant hinted at verbal sexual harassment between teacher colleagues. He described how the issues that Silvio’s story raises *“reflect reality”* and that *“there are many staff members who pass comments that are homophobic... even when you are around and when they know that you are gay”*. This teacher continued to assert how he gets *“more stupid gay remarks from other teachers and colleagues rather than from students. Students are ok about this and I rarely get stupid remarks from them.”* He interestingly ties the lack of student confrontation to his professional dedication as a teacher: *“students await my lessons because they know that my lessons are interesting and that I conduct them in a professional way”*.

Manuel's Narrative

“You look sexier, sir...!” were the first words that greeted Manuel for that Monday lecture. This was getting tedious. He was starting to dread Mondays months after he had started teaching at this post-secondary school. And it was only because of *him*.

“I think you’re exceeding the limits, James”, Manuel warned, as he rubbed off notes that other lecturers had scribbled on the board before the weekend.

“I had only shaven my beard. Ok. My beard grows thick and rough so when it’s entirely shaven... I do look much younger. You’d say, come on, he’s only complimenting your new look... but James, despite being academically bright, had *me* on his personal agenda. It felt as though he had embarked on a personal mission to unchain my Pandora’s box... unveiling issues I had either not come to terms with as yet or was even too afraid to do so...”

It was already five past eight and students were still unsettled. Many were not present as yet. A morning storm had caused complete chaos in the area; roads were heavily congested and as expected, following an early morning downpour, the whole of Malta was brought to a standstill. Manuel took some of the assignments he had corrected over the weekend out of his briefcase, turned on his laptop and greeted sixth formers with a comforting smile as they excused themselves persuasively for the justified delay.

Yet, that Monday, James was determined to distress his teacher.

“Defiantly, with piercing eyes, this seventeen year-old, vengefully asked me that burning, much anticipated question: ‘Have you got a girlfriend, sir?’ he demanded, confronting me with a sly half-smile as he crossed arms and slouched in his front-row seat. I did not utter a word.”



Figure 4.4 – ‘Verbum Dei Caro Factum Est’ badge worn by members of the M.U.S.E.U.M society (http://images.delcampe.com/img_large/auction/000/167/879/078_001.jpg)

Silence may be golden but in those circumstances, silence gave consent, permitting James to further his persecution.

“Do you have sex with her?” asked James. Students looked at him shamefully as they murmured in dismay. Two guys at the back row hid their faces behind the palms of their hands, as they chuckled amusingly at their mate’s indiscreet comments.

Manuel knew that, at some stage, this would happen. If the world’s a stage and us mere actors, the truth revealed can be devastating for some. His ‘Verbum Dei’ badge had served him as a smoke screen for years. The stricture of celibacy as a member of the M.U.S.E.U.M¹³ (known by locals as *il-mużew*) had camouflaged his sexual identity, dispelled any doubts about his homosexuality and above all it had secured a reputable

The Society of Christian Doctrine, M.U.S.E.U.M was founded in Malta towards the early 20th century by St George Preca. It has, since then, established one centre in almost every parish. Members of this society are catholic lay men and women who choose to live the life of celibacy and who help the church in the faith formation of children, youths and adults. In each and every village MUSEUM centres these single-gendered centres are managed by these spiritual educators, commonly referred to by locals as ‘*tal-mużew*’. Female teachers tend to have a short haircut and tend to wear dark clothes – peculiar characteristics which distinguish ‘*tal-mużew*’ till this very day. The majority of children and youths, attending these centres, look forward to a daily hour of play and with far less enthusiasm to a 30 minute session of religious formation.

career. But now he could no longer hide behind the security the badge gave him. No longer wearing the *'Verbum Dei'* means that he either has a girlfriend ... or maybe that he's gay (and that he has been clandestinely involved in some hanky-panky business since weeks or possibly months).

It was then when Manuel was experiencing moments of transition, as he swam breathlessly in heteronormative waters, towards reality and self-acceptance.

The instinctive need to educate was perhaps the factor that determined the choice of a teaching career for several members of the Camilleri family. Though not strictly teaching in a conventional school, three of his aunts were *tal-mużew*, one of them had even reached the top ranks within the society's hierarchy.

Manuel's mother, devoutly Catholic, was a teacher by profession. Opting to get married, the then twenty-four year old graduate was, by law, forced to give up her duties as an English Language teacher. The truth is that up to the 1980s, women in Malta who opted to tie the knot and build a family were legally expected to resign from their employment. Remaining in employment was not an available option. It was a clear-cut option: women could either remain spinsters and if they had the means, embark on a career or they could decide to give up their career for marriage, and children... many children, if possible. Upon getting married, women would automatically become solely dependent on their husband and the wife's only role would be that of taking care of the home and the eventual upbringing of her children. In the eyes of the institutions, juggling career and marriage was out of the question and considered to be morally incorrect.

At the Camilleris', Manuel's mother was the more dominant parent. His dad used to work night shifts and thus much of the day, was spent in the company of their mother. Manuel was the youngest of four children and he was very much attached to his mother.

“After school we would all sit around the table, have lunch and then start our work. Mum would then become our teacher, spending hours explaining and revising school topics to all of us. She even used to read fascinating stories... and recount anecdotes from her childhood years. She was indeed a devoted mother who dutifully raised us in a very spiritual environment.”

Manuel had a very Catholic upbringing... As young children they would never miss the daily mass at the nuns' convent, nearby. Being both very religious... Manuel's parents sent their children to Church schools, recited the Holy Rosary on a daily basis and ensured that no doctrine lessons were missed.

Manuel continued: “Sunday was dad's day off. We would go together to church smartly dressed in our Sunday best. This Sunday rite would end with a treat - dad would buy a small cardboard box of fresh traditional *cannoli* for that afternoon. Going to church was not open to discussion. And Mum was very strict about it. Even in summer, at our seaside residence in St Paul's Bay. I remember meeting a few friends (whose company we were looking forward to from October till June) and together attend mass every day. You could not dare miss mass with the excuse that you felt weary. If you were too tired for mass, then you were too tired to go for a swim, mother would reply.”

Religion was our staple diet. Manuel breathed religion. It was everywhere he looked. And he couldn't imagine life without it.

“I was about eight years old when I had first kissed another boy at school,” explained Manuel. “He was about a year younger than me. I cannot say I was aware of my sexuality at that age but I remember that this was somehow wrong... the feeling that kissing another boy felt wrong... for some reason I felt it was not right... and I recall feeling *terribly* guilty about it... Ironically I kissed him more than once. Little did I know that this was something I needed to bottle up!”

Manuel's continuous attempts to inhibit his attraction towards his peers in the secondary school failed on a couple of occasions. He somehow had no control over it but he was kind of convinced that what he felt was wholly unnatural. It was a truly baffling situation. The guilt that abiding by the laws of nature caused him was immense; something he could not cope with on his own.

In Form two, Manuel thought Gabriel was very cute. They shared the same class for the rest of secondary school but Manuel never managed to voice his feelings to Gabriel. He became Gabriel's secret admirer. And then there was John in the fifth Form with whom he did fool around during a sleepover - not beyond certain limits though as they were both terrified... but he had kissed John and they had touched...

It was only until Manuel turned thirty-four, that he eventually grew more accepting of his homosexuality – an issue which he could no longer keep at the periphery of his sub-conscious.

“At that age I was still a member in the M.U.S.E.U.M. Then, I attributed absolute importance to the teachings in the Bible and the Church's doctrine. Despite God's unconditional love to all, the Bible termed homosexuality as an objective disorder... unnatural... that homosexuality is ‘an intrinsically grievous sin...’ I sought those parts in the Bible that spoke about homosexuality.” In his teenage years, eternal damnation was a monstrous nightmare for Manuel.

With an ever-increasing awareness of this puzzling incongruity, being a spiritual educator at *il-muzeu* only rendered things worse. He never dared to confide in anybody, not even at the school where he teaches (though he believes that two of his colleagues might know about him). Manuel defends his reasoning: “The thing is... I haven't got a close relationship with members of my family. It's not a question of unease or embarrassment but simply because sexuality is a private and personal issue and worse than that ... homosexuality. Homosexuality was strictly personal and out of bounds to my family... and surprise, surprise... I haven't outed myself at home as yet. I am not saying that my parents are homophobes but they're very religious and rather conservative... so I never found it comfortable to share my worries with them.”

Sunday morning. Manuel, aged nineteen, attends the six am mass as he listens with trepidation to the weekly homily.

"Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals", cautioned the priest from the pulpit as he quoted Timothy 1:9-10.

The beastly fear of eternal damnation had long burrowed itself in his subconscious. He did not even dare to look at the celebrant... Although he had never confessed this inner confusion to a priest or a spiritual director, it felt as though the priest was being accusatory in his gaze and that made him feel culpable. His heart throbbed and cold sweat wetted his forehead with undefeatable paranoia.

"Certainly, it was me whom the priest was referring to. He could not possibly be addressing the rest of the faithful. How could he ever get to know about *me*? Had someone doubted my masculinity and spoke to the priest about it? Have I been feminine in any way? Was it the parents from *il-mużew*?" Manuel kept thinking of the various possibilities but could not come to any conclusion.

A quick glimpse around was enough to ascertain his worries. Half of those attending were lost in their thoughts and could not understand what the priest meant anyway; some were dozing off and others expressed fake interest by merely sustaining eye contact with their beloved parish priest. However, most of them knew Manuel and his family. He lowered his head, like a child who has just been told off. Manuel avoided looking at the celebrant as he monotonously delivered a homily which that morning seemed to be unending.

"Back then I was convinced that the priest was referring to me... I did not even dare to wipe off the sweat across my forehead. The fact that none of the parents of *tal-mużew* children were around was a relief."

And that was Manuel's only consolation.

Without realising it, Manuel worked himself up through the different ranks at *il-mużew*... first as a *magħżul* (the chosen one), eventually as an *aspirant* (aspirant). The fact that he had successfully proceeded to higher ranks within the M.U.S.E.U.M society magnified the strong sense of incongruity which Manuel found increasingly difficult to surmount.

Friends who were his age had left by that time, and no longer attended *il-mużew*; some had got engaged and most of them had found a full-time job. A few others had pursued further studies. Manuel recalls how he was approached by one of his superiors to consider helping out with one of the teenager classes.

Manuel: *But hang on...* I said. *"I, honestly, do not feel fully fit for this role!... It's just not the time... maybe later on but... the thing is that presently, you know... I got so much on my mind..."*

Superior: *Oh Manuel! I'm sure you'll be doing a great job! We all have blind faith in you! Why should you worry?*

Manuel: *I thank you Sup. (short for Superior) I know you've always trusted me and respected me... But I'm afraid that this time round I cannot...*

Superior: *(Briskly interrupting Manuel) Come on 'Lel! It's just a class of fourteen year olds... They have always liked you and you've known each other for years now... What's upsetting you? Don't tell me you're afraid to deliver a thirty minute lesson! It's not the first time you've replaced one of us even on short notice... and I - as you well know, ... I have always admired the way you keep children engaged whenever I have heard you telling Bible stories to the younger ones. Even parents like you. Remember that this will serve you good practice for your teaching placement... helps you with pedagogy, class control... and so on... so (as he smiles broadly)... We'll be soon handing you the new Verbum Dei now that you will be a trainee... a 'Kandidat' (a Candidate).*

Manuel had no other possibilities left other than offering his humble acceptance. To decline such an offer would have raised suspicion. On the other hand, this offer could imply that his superiors failed to recognise his homosexuality. So thankfully he doesn't look gay... he actually never looked gay! However, deep down... his conscience was on the verge of despair. Manuel had the presentiment that he was getting further entangled in this on-going deception. He firmly believed that no other possibilities existed. He had run out of options. The only possible way out of this mess was to run fast for his life, breaking the suffocating net around him.



Figure 4.5 – A typical M.U.S.E.U.M centre in Malta
(http://www.cospicuaparish.org.mt/images/photos/streetsandvies/muzew_tas-suben.jpg)

But...deep down he knew he could not do that. Anyway, it was too late for that. He decided to go with the flow with the current hope that he would manage to float with his nose above water.

“As expected I was eventually charged with a class of teenagers, some years younger than me and soon the fears that were always with me, came to the fore. Not that I ever suspected that I would become attracted to one of the boys. That had never crossed my mind. But with trepidation I remember asking myself the dreaded question: could this ever happen to me?”

In those days, not many people knew what paedophilia meant but the possibility that he could be considered as one of them petrified Manuel since he was now one of *the chosen ones* and he was aware the way people associated paedophilia with being gay.

The day when he wore his green ‘*Verbum Dei*’ badge arrived. It was a new status symbol. He had put on stronger armour now. Conversely, he started realising how fragile he had become on the inside:

“Ironically it was my own nature that had rendered me brittle. I started to despise it... and I feared it”.

Years later, Manuel graduated as a secondary school teacher. He was also formally appointed an Associate within the M.U.S.E.U.M society. He taught in the same centre where he had his first doctrine lessons prior to his Holy Communion. Although he's no longer *tal-mużew*, he believes that paradoxically it had been a significant chapter in his life; a bold chapter which helped to significantly sculpt his prospects.

“I have been through intensive moments, moments which made the Manuel I am today, *il-mużew* taught me character formation, character building, discipline. I admit that there were negative things also: being narrow minded, indisputable indoctrination...”

Manuel began to see things differently following a transfer to a more ‘cosmopolitan’ town in Malta.

“The thing is that in that particular village, things were done in a different way, it was more open-minded and one could criticise. Before, I was a man of the book and I strictly adhered to the rules... perhaps more than the founder of the M.U.S.E.U.M society did! But then I started to be critical... With the help of spiritual exercises I started reflecting about the decision I had taken about my faith, my life, *il-mużew*... and this made me more critical but safe. I started realising that it is normal and safe to question faith with a capital ‘F’. I started becoming critical in a constructivist way and applied deconstructionism to my own faith and to my own perspectives about life and sexuality. This I do through a lot of prayer and spirituality. So the way I look at things has changed completely. I no longer say that if the Church said so then it's hundred per cent right and it shall not be questioned. I am not going to be apologetic towards the Church. Today I am still a Catholic. I am a devout Catholic. But I am critical. And I still pray. I am very spiritual. I challenge the traditional doctrine about homosexuality and the natural law... I don't dump it to the proverbial dustbin but I say there are other ways”.

Manuel had just returned from a talk that he delivered to a group of about forty parents whose children are gay. It's now been a year since he has joined this Catholic group that seeks sexual and spiritual integration. The need to educate remains evident in Manuel's life. He says God has given him the talent to speak up, the ability to communicate his experience to others for society's own good. It is a mission he has recently embarked on.

“I remember feeling terrified when I attended the first meeting in this support group. I made sure nobody was looking as I entered inside the premises. As a teacher I knew I was kind of risking a respectable career. Five years ago I wouldn't have dreamed of sharing my story with others... today... I've gone ‘public’... and all I want to do is raise other persons' hope as they go through moments of obscurity. I know many feel lonely, are scared and even pushed to the fringes of society because of their sexuality. They dreadfully want to hear a word of hope.”

Strangely, Manuel hasn't told his parents about his homosexuality yet... He feels they're not prepared for this; he too must be well-prepared for their psychological reaction and for its consequences on his parents and on other family members.

“I honestly do not feel I have the energy and time to do this now... not just now... I don't feel I need to explain anything to anyone... I'm just sharing the gift the Lord has given me; the gift of homosexuality.”

A Reading of Manuel's Story

And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free

(John 8:32, The Holy Bible, New International Version, 1984)

Sources and Contexts of *'Manuel's Story'*

Exemplified into a quotidian fictional representation, this narrative provides distinctive insights into the human experience of a Maltese gay post-secondary educator; Manuel, whose life was heavily influenced by a very religious upbringing in the highly conservative context of Malta.

Whilst the process of construction of this story shares its characteristics with all the other narratives, this one in particular was fuelled by local on-going political debates on 'controversial' issues that ranged from the legal acknowledgment of same-sex 'unions' to the enactment of a law that made it possible for same-sex couples to adopt children. Issues related to civil unions had prevailed in the run up for the 2013 general election in Malta and even featured in the electoral manifestos of the respective parties (Alternattiva Demokratika, 2013; Partit Laburista, 2013; Partit Nazzjonalista, 2013). The way the parties' positions differed on these topics stirred up lengthy controversies that prevailed during the period of my doctoral study. It was interesting, even fascinating to an extent, to watch people publicly discussing this 'open secret' and to realise how many individuals were passionate about LGBT issues, whether in favour or against. It was a period during which difficulties, of a legal, emotional and psychological nature experienced by LGBT people were exposed. In a country which introduced divorce only in 2011, the introduction of same-sex civil union and particularly the adoption of children by same-sex couples were highly controversial.

Monsignor Bishop Scicluna who in February 2015 assumed the leadership of the Church in Malta as Archbishop described the proposed 'civil unions' Bill as 'illogical' and 'deceptive' (Sansone, 2013). The Bill proposed the extension of marriage rights and obligations to same-sex couples, including the possibility to adopt children. In the light of these circumstances the Church commissioned a local study (Sansone, 2014) which eventually concluded that in Malta eighty per cent of respondents were against gay adoption; in Gozo, a smaller and more conservative island eighty-eight per cent of the respondents were against gay adoption. While support for adoption by same-sex couples had gone up from seven per cent to twenty per cent from 2006 to 2014, strong opposition was persistent throughout all age-groups. In the eighteen to twenty-four age bracket, almost fifty-four per cent opposed gay adoption but disapproval soared to more than eighty-one per cent in the twenty-five to sixty-four age-

group. This specific survey had been criticised by government MPs who accused the Church of trying to “suffocate the logical and civil argument with nonsensical statistics” by exerting undue pressure on MPs to vote against the legislation as if they did otherwise they would be committing a “grave immoral act” (Schembri, 2014, p.2). Both main parties backed the introduction of civil unions however the opposition had reservations on the more controversial aspect of the law that allowed the adoption of children by gay couples. As a result, in April 2014, all government MPs voted in favour of the legislation whereas all opposition MPs abstained from voting. Undoubtedly, given Malta’s highly conservative political, social and cultural context, the more liberal stance adopted by the government, (elected in 2013) was revolutionary. Throughout this period, the political disputes that ensued and the gradual legal metamorphosis on LGBTIQ-related issues have all been an enriching and contributory source of data that led to the final characterisation of ‘Manuel’.

Many individuals, including myself as a Roman Catholic man were trapped in a dilemma: whether to conform to the teaching of the Church or advocate for the fundamental rights that all individuals in a just society ought to be afforded. However, I must point out that the construction of this character is additionally researcher prompted, in the way it amalgamates memories from the days I myself attended *il-mużew* up to my late teenage years. Imagination, added to these experiences, renders stories more realistic. This element together with the use of flashbacks and flashforwards helps readers relate to the story through their capacity to evoke emotive response. The story is told mainly in the third person narrative; but at times direct speech is used which helps to further immerse the reader in the context.

Who is ‘Manuel’?

Throughout this narrative, Manuel incessantly attempts to define and categorise himself in ways that satisfy the exigencies of social discourse. He struggles between being morally correct and with simultaneously being honest to himself and those around him as his rigid spiritual creed had always instructed. Manuel, however, fears the engulfing nightmare of social rejection and alienation as he opts to leave the doctrine society which had ensured the invisibility of his homosexuality and protected him from a towering hegemonic community for years.

... of Power and Hegemonic Masculinity

The narrative is introduced with a scene where a post-secondary student verbally intimidates Manuel, his teacher, prior to the delivery of a lecture. James, despite being a relatively minor character in the story, symbolises issues of masculine supremacy and power. Sitting in the front row seat and passing comments fearlessly, James is oppressive and intimidating in his lecturer's regard. There comes a point along this incident where we doubt Manuel's classroom control and disciplinary skills. His inability to handle James' verbal aggression symbolises his weakness and fear when faced by a confronting society that abides by the principles of hegemonic masculinity which in turn delineates one's fate. Although the majority of students sympathise with their teacher and condemn such harassment, their disapproval is dwarfed by the loudness of James' abusive stance. We do not know whether action is taken against the harassing student. Manuel's inability to take the bull by its horns can however be closely related to a strong sense of insecurity which keeps the teacher back from acting. Though Manuel's sexuality is not 'visible' to his students and the college staff as yet, he feels petrified that he might be unable to preserve such concealment. As a result, Manuel maintains his distance. His sense of helplessness is obvious.

The incident in the initial scene represents an ever-growing number of confrontational students who are hostile in their teacher's regard (Borg, 2015). Students' rights, challenges with upbringing, a lack of parental support in the education of children and the lack of protection of teachers from concocted abuse allegations are issues that get entangled during heated debates in the local media. Yet issues underlying the vulnerability of gay teachers in Malta are almost unheard of, and foreign to any sort of discussion. Where are gay teachers in Maltese schools? What position do they occupy within the moral and social ecology of Maltese educational institutions? If their voice has been either unheard of or possibly unheeded, why is this so? We are not told how the scene progresses or whether Manuel reports this bullying incident to his superiors. He is not necessarily afraid of James *per se* but of the possible negative outcomes that might emerge if he takes concrete action against his student. Manuel's timid and rather insecure character is not only very indicative of the state of his own well-being but it outlines the repercussions when a society fails to acknowledge sexualities that go beyond the male-female benchmark.

A Binary Gender Regime

Indeed, the manner in which gender identity operates within a binary system is an overarching theme throughout the narrative. The '*Verbum Dei*' badge (as it has been customary to term since its origins) plays a pivotal role in helping Manuel establish a 'rational' identity that can be easily defined "through the matrix of coherent gender norms" (Butler, 1990, p.24). What seems to be a trivial twenty-euro cent badge is indeed an identity construct for those around Manuel. The latter's sexual orientation was never an issue to his students up to the day he chooses to remove his '*Verbum Dei*' badge. The student's snide remarks reinforce the deeply ingrained nature of gender stereotypes, thus sustaining Keiller's (2010) observation on the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes where pressures are internalized from parents, media and peers.

Apparently, Manuel is a gay man whose physical appearance challenges mainstream stereotypical images of gay men. In removing the M.U.S.E.U.M badge, Manuel renounces his commitment to celibacy. His students now almost expect their lecturer to sleep around with any girl he desired, given that he no longer forms part of the doctrine society. Manuel has thus been officially pigeonholed as 'a heterosexual' within the binary regime of gender and is now expected to be on the lookout for a female complement. He now carries a new fixed and unchangeable identity that society has imposed on him. He is no longer categorised as 'single male; *tal-mużew*' but is now a 'single heterosexual male'; this makes a marked difference in the way students and society in general perceive Manuel. It is an aspect which is telling of stereotypical images of gay men. Notwithstanding a "proliferation of a wider repertoire of images of gay men (and less so, lesbians) in popular culture in recent decades... these images still speak to mainstream ideological agendas and fail to represent the diversity of gay life" (McLelland, 2005, p.1). Assumed heterosexuality is psychologically distressing for LGBT individuals.

Manuel's struggle to control himself from kissing his young friend (an impulse which he grew to deem as unnatural) and the eventual physical realisation of his instinct is an instance that leaves Manuel mortified for the 'grievous sin' he commits. The wrongness that Manuel feels after having kissed another boy at age eight is strongly suggestive of the implications of an ingrained binary gender system.

With reference to education, this is a problem for all students and teachers independently of their sexual orientation. These heteronormative assumptions regulate and restrict the individuals' behaviours and beliefs and therefore hierarchies of power are created and maintained. Our classrooms are not immune to such assumptions. As a result, the spectrum of expressions or ways of identifying for all students are restricted and, in turn, the type and quality of learning and teaching that can take place in the classroom becomes increasingly limited.

In this narrative, save for the thick beard, there is no description of Manuel's physical appearance. This is emblematic of the veiled presence of gay teachers in local schools which is a salient aspect that persistently emerges from the interviews in this study. In this case, Manuel encompasses the fears of gay teachers who fear social alienation and perhaps even harassment or victimisation by students or fellow colleagues should they become aware of their sexual orientation. The reader is fully aware of Manuel's dual identity practically from the very beginning of the narrative. The central character experiences a continual inner conflict between his outward role as a heterosexual male teacher and his true self which he has difficulty acknowledging, accepting and being. In this research study, all the teacher participants claimed similar experiences to those reported by and through Manuel. The aspect of gay teachers' dual identity is discussed at a later stage in this chapter.

***'Emmanuel'* – God is with Us**

The plot of this narrative does not unfold in a linear perspective with the introduction taking the reader to the protagonist's recent past paralleled by that complete chaos which had paralysed the local traffic that fateful Monday morning; Manuel's confused emotional state is palpable. Some of the quotations that have been integrated into the initial dialogue are 'actual' interview data that have been rephrased for the sake of anonymity. Society pressures Manuel to define his identity. Manuel feels morally incorrect on two opposing levels. On one hand, he fears he has been dishonest to comfortably hide behind the M.U.S.E.U.M's parameter of celibacy and he therefore decides to leave *'il-mużew'*, whilst on the other, he realises that by being himself he may be sinning and risking eternal damnation.

In one of the previous commentaries, I have elaborated on the discussion about the relation between homosexuality and spirituality which is a persistent theme across all narratives (See page 159). The religious teachings with which Manuel was brought up since childhood are in conflict with his sexuality. He is reluctant to give up his religion but he is simultaneously aware of the Church's antagonistic attitude towards issues related to homosexuality. In order to substantiate this uncontrollable anxiety in terms of morality and spirituality - (the two main issues with which Manuel struggles incessantly throughout this narrative), the narrative is deliberately constructed to include Manuel's childhood years through a flashback.

In the context of this narrative, religion is perceived not only in terms of spirituality but also as a custom which Manuel 'dutifully' accepts from his humble and conservative mother. Manuel's mother's minor role is however indispensable to the complicating action of the narrative. His mother is a woman who lives in fear of God. Neither her name nor any other details about her are revealed, but instead the focus is on her evident Christian devotion. She is submissive and conformist to social order and never chose to defy society's expectations. Her impact on her son's life is tremendous. This is the point where the story is constructed so as to bring to light the extent to which Manuel has been moulded by both his microcosmic and macrocosmic society.

When describing his childhood years, Manuel addresses the reader directly through the use of the first person narrative. Together with vivid descriptions which characterise these years, recounting these episodes in the first person narrative augments the sense of nostalgia that is derived from when I was storying Manuel. He sinks in thoughts of a blissful childhood with a sense of reminiscence which clearly contrasts with his actual turbulent state of being. All routine activities were immersed in spirituality and thus Manuel could never betray this integral part of himself. He additionally finds himself gradually and unconsciously making his way up the M.U.S.E.U.M hierarchy in a seemingly effortless way.

As with the narratives of Nick and Silvio, Manuel's story underscores a major issue which has been stressed by several researchers: active involvement within religious organisations and regular contact with religious friends and religious literature is likely to further promote attitudes that are anti-homosexual (Olson *et al.*, 2006; Sherkat and Ellison, 1997; Scheitle and Adamczyk, 2009). Manuel fears eternal damnation and thus his incessant exposure to religion is seen as contributing to his continued anxiety. However, I fully support the research

conducted by Wilcox (1996) and Regnerus and Smith (1998) who conclude that religious people may also be instrumental in shaping and in seriously prompting anti-homosexual attitudes that promote intolerance within society.

The paranoia that strangles Manuel during the Sunday homily is undeniably a strong scene along the account. The episode is recounted in the first person narrative. His guilt is tremendous and the teacher comes to internalise an innate belief that it is aberrant and corrupt for homosexual individuals to own sensitive and responsible jobs such as his teaching post. As previously discussed in the commentary on Albert's narrative (See page 137), society's fusion of homosexuality with paedophilia instils in Manuel the fear that being a homosexual teacher might be "viewed as perverted and as a corrupter of young, innocent children" (Clarke, 1996, p.203). In this regard, Manuel does not even dare to speak. He feels defenceless and vulnerable. His homosexual being may even jeopardise a respectable career in which he had invested all his time and energy.

Implications for Education

It would be easy to put together a sort of global 'Whig History' of the status of LGBT people, pointing out the proliferating legislation which in many of the world's jurisdiction acknowledge, legalise, and sometimes celebrate aspects of sexual diversity. 'Things have changed a lot for the better' might be a popularly-held view. But – even setting aside nations where no such rights exist and are furthermore often illegal and punishable sometimes by death– such an assumption is something of a sleight of hand. Even the latest NCF (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012) has 'Diversity' *typed* as one of its principles. It claims that: "It (the NCF) acknowledges and respects individual differences of age, gender, sexual orientation ... In a nutshell; it underpins diversity in all its forms" (p.32). However, beyond the heterosexual model of sexuality, what sort of sexual diversity are Maltese students being educated about? How is education helping individuals to come to terms with their 'othered' non-normative sexuality?

Although popular culture increasingly portrays homosexuality in a "non-threatening manner", "the increase in these kinds of representations of gay men [do not present] a strategy for inclusion but for containment" (McLelland, 2005, pp.2-3). In fact, Lilley (1985, p.20) accuses

educational institutions as being the “most cruel enforcers of heterosexist norms” and points to the vital necessity of acknowledging the violence, pain and harassment that seem to go unnoticed in cases of invisible queers in the field of education.

During one of the episodes in the narrative, Manuel is portrayed in his younger years. The young boy feels he is the only boy in the world who feels these emotions... who thinks that *he* is the exception to the rule of normality and who starts to believe that something has gone terribly wrong with him... and why? Because he is attracted to his fellow male students and shows no interest in girls. This is definitely suggestive of a shocking shortfall in the holistic education of students (and not just secondary school students during Personal Development sessions) on matters of sexuality. From a very tender age, even as babies and toddlers, children are bombarded by a popular hegemonic culture which projects the existence of a single binary relationship model: male and female (Meyer, 2007). Same sex relationships are viewed as having a lesser status than heterosexual relationships on legal, political and moral levels. The fact that society views homosexuality as being at the bottom of a gender hierarchy is an issue discussed by Connell (1995) who shows how being gay becomes closely correlated to whatever mismatches the criteria of hegemonic masculinity. In the light of this, Holmes and Cahill (2003) suggest that schools should address such social and cultural changes. Manuel’s narrative emphasises that schools need to synchronise their development in accordance with the culture to eradicate violence, isolation and harassment of LGBT youths.

One might think that the kind of distress that gay teachers face is the same form of injustice that other gays working in other areas, are made to endure. However, though rooted in one common social discourse, gay teachers are arguably even more particularly vulnerable. Manuel’s inner distress highlights Toynton’s (2006) thesis, who indicates that once an adult practitioner identifies himself as belonging to a devalued minority, further complications in the teacher-learner relationship may be experienced.

An additional observation that can be drawn from this narrative is that there is a definite lack of adequate support structures for teachers. Evidence of such is not only Manuel’s unaided mental distress but his sense of insecurity and increasing vulnerability as evidenced by his gradual yet deliberate isolation. None of his colleagues know about his sexuality. Manuel is thus represented as an isolated individual within the school’s social system. Not even his

spiritual director is aware of his homosexuality. It is made clear that for Manuel, revealing his sexuality would be a colossal task. He feels the urge to share his 'big secret' but he knows that increased social visibility might put his own well-being at stake. The protagonist's concealment of his sexual orientation, his sense of internalised stigma and his expectations of discrimination are evident contributing factors that confirm how Manuel is a victim of what Meyer (2003) defines as minority stress model. As a consequence of his minority status, Manuel experiences these challenges which prove to be a source of anxiety and distress.

This point affirms Young (1990), who explained that even the knowledge that oppressed minority groups are liable to harm and abuse *is in itself indirect persecution*(my italics). This issue of security may pose serious questions on the teacher's effectiveness in terms of his output and may possibly augment his sense of powerlessness.

An interesting aspect of Manuel's story is how teachers are expected to abide by a heteronormative discourse in their teaching at the expense of varied ways of being. This contradiction is particularly striking in Manuel's role as a teacher at *il-mużew*. In state schools, the teaching of Roman Catholic Religious Education is not only compulsory but in primary schools teachers are legally obliged to teach Religious Education. Article 2 of the Constitution of Malta states that the religion of Malta is the "Roman Catholic apostolic religion" (paragraph 1), that the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church have the duty and the right to teach which principles are right or wrong (paragraph 2) and that religious teaching of the Roman Catholic apostolic faith shall be provided in all state schools as part of compulsory education (paragraph 3) (Malta Const. 1964). Students, however have the right to refuse such instruction.

Participant teachers in my study, particularly in the primary sector, admitted they feel uncomfortable endorsing and transmitting principles which strongly contradict their way of being. Two participants spoke about the constant promotion of a traditional family model in the fourth year of the primary cycle while pointing out the fact that there is no mention of different forms of families in teaching sessions. In July 2015, MGRM donated about a hundred copies of fourteen books which included publications on 'coming out', on Trans children as well as audiovisual material for teachers (Micallef, 2015). A number of parents and teachers joined forces and created a Facebook group '*Parents and Teachers Against Gender Indoctrination of Our Children in Schools*' to protest. This attracted more than six

thousand members in a matter of a few days. Mr Grech Mintoff, a spokesperson for the group said that these books formed part of a wider agenda, driven by MGRM and claimed that “we have nothing against LGBT people, but we cannot accept that a minority imposes its agenda on our children, to the point that we cannot educate them according to our beliefs” (Micallef, 2015, p.3). Education Minister Bartolo explained that “the aim is not to turn children gay or lesbian but to eradicate stereotypes and certain prejudices against them” (ibid., p.3) yet despite this ministerial position, in the light of the ensuing controversy the Ministry of Education decided not to distribute the books to schools. These recent developments confirm the difficulties that LGBT individuals in Malta are forced to endure in a culture that is indifferent and hostile to their needs and reality.

The Need for Gay Role Models?

Towards the end of the narrative an emancipated Manuel opts to ‘come out’ ‘publicly’ by helping out with a parents’ support group. He admits that his experience within *il-mużew* cannot be defined as a sour one. He adds that it has helped him positively to become more critical and mature in his concept of the integration of his Catholic spirituality and his homosexuality. It is ironic that he does not find the courage to speak to his parents about the matter. This is an issue which proves Haas *et al.*’s (2011) point who argue that for gay people, parental rejection due to sexual orientation can prove to be a “powerful stressor” (p.22). This aspect has been highlighted in a discussion on the ‘coming out’ of gay individuals in the commentary on Albert’s narrative(See page 140).Then again, this concept of crossing, of having to ‘come out’ and tell the universe about one’s homosexuality in order to feel ‘liberated’ reinforces social discourses on gender, sex and sexuality.

The eventual unfolding of the narrative seems to imply that there is just a single ‘truth’ and once this truth has been discovered, the individual will be enabled to lead a more liberated life. However Butler (1990) states that, “the notion that there might be a ‘truth’ of sex, as Foucault ironically terms it, is produced precisely by the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms” (p.24). From a queer perspective, the premise that individuals in society all own a fixed and unchangeable identity is challenged. In the context of this narrative and in relation to queer paradigm, a valid counter-argument might claim that in coming in terms with his ‘gay identity’ Manuel is

ascribed a 'gay' status and pigeonholed in normalising categories, despite the emancipatory nature of this process.

Although some would argue that teachers should professionally distance themselves from their students in terms of their private lives, it is also necessary for all students to have positive role models (Stonewall, 2012). LGBT equality campaigners suggest that in itself, the act of 'coming out' may serve as a strategy with the greatest potential for freedom whereas Kissen (1996) explains how being 'out' "was also seen as a positive part of creating an environment where students would acquire a more humane vision of the world" (p.69). She further adds that the life experiences of gay teachers who opt to 'come out' to their students "as a hated minority had sensitized them (the students) to the plight not only for gay students, but of all those who were victimized" (p.64). Manuel's emergence as a 'gay public figure' sheds light on the effectiveness of having openly-gay role models within the educational domain.

The self-disclosure of gay teachers may be closely associated with authenticity and honesty – elements which according to Noddings (1984) are the pre-requisites for a "very special – and specialized – caring relationship" (p.174) that is known as the teaching profession. To be the person whom Noddings calls the 'one-caring', one must be willing to present himself or herself honestly and openly – in Martin Buber's words, to "really be there", for the "cared-for" (Buber, 1965, p. 98; Noddings, 1984, p. 4). This is confirmed in research by Stonewall which claims that "people perform better when they can be themselves" (p.3). Nonetheless, honesty and openness, fundamentally significant in Nodding's concepts of care may prove to be practically unmanageable and perhaps impossible for most gay teachers as has been discussed in my reflection on Manuel's narrative (Kissen, 1996).

Personally, I believe that the visibility of non-heteronormative sexualities is a basic necessity to combat heterosexism. However the true liberation of the self, acquired through choosing to abandon the closet may come at massive, potentially disastrous personal cost. If teachers want to be open about their sexuality, issues of homophobia and a lack of support from teacher colleagues and from members of school management teams militate against such courage. This is borne out by research carried out by Stonewall in the UK where ninety-six per cent of gay pupils had heard homophobic language such as 'poof' or 'lezza' at school – behaviour that teachers often fail to address (Williams, 2012). A survey conducted by the

Teacher Support Network (2006) shows that two-thirds of LGBT teachers had withstood harassment or prejudice at work because of their sexual orientation. Eighty-one per cent of respondents claimed that harassment and/or prejudice came from pupils, forty-six per cent it came from colleagues and thirty-three per cent said it came from members of the management team. Sue Sanders, of '*Schools Out*', a charity that promotes equality for LGBT people in education estimates that as few as twenty per cent of gay teachers are 'out' to their pupils. "There's nowhere near enough support for them," she says. "I've had teachers tell me their Heads won't let them 'come out'. They should fight it, but people are frightened" (Williams, 2012, p.5).

Participants' Responses to Manuel's Narrative

“Beautiful. Not only in the way it stirred up my emotions but also in how I could see myself in parts of the story and even in Manuel himself, at certain moments...” commented one of the research participants on the story. I have decided to open this part of the commentary with this statement since I felt that this teacher captures precisely the essence of fictional narratives as a research methodology.

The feedback of one interviewee was focused on the pressures that *“living a double life”* may cause gay teachers, while another participant believed it was *“inspiring to hear of a person who is using his openness of his sexuality to help younger adults who would be facing the same situation”*. This comment was repeated by another educator who has a managing position at the school where he works. He claims:

I could identify with Manuel since I try to help out students in all cases but especially in matters that deal with homosexuality. I somehow feel more confident when these issues arise. I feel it is my duty... my obligation to give a helping hand... even by simply using the right words to address the situation.

One contributor felt that the narrative *“re-ignited”* his anger towards religion. Using strong words, the teacher justified his rebellion towards the Church in Malta since it *“does not do anything to protect gay rights... and for being the cause of many gay people's suffering”*. This particular teacher goes on to add that he practices his Catholic religion through the professional way he delivers his work duties; his teaching. He affirmed that this narrative encouraged him to state with conviction that being a true Catholic meant *“respecting others and their own beliefs, whether they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, male or female, black or white”*.

Edmond's Narrative

As he played the last few notes on the piano, the audience broke into a warm applause, lauding the musician's admirable performance. Not only had he become renowned well known to tourists who choose to reside at that hotel for the period of their vacation but his aptitude to play the piano by ear attracted hundreds of non-residents too who enjoyed his recitals over cocktails. With his talent, he enlivened the atmosphere inside that piano bar every other evening. In winter he would work only at weekends. He has been doing this successfully for the past three years or so.

By the time he returned home I was already asleep. As he turned on the bedside lamp, I peered at my digital watch. It was almost three a.m. I looked at him with sleepy eyes. It has been a long time since I last saw that excited look on my boyfriend's face.

Enthusiastically he announced his good news. He simply could not wait till dawn: "I've had my contract renewed for the next year at the hotel!"

"Great... I'm happy for you... Well done!" I replied with a yawn.

"Is that all you're going to say?" he asked indignantly.

"What am I supposed to say? I said I'm happy... actually very happy dear... it's just that I'm tired and you know I'll have to be at school at seven this morning... but I did tell you how..."

My comment backfired.

"Ah! Always with the same old boring excuse up your sleeve... work, work and work... I never learn! I should not have told you anything in the first place. Why do I bother if you are not interested in what I do? You're just an old sick cow who's fed up of life".

I sat up in my bed and crossed my arms. All my sleepiness had faded by then.

"I am ... yes... fed up... I am actually fed up of your constant whinging... your spiteful words and your unjustified anger towards me ..." I replied, angrily. There is no need to remind me that I'm sick and getting worse... There's one door and plenty of windows, whenever and *if ever* you choose to leave". I had raised my tone of voice by then.

Sulking, he went inside the sitting room and sat on the sofa. He stayed in complete darkness. He was sobbing. I could hear him from the bedroom.

I pitied him.

For the umpteenth time, I tried to resist and ignore his outburst. AS usual, I succumbed, got out of bed and sat down beside him.

"Sorry" I whispered. It was the only way I could stop the sobbing. I hugged him. He wrapped his arms around me and I kissed him gently on his lips. "It's over, all right?"

He murmured something I did not want to hear or understand. I wanted the arguing to stop.

In that enveloping darkness, we held each other's hand.

He kissed me passionately. His cheeks were wet. He was still in tears. He could be the greatest companion when he was in a good mood but the boy was mentally distraught. The way he touched me meant that he wanted to have sex. That was his only tactic to resolve arguments and it was how he reconciled with himself.

Despite my exhaustion I did not turn down his proposal. I was not allowed, anyhow. Refusing was something I could not afford to do. In rejecting him, I would be landing myself in trouble, and days of ceaseless quarrelling and contention - something I can no longer stand. I have had enough of it in these last four turbulent years.

We had sex.

I had never led a gay lifestyle till I got to know Sam. I had met him at a tiny bar where he had been entertaining the public. He looked younger than me. Just looking at each other we knew we fancied one another. A kind of love at first sight, as they say. I kept on frequenting that same bar for several evenings but we never spoke, until, one night I offered Sam a drink. That night we conversed till the early hours of the morning. It was the beginning of a tragic relationship leading to a dead end but which neither of us could abandon.

Sam said he was fed up with me.

We have been together in this relationship for more than nine years. We have seen each other grow up. But I have been in a state of despair for the last four years now... and I cannot leave him – I love him. Staying on in this relationship makes me feel bad. Deserting Sam would make me feel just as bad. Leaving him in the lurch would be very selfish of me. These last years were characterised by a series of crises that have submerged me deeper and deeper into a suffocating abyss from which I cannot surface.

Two years ago we had our first break-up. I teach at a primary school. The following morning, I went into the classroom, sat behind my desk and wept uncontrollably. I cried so much that my eyes were swollen. To make matters worse, somebody knocked at my door exactly the moment I broke down.

Reluctantly I answered.

“Yes, come in”.

She was about to ask me how I was, as she does habitually. Instead she paused, just in time.

“Good morning Ed”. It’s the pupils’ work from yesterday” she said gently as she took the arithmetic workbooks out of a plastic bag. It was Sonia, my best friend who worked as the school secretary.

“Ok. Erm... place it over there, please... I’ll see to it soon” I replied.

She had added another mound of books to my backlog of work which by then, had started to pile up on my desk. The only thing I hated in my work was those endless corrections.

Sonia hesitated. I could see she was concerned about me even though I did not have the courage to face her.

“Would you like a coffee?” she asked, turning around before leaving the classroom.

“Yes please, that would be very nice of you, Sonia.”

She hesitated and walked back towards my desk.

“Ok... Listen, Ed’ you know how much we have always respect each other. I have noticed you were on sick leave last week and I imagine you are not feeling that well as yet. I cannot oblige you to share any of your troubles but you know I’m here if ever you want to chat”.

“Thanks”. I smiled at Sonia. It was nice of her. She has always been a genuine friend. But I never shared any of my problems with her. Not even in the worst of times. Despite a clear policy against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation - that has been recently adopted at the school where I teach, I feel uneasy disclosing my homosexuality to anyone. Losing my job is something I dread terribly and it is something which I certainly cannot afford at present.

At school my homosexuality is more like an open secret. My fellow colleagues might assume that I am gay and I imagine that my sexuality might have been the topic of many staffroom conversations; but I never formally informed anybody about it - not even to any of my family members. I have no brothers or sisters and my parents are old. Mum was forty-five when she had me. Both mum and dad are now octogenarians. I will never ever tell them that I’m gay. They would undoubtedly struggle to comprehend my reality at their age. Mum, particularly, has got an ignorant mentality – ‘the mentality of the church’. I laugh whenever I see the cardboard box filled with toys which she keeps in the kitchen. She says she is saving those toys, which had once been mine, for the grandchildren that God will one day send *me* from heaven.

On the other hand, my partner Sam had no support from his family. He had been brought up in an orphanage and, though Maltese, he knew none of his relatives.

So two years ago, we broke up.

We broke up because Sam had cheated on me. The moment I got to know, I left the house and spent the night in the car.

He justified his disloyalty with a number of reasons.

He said I work too much and that I was always tired in the evening.

He accused me of not looking after my own health much. [I agree. It’s true. I barely take heed of my doctor’s advice. My doctor suggested I cut down on fatty foods when tests confirmed that I have a slow thyroid. I never did so but my emotional ups and downs with Sam were not beneficial either. I have put on weight and it does not look good on me]. Still, I could not take the blame for the guilt that had overcome Sam following his infidelity. It was something I could not endure. At least that was what I thought on the spur of the moment as I left the house, heading to nowhere.

Eventually I rented a place despite owning half of the place Sam and I had bought together.

Ten days following our break-up, Sam contacted me.

He insisted on buying my share of the place. I warned him he could not afford to do that. He did not listen and proceeded with his plans. Again, I could not refuse.

After a number of weeks, Sam gave me a call.

He said he wanted me back and that he was terribly sorry for what happened.

Surprised? Not at all - I knew it would happen.

I went back to Sam. I was worried. [There were times when he attempted to commit suicide.] Once together again, I suggested we see a psychotherapist as a couple. He insisted that I was saying that he's gone bonkers, that he's mental. I have now given up suggesting that we seek professional help.

Sam is a good musician, and according to Sam it's the only thing he can do to earn a living. Regrettably, given the local restricted market and the lack of exposure of such talents, earning a living through music is only illusory. For the rest of the day Sam is unemployed. He does the laundry and the cooking, takes care of the house work, watches endless telenovelas that have been going on for years and that's about it. What he earns just pays off his loan. I foot the utility bills, even though I haven't got the ownership of the place. The place is not mine, now. He has been looking for a full time job for ages. He says he wants to do something he loves.

On the other hand, I love going to work – it's a way of escaping this one-way tunnel. But at times I lack the energy to perform as I have always wanted to. I feel mentally drained and broken. And I have nobody with whom I can share my feelings.

Is it my weak character that keeps me back from being decisive? Is it my solitude that has rendered me insecure or am I with Sam out of pity?

This relationship is ruining me.

Nonetheless I confess he is the only one I love, and the only man I have ever loved.

A Reading of Edmond's Story

Sources and Contexts of *'Edmond's Story'*

Throughout the entirety of this project, ensuring the narratives' credibility or what Clough (2002) describes as "*the ethnographic challenge*" is a main challenge that this research project aimed to fulfil; in a commentary that he provides on one of his fictional narratives (ibid.), Clough explains that there is a tendency to expect 'believable' fictional characters to suffer only "a certain portion of pain, of horror" (p.64). Moulding "implausible" and "disproportionate" experiences into a single character may, in the eyes of some readers and critics, undermine the narrative's trustworthiness and its connection to reality. In the context of this fictional narrative, Edmond's story may attract "criticism because it is too dark" however this narrative "translates life's realities as lived" (Clough, 2002, p.64) by some of the research participants who shared their stories in my research project.

Communicated in the first person narrative, Edmond's story embodies the capacity of narrative methods in reporting the irony and ambiguity that is inherent in human experience. It is an emotionally-charged account which may evoke sentiments of compassion, melancholy or perhaps resentment. Although, in terms of length, this narrative turns out to be the shortest one from this collection of stories, it nonetheless interweaves a number of significant themes that are of paramount importance. Identity politics, the invisibility of gay teachers and the increased emotional hardship for gay educators are all issues at the core of Edmond's story but are also major themes that reappear across the different narratives in the study overall. Particular parts of the story reveal the messiness of lived experiences of any individual who is caught up in any tumultuous relationship, independent of whether the individual is gay or not (albeit my stories and the literature show how difficulties may be exacerbated for gay individuals). On the other hand, the ubiquitous sense of the individual's lack of completeness and the uncertainties of partnership are ever present throughout Edmond's narrative.

The story is rooted in a key episode that was shared by one of the teacher participants and which eventually proved to be instrumental in shaping the essence of Edmond's narrative. The described event, which I eventually refashioned into a fictional narrative, conveys the complexity of social discourse and the tensions that arise as 'Edmond' negotiates his intersecting identities in the professional and personal spheres of his life. The narrative thus

exhibits consequences which are part of “the intersectional slippages which happen when professional identities are negotiated in education spaces” (Taylor, 2009, cited in Biddulph, 2013, p.235).

The Invisibility of Gay Teachers and the Concept of Dual Identity

Characterised by strong feelings of isolation and loneliness, Edmond’s narrative primarily reveals the inherent tensions of living under the double burden of oppression and invisibility. Edmond, a primary school teacher is trapped in a relationship that is significantly compromised by a sense of anxiety and by his partner’s own vulnerable state of mind. He does not use these terms but beneath the surface Edmond’s fears are palpable. The narrative necessarily exposes the relational crisis which has taken its toll on both Edmond’s and Sam’s psychological and emotional well-being. Apart from the psychological strain that often accompanies stressful relationships, Edmond and his partner belong to a ‘devalued minority’ in society – an aspect which naturally complicates matters for individuals whose sexuality is socially constructed as non-normative.

For gay students and teachers, revealing their sexual orientation in the average Maltese school means taking tremendous risks that may ultimately render them more vulnerable. This narrative portrays a painful split between the professional identity and sexual identity of Edmond who is indirectly inhibited from being his true self. Rather than being perceived a whole, the identity of gay teachers seems to be fragmented in a dual identity: a professional self and a sexual identity. Individuals who do not fulfil the criteria of heterosexism are often delineated by their sexual identity – an integral aspect which is considered as the assumed, socially accepted and taken for granted norm in the case of heterosexual individuals. In concealing his homosexual identity and therefore hiding a significant part of himself, Edmond, safeguards his professional teacher identity from anything that may threaten its stability. This is mirrored in Kissen (1996) who explains that “self-revelation is a dangerous undertaking for any gay teacher” (p.62) since educators may then risk the sad reality of harassment and social alienation. For homosexual educators, to be open about their sexual identity means giving up control over how much of their identity they will be able to reveal (Kissen, 1996). This echoes Rofes (2000), an openly gay teacher, who claims that when he previously disguised his homosexuality “[he] sacrificed parts of [his] identity that did not

comfortably fit into the world's sense of what is appropriate conduct for a teacher" (Rofes, 2000, p. 449).

The issue of invisibility surrounding gay students and teachers demonstrates the power and control of heteronormativity in hiding non-conformant aspects and in naturalising conformant heteronormative practices. Edmond chooses to withdraw the more personal dimensions of his identity from the place of work notwithstanding his colleagues' evident loyalty. The sexual aspect of his identity enables Edmond to define himself as non-conformant and it additionally determines the meaning that he gives to his lived experiences. Given the social construction of identity, Edmond's identity is not neutral. His sexual orientation is prone to the social and political power that he owns and the way he exercises his power in the professional domain. It shapes his experiences and the way he builds his immediate social network. It furthermore stipulates the affordances and inequalities that he recurrently faces. This is evocative of the discursive aspects of 'field' and its impact on habitus as outlined by Bourdieu (1990). In actual fact, the fundamental role of identity in accruing power is a major theme across the collection of stories presented in this research project. Systematic and institutional prejudice is a recurring obstacle which manifests itself in unequal rights, unequal opportunities and consequent marginalisation as this narrative confirms.

Given the close-knit 'village culture' of the local Maltese community most people would probably be aware of the sexuality of friends and neighbours. Nonetheless, interviewees confirmed that it is somehow more stressful to pluck up the courage and explicitly proclaim one's homosexual identity to the rest of teaching staff even when there is common knowledge of someone's homosexuality. Most often, the teacher's homosexuality would remain a known secret – most colleagues would know about it but not because the gay teacher opts to deliberately share his sexual identity. This invisibility it is not a matter of cowardice or pusillanimity but for gay teachers the disclosure of their homosexuality in educational spaces renders them exposed and defenceless. Educators who take up this challenge are aware that they may face potential professional and personal harm (Andrews, 1990; Harbeck, 1992).

Fear of the consequences of self-disclosure holds gay teachers back from sharing their personal suffering with their colleagues. Having faced circumstances similar to Edmond's situation vis-à-vis partnership, heterosexual colleagues, faced with circumstances similar to Edmond's are in a position to seek collegial support without any difficulty but like Edmond,

many gay teachers are bound to suffer in silence as is illustrated in this account. Nonetheless, although Edmond is mentally and emotionally distraught given the miserable circumstances of his relationship, he is still unwilling to risk the disclosure of his homosexuality. He ‘deliberately’ resists sharing his distressed emotional state in order to safeguard his own security. This concern keeps Edmond back from engaging in genuine relationships with his colleagues. Suffering in silence without the comforting words of a supportive teacher colleague is sadly a common element that emerges from a number of interviews that were conducted in this project and which I have purposively highlighted in the portrayal of this fictional character.

To make matters worse, Edmond has not even ‘outed’ himself with his parents. His mother, in her eighties and with a ‘church mentality’ is hopeful that one day Edmond would make her a grandmother. Edmond conveys the impression that his parents might not be able to understand what homosexuality is all about, let alone attempt to grapple with the reality of a homosexual son.

Edmond’s internal perceived stigma is evident in his underlying expectation that he might be rejected and discriminated against if he renders his sexuality visible. This internalised process, sometimes referred to as the ‘felt stigma’ may lead to “a state of continuous vigilance that can require considerable energy to maintain” (Herek, 2009; Scambler and Hopkins, 1986, cited in Institute of Medicine, 2011, p.8). In this respect Clarke (1996; 2002) explains how this sense of ‘double consciousness’ is in addition a source of tension for lesbian students and teachers. If teachers opt to ‘out’ themselves they would be violating society’s norms and its hegemonic boundaries, and would therefore be risking alienation and social exclusion and their eventual reverberations.

Participants' Responses to Edmond's Narrative

In providing some reflections on this narrative, all participants commented on the aesthetic capacity of writing in revealing 'true life' experiences. One of the contributors wrote: "*Again, written very beautifully, very human ... sometimes it reminds me of some of the dynamics in my relationship with (mentions partner's name) ... although, thankfully, the situation is also very different. But, I could relate...*" One other participant reiterated the artistic characteristics of the narrative and its potential in evoking real-life scenes and 'humane' sentiments. This interviewee explained that:

the way the narrative is written immerses you (meaning, the reader) in the story. It reminds me of difficult moments in my life, which I had to sort on my own... without anybody's help – and this because I risked revealing my sexuality by sharing my difficulties and I was always wary about that.

A teacher participant succinctly affirmed that he found the story "*heart-wrenching*" and without focusing on the gay nature of the relationship, he asserted that "*this story shows how love makes us do strange things. In my experience I would say better to be alone than to love and not be loved back*". I purposefully included this reflection in order to show how a single narrative enables different readers to construct an array of understandings depending on the way they locate themselves in the story and in the way they relate to the characters.

Conclusion

Almost all the narratives are ultimately something of a partial success story, since despite the turmoil which gay adolescents may endure, these participants have succeeded in having a teaching career which they have defined as rewarding and fulfilling. On the other hand, as the narratives show, having a stable job and ensuring financial stability are not sufficient elements to guarantee well-being.

Albert's narrative enables individuals to reflect on issues underlying the feminisation of early childhood education as it attempts to reveal the reasons behind the stigmatisation of gay teachers in elementary schooling. In the local Maltese scenario, the number of female teachers disproportionately outweighs their male counterparts. It is an undeniable fact that Maltese society is highly satisfied with female teachers' work in this sector (Galea, 2013). Moreover the social discourse that separates gay teachers from elementary school children, because of the ingrained fear of paedophilia, continues to complicate matters for gay teachers. Furthermore, Albert's account encourages reflections on the effects that the 'coming out' of an LGBT adolescent may have on his well-being, especially if rejected or unsupported. The realities portrayed through these narratives may often be the case for any other gay individual in any society but 'coming out' in Maltese society is particularly complex and risky. In this study, participants who are still not open about their sexuality to their parents confirmed that they do not disclose their sexual orientation with their parents for fear of adverse reactions

The Catholic religion, emerging as one of the main themes across the narratives in this study, has historically policed heteronormativity. Nick's story particularly embodies the way in which Catholicism is ingrained in Maltese culture and similarly shows how religion continues to exacerbate difficulties gay teachers have to deal with.

Both Nick's and Silvio's narratives deal with the indisputable reality of homophobic bullying in educational settings. In Nick's story, the rampant masculine sport culture endorses an attitude of intolerance and persecution. The PE teacher's homophobic intimidation in Harry's regard is similar to the Religion teacher's attitude, experienced by Silvio in his narrative. In the respective accounts, both teachers embody two main domains which are homophobic.

Interestingly, almost all teacher participants in this thesis referred to cases of homophobic intimidation among students at school as they described their experiences as either victims or witnesses of similar abuse. Participants in this study who described episodes of school bullying confirmed that their teachers were rarely aware of abuse, in spite of the fact that these episodes contradictorily occurred on the school premises. Even so, all participants confirmed that teachers were quite positive and generally supportive in their approach towards students but they proved to be rather blind to cases of homophobic bullying. Furthermore, all teachers in this study affirmed that homophobic harassment between students is still widespread in educational institutions.

The challenges described in Silvio's narrative draw a parallel to those experienced by Nick. Although Nick did not engage in high-risk activities, his adolescence was marked with solitude and a sense of confusion, as evident in the bar episode and in his short-lived relationship with Ben. He deliberately lost all his contacts and became increasingly isolated. As Nick became gradually aware of his same-sex attraction he was petrified. As a result of his confusion, Nick axed the minimal opportunity he had to socialise with Ben who was experiencing feelings that were similar to his. In the respective narratives, Silvio and Nick were particularly unable to maintain a healthy state of mind due to issues that arise from inaccurate knowledge within society in general and from the stigma that society attaches to homosexuality rather than from the orientation itself.

The phenomenon of silence surrounding Maltese gay teachers is an overarching theme in this thesis. The sense of 'dual identity' that teachers adopt to cloak their homosexuality is particularly outlined in Edmond's narrative. In this account, it is clear how aspects of a heterosexist culture force gay teachers to hide in order to avoid harassment and to live with the constant threat of discovery. Edmond's story suggests that since invisible gay teachers "cannot present themselves authentically, they can neither serve as positive role "models" nor "model" caring by responding to the needs of students, especially gay students" (Kissen, p.63). Through hiding, Kissen (1996) explains that gay teachers are prevented from expressing authentic care to their colleagues and for themselves, an aspect which she defines as "the most devastating consequences of the glass closet" (p.67). These problems, embodied in Edmond's story, not only impinge on the psychological well-being of gay individuals but may additionally dent the output and professional care that gay teachers are 'expected' to fulfil in meeting the duties expected of them within the teaching profession.

“No LGBT student [or educator] should have to suffer just because of who they are. This means making sure that schools are safe places for all and that the diversity of the ... population is reflected in the curriculum” claims MGRM (2012, p.60). The Ombudsman for Children (2012) concurs, suggesting that educational institutions must understand the enormous difficulty for students to divulge cases of homophobic bullying when issues revolving around the subject of homophobia or transphobia are never discussed at school or if their school culture is perceived to be tolerant towards homophobic attitudes and behaviours (Ombudsman for Children’s Office, 2012).

Rendering school environments more LGBTI friendly goes beyond acting on homophobic bullying incidents. Appreciating and supporting sexual diversity should not just be limited to mere academic exposure in school curricula. Educators merely teaching about homosexuality, would only be reinforcing the gap of estrangement and the normalising discourses which pervade sexuality (Kumashiro, 2004). The way forward is to challenge the heteronormativity of school environments through a collective and institutionalised effort. It is only in this way that the gloomy reality of homophobia and heterosexism can be seriously addressed.

Critics of these narratives may view these stories as vulnerable to the old stereotypes of silence, invisibility and homophobic sentiments however, as shown in parts of the commentary on Manuel’s story, these narratives emphasise the point that Maltese culture and practice have not evolved in parallel with legislation. The reality in Malta is that the current systems within the local educational culture fall short of fulfilling Meyer’s (2007) notion of queer pedagogy which aims to question the (in)visibility of silenced discourses and which “create spaces for students to examine and challenge the hierarchy of binary identities that is created and supported by schools” (p.27).

In the classroom context, failing to make visible the heteronormative assumptions further silences sexualities that society has constructed as ‘others’. Teaching staff should, at least, be enabled – if not required – to contest heteronormative assumptions in classroom interactions, in academic work, curricula, school resources and materials. This, however, is not enough. All educators need primarily to be sensitive to the effects that a school environment hostile to ‘non-normative’ sexualities may have on students, particularly on those who ‘do not fit’ with its mainstream discourse. This principle ought to permeate the schools’ culture and ethos in

order to help all students and teachers feel equal, safe and respected. This ought to be the ultimate aim of whoever opts for a socially just learning process that is free from any sort of bigotry.

Figure 4.6 Narrative Themes/Sub-Themes	<i>Albert's Story</i>	<i>Nick's Story</i>	<i>Silvio's Story</i>	<i>Manuel's Story</i>	<i>Edmond's Story</i>
1. Issues of power/hegemonic masculinity/a binary heterosexist gender system	X	X	X	X	X
2. The concept of a dual identity (professional vs. personal)/invisibility/silence	X	X	X	X	X
3. The role and influence of religion on the lives of gay teachers	X	X	X	X	X
4. Consequences of 'coming out'; the support/acceptance/rejection of family members	X	X		X	
5. Homophobic/Heterosexist bullying		X	X		
6. The feminisation of teaching	X				
7. Gay teachers as role models		X		X	
8. The fusion of homosexuality and paedophilia	X			X	
9. Issues of inclusion and safety at educational environments/support of teacher colleagues		X	X		X

Figure 4.6: Narrative Themes and sub-Themes

Figure 4.7: The Main Theme in Each Narrative

Narrative	Main Theme in Each Narrative
<i>Albert's</i>	The conflation of homosexuality with paedophilia
<i>Nick's</i>	The influence of Catholic Religion (and gay teachers' accessibility to employment in the teaching sector, especially in Catholic Church schools)
<i>Silvio's</i>	Issues of safety for gay individuals in educational environments
<i>Manuel's</i>	Aspects of power in a binary gender regime
<i>Edmond's</i>	A culture of silence, invisibility and a dual identity

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This study entitled, *'The Narratives of Gay Male Teachers in Contemporary Catholic Malta'* explores the significance of the narratives of five Maltese gay teachers. Through the assembly of five fictional narratives, this project has identified key cultural issues which characterise these experiences. Since appropriate literature of this cultural locale is scant, this study sought to make a contribution to it by addressing the following research question, namely;

What do the experiences of local gay teachers reveal about contemporary Maltese culture?

In this study, the narrative methodology was central to access the experiences of Maltese gay teachers. In-depth interviews with research participants generated data which served as the foundations for the construction of the narratives. A significant part of the 'analysis of data' is carried out by means of the narrative compositions. Reference to Maltese legislation and to other legal documents [in either the fictionalised accounts or in the respective commentaries] consolidates the experiences of these educators by providing a more authentic understanding of what it means to be a gay teacher in Malta in the 21st century.

As discussed in Chapter three of this study, ethical obligations are a *sine qua non* given the indispensable participation of Maltese gay teachers. The only way in which the experiences of these educators could be *safely* shared within a culturally sensitive society was through a fictionalised narrative methodology. This qualitative technique was not only instrumental in communicating the humanity of these stories but it also ensured the protection of participants and their close relatives from any risks or dangers that might arise from the experiences shared in these stories.

The insight generated about issues raised through the interviews with research participants is significant. The interview data, reworked into fictionalised accounts exposed several characteristic features of contemporary Maltese culture. The realisation of such features in Maltese institutions and their professionals proves the pervasiveness of a culture of heteronormativity in the Maltese context. The narrative interviews demonstrated the systematic marginalisation of individuals who violate the 'normative' framework of heterosexuality. For the majority of participants, growing up in a society which assumed that all people were heterosexual and which in turn muted the true expression of their perceived deviant sexuality proved to be a traumatising experience. This was predominantly evident in the interviewees' description of their 'coming out' process. The support of family members to

their gay children could not always be guaranteed despite their love towards them, and while a number of gay teachers actually faced dire consequences upon ‘coming out’ to their family network, others chose to refrain from presenting their ‘true self’ for fear of their parents’ adverse reaction. Religious arguments rooted in the biological complementarity of males and females and in arguments in connection with human reproduction have historically preserved a patriarchal culture of maleness which defined homosexual activity as sinful. Time and again, this discourse was responsible for re-generating a hierarchy of masculinities which relegated ‘deviant masculinities’ to the bottommost level of this constructed hierarchy. The repercussions of such discourse on island communities where one’s future is traditionally ‘destined’ by the priest from the pulpit are devastating.

Aspects of ultra-heterosexism, manifest in homophobic bullying, underscore the institutionalisation of heterosexuality as a legitimate mainstream, sexual identity at the expense of ‘othered’ sexualities. These narratives constructed schools as educational sites which preserve the pre-eminence of heterosexuality. The struggles of gay teachers are evident throughout their educational experiences both as students and eventually as teachers. Participants in the study had direct experience of homophobic abuse, others claimed they witnessed such mistreatment on fellow students. In one case, homophobic abuse was evident through disparaging comments from other teachers. The safety and protection of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) students is a prevailing issue at different stages along the narratives.

The fictionalised narratives exemplify how the difficulties of research participants are exacerbated as they navigate the professional terrain of education. Indeed, as educators, these individuals generally distance their sexuality (an undeniably essential aspect of one’s self) from their professional life. These stories prove that in close-knit communities such as that of Malta, hiding one’s personal life can be taxing since detection is easier and its consequences are worse. Instead of serving as positive role-models to students, gay teachers in Malta are generally discouraged from rendering their sexuality visible. Fear of losing one’s employment, fear of parents’ reactions and the possibility of unsupportive stances from teacher colleagues and school management staff are factors that generally keep teachers in their closet. Furthermore, discourses which fuse homosexuality and paedophilia and the feminised context of teaching particularly in the field of elementary instruction were major concerns for participants in this project. Generally, participants also claimed that by being

ultra-dedicated educators, they could fend off any accusations that could blemish their unsullied reputation. In addition, they were conscious of the negative attitude of the Maltese people regarding the correctness of accepting gay people as teachers. As a result, these teachers were, by and large, presented as isolates within their respective school environment. As the title of this research project implies, the suppression of the teachers' sexual identity is altogether marked by a sense of invisibility, vulnerability and isolation.

All these issues have determined the way in which gay teachers construct their identity(ies) and the way in which their homosexual identity intersects with their teacher identity. The recurring identity conflicts affect the day-to-day lives of teachers in Maltese educational institutions. Schools act as a massive closet for most gay teachers since the challenging elements that all participants referred to in their narratives render the teaching profession unique in the way it restricts and complicates the lives of teachers who do not adhere to the prescribed standard 'norms' of sexuality. These features also reveal the absence of 'non-normative' sexualities within school environments. In Church schools, the overall governing ecclesiastical institution continues to police its heterosexual 'Catholic hegemony' (Borg, 2006), while exposure to sexual diversity in state schools remains limited. While people from all walks of life and background stress the need to educate new generations in a holistic way, the aspect of sexual diversity, in all its forms and meanings is rarely given the attention that it merits. These narratives reveal how teachers in Malta are not professionally equipped to be able to discuss such issues in the classroom and that the exposure of teachers to the multi-faceted topic of sexual diversification, through the preparatory Bachelor of Education programme is limited. As things stand, the only teaching about sexuality in local schools merely consists of an emphasis on difference – an aspect which effectively reinforces separative categorisation: the 'us' and 'them' approach which continues to preserve the hegemony of heterosexuality to the detriment of other sexualities which do not fulfil the criteria of heteronormativity.

To a large extent, the challenges described in these fictional narratives mirror the conclusions of extra-Maltese research, but in the context of Malta the authoritative influence of the Catholic Church in Malta has a distinct if not unique¹⁴ impact on the lives of these

¹⁴ This research does not address in detail other cultural, socio-political and jurisdictional communities outside of Malta, though the role of a hegemonic (and variously punitive) faith often coterminous *de facto* - if not formally - with state identity is surely hostile to any condition of homosexuality [See, for example, Armstrong, K. (2011)].

individuals. This research has achieved a more authentic understanding of the difficulties that Maltese gay teachers may face in the Maltese cultural context. It shows that:

- Despite the adoption of legislative measures regarding same-sex civil unions, protection from homophobic discrimination and the adoption of children by same-sex couples, formal and hidden curricula are not synchronized with these legislative advances.
- Not only does Maltese educational policy fail to address the needs of all students (in terms of sexual identity and orientation) but it is exclusionary in the way it dictates a binary notion of sexuality. The inclusion of all learners is therefore compromised.
- Teachers who have undergone local teacher training course may not be professionally equipped [if not resistant] to educate on the diversity of human sexuality and to deal effectively with homophobic incidents/arguments that may arise within a classroom context.
- A fundamental religious outlook is often one of the main reasons prompting adverse reactions or prejudice towards gay individuals. The socio-cultural embeddedness of the Catholic religion in the life of an average Maltese citizen exacerbates the difficulties that a gay individual may experience elsewhere.
- With the Catholic Church being one of the main providers of education in Malta, the exclusionary and regulatory discourse on ‘deviant’ sexualities is maintained.
- To gay teachers these difficulties are inhibitory. Adopting a dual identity and maintaining invisibility [when and if possible] is for many Maltese educators, the safer option for a stable career. In Malta, the employment of teachers in Maltese Church schools is restricted to candidates who are ‘Practicing Catholics’ who have committed themselves to ‘Catholic Life Choices’. The gay teachers’ entitlement to employment in this sector is therefore compromised.
- An erratic conflation of homosexuality and paedophilia heightens difficulties for gay teachers working in the Primary Education sector.

Implications for Educational Policy

In 1984 Lorde said that Western European History encourages us to perceive human differences in simple, dual oppositions such as:

dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior. In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior (p.114).

While the quote from Lorde refers to ethnic minorities, old people, women and individuals from a working-class background, it can also be effectively extended to include individuals whose 'atypical' sexual preference jeopardises their entitlement to equal participation in society as evidenced through the research narratives. As Paulo Freire insists in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the emphasis of effective change is "never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships" (Lorde, 1984, p.123). Traditionally, as Freire implies, victims of oppression are expected to inform the heterosexual world about the effects of discrimination, whilst dictators of such discourse maintain their position as oppressors and avoid responsibility for their actions. In schools, having gay teachers dealing with gay issues, may in contrast, further ghettoise these individuals as an alien community.

Although Zacko and Smith (2013) claim that issues regarding the LGBT population have become more 'mainstream' through popular media and the internet and that local legislative advances have granted further rights to LGBT individuals, there is still a tendency to associate non-normative sexualities as "abnormality" and that the "intimacy (students) develop with their peer group homosociality consists of a complex mix of longing for intimacy . . . and the need to maintain borders in relation to their surroundings. In this mix, homophobia is often present" (Johansson, 2007, p.43). Within the context of schools, teachers are nowadays exercising their profession in multicultural and "hyper-diverse" contexts (Zacko-Smith, 2009) which expose them to cultures, values and ideas that may interrupt established frameworks and which may confuse teachers. More than seventeen years ago, Smith (1998) stated that in the US "most preservice and inservice teachers are woefully undereducated and underprepared by traditional teacher education programs to deal with

educational issues related to sexual orientation" (p. 88); however, in the context of Malta, change is barely perceptible (and the Bachelor of Education course - the principal route to initial teacher education in Malta – remains largely innocent of developments in inclusive culture).

The students' entitlement to an education that is holistic is outlined in Malta's National Curricular Framework (NCF) (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012) which claims that:

The overarching principle upon which this framework has been constructed is that of giving children and young people an appropriate entitlement of learning that enables them to accomplish their full potential as individual persons and as citizens of a small State within the European Union (p.xiii).

Theoretically, the teaching and learning practice should itself be a model of a just and equitable process, addressing the realities of all students regardless of their cultural background, their religious beliefs, their ethnicity or sexual orientation.

A persistently inescapable theme of this research has been the transcendental influence of religion on the participating teachers' construction of identity. Given the widespread control that the Catholic Church in Malta has over the provision of schooling, discriminatory arguments apropos the immorality of 'othered' sexualities are bound to be raised. However making the diversity of sexuality more 'educationally mainstream' in both principle and practice should not be a question of religion, sin, or morality. The inclusion of this integral aspect in the teaching and learning process may in effect alleviate the tension that most LGBT students and teachers are often made to endure throughout their educational experience (which, according to the legislated policy [above] guarantees the holistic well-being of all individuals). It is the right of these students to be educated on their sexual identity. Ultimately, it is the moral obligation of all educators to see that the needs of all learners are entirely met and that none of these students end up describing their educational experience as a trauma. This is what holistic education really implies. This evolution in educational practice should be reflected in university teacher preparation programmes so as to equip teacher professionals with adequate awareness on the diversity that classrooms really and truly embrace.

School policies frequently speak of *'inclusion'* that is *'regardless of a student's sexual orientation'*. Of course, such statements will not of themselves come anywhere near, let alone combat the heteronormativity of schools – and they run the risk of being experienced as empty clichés. The real changes should permeate every aspect of pedagogy and its culture: school curricula, text books and assignments should be the topics of school discussions and morning assemblies. School environments, teaching and learning should mirror the realities of society and should not conversely attempt to hush them. This ought to be implemented in a way that does not underline 'difference' but an approach that treats different sexualities with equal importance and respect. Not only will this inclusive pedagogy enable learners to question society's assumptions about heteronormativity but it will altogether sustain the fight against bigotry and sexual discrimination.

Through a joint effort which combats harassment, all school stakeholders - management teams, students and parents, commit themselves to render schools safer. An increased sense of safety in educational spaces encourages students and teachers to strip off the disguise which cloaks their true self, encouraging them to be who they are. Given the influence that teachers normally have on their students, gay educators may possibly serve as role models to students who may feel troubled because of their sexual 'difference'. Findings of this research demonstrate that most gay teachers do not feel at ease 'being who they really are' at the place of work, despite the implementation of legislation that ensures the protection of workers from any sort of mistreatment. On the other hand, socially constructed gendered roles have traditionally dictated human understanding of role expectations and the performance of gendered behaviour. For instance, in the context of pre-school and elementary education, where misconceptions on homosexuality and paedophilia tend to penetrate, gay male teachers may provide nurturing that is particularly productive for children. If we aim to inject the concept of care in the provision of education, it is absolutely necessary to have role models who not only provide nurturing education but who additionally reflect the strength of sexual diversity. As one of the narratives implied, the effectiveness of teachers during the early years in these years is absolutely irrelevant to their sexual orientation or biological sex.

Rendering schools truly inclusive should be a united effort which translates written ideals into fair educational practice. When dealing with issues that address gender identity and sexual orientation, all educational stakeholders should choose responsibly between either endorsing the status quo or redefining what 'normality' truly intends. In this regard, any

educator can be an effective resource to LGBT students. In North American high schools, colleges and universities, Gay-Straight Alliance clubs (GSAs) are effective school clubs which help support LGBT students and which help educate all students on issues of sexual diversity. These school-led communities encourage students and school staff members to ally with LGBT and gender non-conforming students (Macgillivray, 2005). Educators who throughout the scholastic year strive to ensure an inclusive school climate should be acclaimed for their effort. This helps promote the school's commitment to diversity as it ensures a positive school environment. Educators should ideally be provided with professional development programmes that may clarify any misconceptions or inaccurate understandings that teachers may have on issues related to sexuality. Such training would sensitise teachers to the challenges that students with a non-conformant sexuality may face in society. It also enables educating staff to reflect on what constitutes homophobic bullying and on how they are to react in the eventuality of such happenings. The input of students, staff members and parents may also be valuable in revising anti-bullying policies in a way that it publicly affirms the school's commitment to the safety of all students. Staff members and learners are to be additionally informed on this policy through student-friendly examples which illustrate its implications in practice. However all educators must keep in mind that the disclosure of a student's sexual orientation should be treated with respect and confidentiality all the way through.

The significance of education in addressing sexual prejudice was outlined in February 2013 during the first ever European Union (EU) level conference on homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools. It was held in association with the Irish EU presidency, the Department of Education and was organised by International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA)-Europe and Irish LGBT organisations GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) and BeLonG To¹⁵. In his opening statement, Minister Quinn reiterated that “education plays a key role in supporting LGBT young people and also tackling the underlying prejudices which can lead to homophobic and transphobic bullying” (BeLonG To, 2013, p.4). Locally, the Malta Gay Rights Movement (MGRM) explains that things can only get better if the Government and the Education Directorates combine forces to ensure the implementation of policies that take the MGRM's proposals into consideration (MGRM,

¹⁵*BeLonG To* is an Irish organisation for LGBT young people, aged between 14 and 23.

2013). The MGRM has repeatedly requested the Government and the Education Directorates to work hand in hand to tackle the sad phenomenon of abusive behaviour against LGBT students. Such collaboration encourages the formulation of adequate policies that would ultimately protect students and teachers of different sexual orientations and gender identities against all kinds of social exclusion. MGRM insists that school educational curricula, methods and resources should serve to augment a solid understanding of sexual diversity and should address the individual necessities of students, parents and family members (MGRM, 2013).

In the Maltese context, bringing about a gradual shift in culture towards greater openness and inclusiveness may prove to be taxing. As part of an effort to help realise this change, sharing these narratives can potentially serve as a means to further sensitise people on issues of sexual diversity. These stories can serve as a backdrop for the development of case studies which might be analysed and discussed in workshops, held as part of a teacher training initiative. These case studies can also be used in preparatory meetings for parents who, ideally would be approached to discuss the main aims of such an awareness campaign. Similarly, theatrical representations involving music and art that teach students about sexual diversity and the screening of LGBTI-themed films or biographies of famous LGBTI people in schools may also be effective. In schools, campaigns which raise awareness on the topic of sexual diversity can be organised in collaboration with the MGRM. These can be spread over a number of days or weeks and should ideally be held as a nationwide initiative. This campaign may include special assemblies and an 'LGBTI week'. With the help of MGRM and with the collaboration of Educational Officers, college principals and school management teams, a cross-curricular toolkit for educators may also be developed and implemented initially in one of the school colleges, possibly as part of a pilot project.

Suggestions for Future Research

With reference to the investigated topics in this study, future research might entail a wider cross-section of different non-heteronormative sexualities in order to generate achievable educational policies which reflect the diversification of sexuality. Alternative investigations may offer insights generated by members of senior management teams, students and parents on the topic of sexual diversity. One main limitation of this research is that although it

acknowledges the challenges of all teachers whose sexuality can be termed as non-normative, and therefore as non-heterosexual, it clearly concentrates on gay male teachers in an exclusive manner. Queer theorists may rationally argue that this study would seem to uphold the notion of identity politics which queer theory strongly contests. Nonetheless, the narrow sampling criteria were meant to provide focus and to strengthen the insights that emerged from the narrative interviews. It was only via such depth that data, which was ‘sufficiently rich’ in terms of complexity and significance, could be accessed. This has also facilitated the effective construction of the fictional narratives of Maltese gay teachers.

Undeniably, conducting research that deals with highly sensitive issues, in a context which is not yet fully accepting of homosexuality, may prove to be challenging for any researcher in the field. However, the teachers’ narratives have contributed to the body of human knowledge in the way they have revealed philosophical underpinnings of being a gay teacher in Malta. The use of creative fiction as a methodological approach to narrative inquiry has moreover rendered these stories ‘more human’ not only in the vivid way they are communicated but also through the realistic nature of themes that these stories investigate.

The recommendations of this final chapter return to the ultimate aim of the study, which was to shine light onto the cultural and educational lacunae in which the identities of gay teachers are frequently lodged; and thence to give voice and profile to those otherwise silent and invisible figures. The study is at least a modest step into the disinfectant of sunlight.

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Appendix A

Information Sheet

The Narratives of Gay Male Teachers in Contemporary Catholic Malta

Research Information Sheet

Dear _____,

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide, it is important that you read the following information carefully. You may talk to anyone you feel comfortable with prior to participating in this research. It is essential that you understand the purpose of the research and what this project ultimately entails. This consent form may contain words that you might not understand. Ask me if there is anything that you would like to clarify or if you would like more information. Take your time to decide whether or not you wish to participate. Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the project?

I am currently studying for a research doctorate (PhD) at the University of Sheffield and am especially interested in exploring the experiences of gay male teachers in Malta.

Many gay individuals still find it hard to disclose their sexual orientation with others. This is particularly hard for gay teachers. These educators might have gone through difficult times in their school experience as students and may still do so as teachers. Furthermore, I want to reveal societal perceptions of gay individuals as I raise an awareness of these ‘invisible’ educators.

This research will involve your participation in two one-to-one interviews with me. These interviews should not take longer than one and a half hours. The data that these interviews generate will help me construct fictional narratives. Researchers who embark on this kind of methodology rework true-life data into a fictional account. Though emanating from real events and actual people, salient aspects of the narratives such as events, characters and settings are re-invented with the help of the researcher’s meditation. While this re-creation process allows the researcher to draw the reader closer to the emotional world of the research subjects, the fictional feature ensures and protects your confidentiality all the way through.

Why have I been chosen?

You are being invited to take part as I feel that your experience as a gay teacher working in the local educational scenario can contribute much to my knowledge and understanding of homosexuality and education in Malta.

I am interested in finding out about your life experiences (and the possible challenges) that you have faced as a gay teacher. I am inviting you to contribute to this research. If you accept, you will be asked to participate in no more than three interviews which will be guided by myself. I will sit down with you in a comfortable place of your choice and if it is better for you, the interview can take place at your home (Please note that I will not be providing transport). I can also answer questions which you might have about the research.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part in the project, you will be given this information sheet and you will be asked to sign an informed consent form. Participation can also be withdrawn even on earlier acceptance. Moreover, refusing to participate will have no bearing on the research and your identity will remain entirely confidential.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

I must inform you that the research is intended to draw out information from the people who are interviewed. This may involve questions or discussions that can potentially cause embarrassment and emotional or psychological distress and therefore I intend to discuss this in detail before I proceed with the interviews.

You do not have to share any knowledge that you might feel uncomfortable sharing. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions during the interview, you may inform me and I will move on to the next question. You may also wish to terminate the interview if too distressed. No one else, but myself, will be present for the interview unless you would like someone else to be there. All the recorded data remains confidential throughout and no one

else except for myself and my supervisors; Dr Jools Page and Professor Peter Clough will access the information documented during the interview. The entire interview will be recorded on a laptop and an additional recording device but nobody will be identified by name on the recording. I will transcribe each interview. Soft copies of these recordings shall be stored at my residential address and will be used only for analysis. Nobody except for myself will have access to these recordings. The data will be destroyed upon accomplishment of the study.

I do not foresee any risks or disadvantages to you taking part in this research as it is entirely voluntarily and any information shared will be confidential. The only time that this would not apply would be in the event of concerns relating to the protection of children, in which case I would be obliged to report such information and comply with the designated agencies as appropriate. In addition I am obliged to inform you that if you should reveal anything of a criminal nature during the interview process I would be duty bound to pass this information on to the Police.

However, if at any time during the research you feel unable to continue, you are at liberty to withdraw without the need for explanation. If you should experience the need for advice, support or counsel in relation to the project, I will ensure that as a responsible researcher I furnish you with the names and contact details of such appropriate external agencies who are expert in the field.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part I would meet you at a mutually convenient time and venue and carry out a series of individual face to face interviews between July 2013 and March 2014. During this period, I will meet you on not more than two to possibly three occasions at one month interval. With your permission I would like to audio record these meetings however, this would be in negotiation with you. I am interested in your story and the factors that have influenced your life as a gay teacher in Malta. After the interviews have taken place I will transcribe the data, a copy of which I will return to you to check for accuracy and further comments and annotations prior to analysis. I will use the anonymised findings from the

interviews carried out with you and others as the basis of the narratives that I will fictionalise for use in my thesis.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for the participants in the project, it is hoped that this work will assist me to gain a deeper insight into what it is to be a gay teacher in the educational sector in Malta in the twenty first century and to present the stories elicited from each of the participants as fictional narratives. As a result I also hope to be able to help raise awareness of current discriminatory and excluding practices in education. Participants will not be provided with any incentives whatsoever to take part in the research.

What happens if the project stops earlier than expected?

In the eventuality that the research stops earlier than expected, you will be duly given an explanation. I urge you to provide me with any complaints that you might have. We will address and discuss this issue together yet if you feel that the issue has not been handled appropriately or professionally, I encourage you to contact my Principal Supervisor; Dr Jools Page on *****. If you still feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, you can contact the Chairman of the School of Education Ethics Committee Professor Dan Goodley on ***** and then the University's Registrar on registrar@sheffield.ac.uk.

Will my taking part be kept confidential?

The information that I collect from this research project will remain private. This research may draw attention from the local community; however, I will not share any information to anyone else. Any information about you will have a number on it instead of your name. Nobody will have access to this data save for Dr Jools Page and Professor Peter Clough who are both supervising this study. You will not be identified in any reports or publication as nothing will be attributed to you by name. The only time that your identity will be revealed would be if a matter of safeguarding children or criminal activity came to light and in which case I would be obliged to comply with the designated authorities as appropriate.

What will happen to the results of the project?

The knowledge that is drawn from the research will be shared with you before it is made widely available to the public. Each participant will be provided with a transcribed document of the interviews. The insights, perspectives and experiences woven into fictional narratives will be published so that other people may learn from the research. Furthermore, it is likely that the data collected throughout the research might be used for additional or subsequent research or consequently be published more widely. In the case of such an eventuality, I would inform you of this fact and where appropriate seek additional permission.

Taking part in this research is not obligatory. You may withdraw your participation at any instance of the project.

This project has been reviewed and ethically approved via the School of Education's ethics review procedure.

For further information you can either contact me on ***** or send an email to *****. Alternatively, my home address is:

I thank you for your kind attention and for taking part in this project.

Jonathan Borg

Appendix B

Consent Form for Participation

Participation Consent Form

Title of Research Project: The Narratives of Gay Male Teachers in Contemporary Catholic Malta

Project Researcher: Jonathan Borg

Participation Identification Number: D

Please tick as appropriate

1. I confirm that I have read the foregoing information letter dated for the above project. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I have been notified with the nature of the researched topic.

3. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study, understanding that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time and have data I have contributed returned to me immediately, without providing any reason.

4. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis and that I will not be associated in any way in matters which can arise from this study without written authorisation.

5. I consent members of the research team to have direct access to my anonymised responses.

6. I agree to take part in the above research project.

Participant **Date** **Signature**

Lead Researcher **Date** **Signature**

Appendix C

Ethical Approval Letter